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Agency, Personal Autonomy, and Transformation in Tagore's *Malini***Achyutananda Bhattarai**

Department of Applied Science, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

ORCID: 0009-0006-6516-2328

Corresponding Email: achyutbhattarai987@gmail.com**Abstract**

This paper examines agency, personal autonomy, and transformation in Rabindranath Tagore's *Malini* (1896). An Indian poet, writer, and philosopher, Tagore (1861-1941) wrote *Malini*, referencing Buddhist philosophy, initially written in Sanskrit. *Malini*, the little girl and protagonist of the play, uses her agency and personal autonomy to transform and resolve the religious tension between Hinduism and Buddhism in Kashi. How *Malini* uses her agency to transform the Hindu kingdom Kashi into secularism for the equal treatment of all religions and how much the characters' agency and personal autonomy contribute to changing the play is searched. This is qualitative research and collects data from the play *Malini*. It uses Michael Garnett's "Agency and Inner Freedom" and Margaret S. Archer's "Resisting the Dissolution of Humanity" as the theoretical framework. It concludes that agency and personal autonomy are the keys to the transformation that engenders inner freedom in the agent and empowers them to resist human tyranny.

Keywords: agency, autonomy, transformation, religious conflict, Hinduism, Buddhism.

Introduction

Tagore's play *Malini* (1896) deals with the religious tension between orthodox Hinduism and newly emerged Buddhism in Kashi, the Indian society. Princess Malini takes up a new religion in the Hindu Kingdom, creating religious tension between the orthodox Brahmins and the King. The Hindu Brahmins demand Malini's banishment to secure their religion in Kashi without any challenge. The King, Queen, and prince fall in peril to balance the family's love for Malini and to fill the demands of the Brahmins. The royal family uses their agency carefully to balance the situation. As Gil Richard Musolf points out, "Agency engenders humans' ability to define or interpret a situation and act based on that definition" (4). Agency grounds for transformation emancipating from epistemological imperialism and leads to taking meaningful social action against unnatural inequality and injustice. He further asserts, "Agency redefines the possibilities for self and society, and reconstructs the self as a meaning maker... Agency grounds transformations in identity and subjectivity, resulting in epistemological emancipation" (13).

In *Malini*, the protagonist uses her agency for humanism and religious tolerance. She wants to leave the palace voluntarily and pass her life like the Buddhist nun with human sufferings and sorrows. She intends to transform Kashi's Hindu extremism with the Buddhist principles of love, non-violence, forgiveness, and religious tolerance. Her agency guides her that humanism is one of the best principles of life to resolve all types of social and individual conflicts. The division of Kashi into different religious cults results from the lack of humanism and self-realization that the essence of all religions is love, co-existence, and non-violence. Covering self-interest by religion brings social conflicts and war to society. As Michael Garnett puts it, "We can be limited by ignorance, blinded by prejudice, or trapped by superstition; we can be brainwashed by cult leaders, controlled by ideology, or subject to oppressive internalized norms" (3). Most of the Brahmin characters are led by the elite Brahmin Kemankar, the cult leader who compels other Brahmins to preserve the Hindu religion in Kashi and block all other new philosophies in Kashi. The common Brahmins' agency is limited by their ignorance to understand the true meaning of the religion and

also trapped by the orthodox Hindu Brahmins' vested interest led by Kemankar with the strong support of Supriya. Contrary to them, Malini displays her agency and personal autonomy and frees herself from the internal desire for the artificial luxury of the palace for the transformation of Indian society, Kashi. Her agency urges her to harmonize the religious differences that overlook the palace life for the princess. All this is possible to Malini by the touch of humanity commonly exists in human beings. As Margaret S. Archer presents, "Humanity is seen as the linchpin of agency in general and is therefore crucial" (17). This connects the socio-cultural differences of men, who are divided into groups of religion and culture, transforming them into a universal society that breeds love and compassion. It develops feelings of equality and the equal gift of nature, which is a base of transformation.

Agency, Personal Autonomy, and Transformation

Agency corresponds to the freedom people desire from the beginning of life consciousness. It is one of the best choices among many alternatives to an adopter guided by the common interest principles of the mass people. It is an emancipation from internal and external human tyranny to set a welfare society. As Ana Mari Cauce and Edmund W. Gordon argue, "Human agency is the capacity and disposition to recognize and act in one's own best interest and that of chosen others" (1). Agency and personal autonomy add liberty to the actor to perform a task reasonably for the social and common welfare. "The cultivation of agency motivates people to transform their life, culture, and society" (Musolf 13). In the play, Malini's desire to leave the palace and live in the middle of human suffering is motivated by her agency and her choice of the different options for palace life. She does so to transform the rigid Hindu society of Kashi, which blocks the allowing of new creeds except Hinduism.

The true agency in man transforms irrational and rigid human behavior into rational, soft, and impartial deeds. It contributes to solving even the great, perilous moments of life, working together with the human conscience. The genuine human conscience emerges through the

achievement of internal and external freedom. External freedom relates to the work that one likes to do and ignores the work that he/she does not like to do without any social and legal obligations. However, internal freedom is the freedom of the soul and self-realization that keeps internal enemies, such as hatred, anger, covetousness, lust, etc. away from the agent. Lack of internal freedom appears as an obstacle to achieving transformation in life as it disturbs the mobilization of the true agency of a man. Cause and Gordon refer to Albert Bandura for the opinion that “Human agency is purposive, constructive, and planful. It involves anticipating the effects of our actions, estimating our capabilities, regulating effect, and initiating effort. We not only act upon a stage, we construct the stage we act upon, and the motivations and outcomes of our actions” (Cause and Gordon, 1). In this regard, Malini’s agency to follow Buddhism, even in the Hindu Kingdom, is a planful agency in which she remains firm and unaffected by the power of the kingdom. Physically, she is simple, without wearing gold and ornaments like the princess. She says, “Mother, there are some who are born poor, even in a king’s house. Wealth does not cling to those whose destiny it is to find riches in poverty” (Tagore 129). This suggests that her agency is so straightforward to her plan that she wants to stay with the poor and suffering to experience the reality of the world instead of limiting herself to royal pleasure and luxury. She prefers to release herself from artificiality and feels happiness in the natural pleasure amid poverty and suffering.

Malini’s agency works together with her autonomy to transform the Indian society of religious hatred resulting from Hindu autocratic supremacy. They forget the essence of every religion is the same: to develop love, tolerance, and humanism among the people and try to control Buddhism in Kashi. Contrary to the religious essence, they are trying to prove that Hinduism is the sole religion of Kashi, giving reference to its long history and practice there. Malini uses her autonomy to mitigate the religious chaos in Kashi through her love and harmony in religion. She is motivated by the principle of humanism and the Buddhist philosophy of life to build non-violence, love, kindness, brotherhood, and tolerance. She keeps her away from the religious dogma and follows

humanism with a reasonable mind and pure soul. How can the truth be proven by the majority by going out of reality? How much does the agency and personal autonomy contribute to the transformation? How do the agency, personal autonomy, and transformation function jointly? Malini asks these questions to herself and becomes restless because she has not found the correct answer. She tries her best to find answers by deploying her agency and personal autonomy in practice to transform social and individual life.

Malini's agency is a moral agency or free will that differs from the philosophical concepts of predestination or determinism, which advocates for cosmic power. It believes everything we do or become lies outside our control and is determined by an outside source as a supreme being or environmental factor. Moral agency or free will grounds for the freedom of mind for the right decision. As Joseph Smith points out, "Agency is the free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts." (49). The exercise of free will and free mind makes a person capable of choosing between good and evil, differentiates the degree of good from bad, and prepares a state to experience the consequences of the selected work.

Furthermore, agency functions to implement "free will," deriving from the inner faculty of the mind and the soul. Agency functions among many alternatives in life and selects the best for social and individual well-being. It places humanity high, applying the principle of co-existence motivated by the inner conscience. The external coercive forces do not move the man of good agency to the wrong decision. The unprejudiced mind results from the proper agency, which prepares it for the transformation. As Michael Garnett argues, "Freedom and agency are often taken together, and the search for an account of inner freedom treated as equivalent to the search for an account of true' or 'deep' agency"(3). The collaboration of agency and personal autonomy is grounds for transformation in human life. Autonomy and inner freedom constitute true agency as a base for transformation.

Similarly, personal autonomy and human agency are crucial to transformation functions. Autonomy is the political term used for self-ruling or self-governing situations. It gives inner freedom to the agent to act using true or deep agency. As Garnett points out, any account of self-government must rely on an account of deep agency since self-government just is government by the (true) self (14). In the play, the transformation of the common Brahmins into Buddhism after receiving Malin's voice results from the deep agency that empowers them to make the right decision. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau states, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (qtd. in Riley 193). Internal and external forces always block a man from making fair decisions. Implementing personal autonomy with a free mind makes a man make impartial and rational decisions. It gives the power to distinguish right from wrong by using the deep agency of the decision-maker. As Katayoun Alidadi argues, "The exercise of personal autonomy requires that individuals should be able to design and conduct the course of their lives through a succession of choices among different valuable options" (118). The King's decision to keep Manili, the little girl with exceptional religious knowledge, in the palace and the Queen's request to the King to ignore the demand of the Brahmins despite their demonstration is the result of their agency. The words agency, autonomy, and self-rule/government are the related terms used to address the inner freedom of a man who regulates human behavior by democratic norms.

From a sociological point of view, personal autonomy refers to the state of a man in which a person's self-freedom is searched in society. Personal autonomy promotes agency and release from temptation's internal and external forces. As John Santiago argues, "Personal autonomy is a matter of having control over one's life, not simply to be free to do as one pleases, or to please as one pleases, but to be empowered over the course of one's life" (22). In Tagore's Malini, the protagonist, at a young age, decides to leave the palace and live a simple life to experience the reality of the natural world. She requests her father to let her leave the palace with a free mind and will, as if falling flowers from the trees were natural. She prefers not to live limited inside the palace

life in an artificial form.

Agency in Malini

The King of Kashi and his people had their belief in Hindu creeds before the princess Malini was born and taught by the Buddhist Monks. She is impressed by the new religion and starts spreading Buddhism in the country despite the strong objection of the Hindu elite Brahmins with protest. They demonstrate Malini's exile not only from the King's palace but also from outside of the kingdom. Malini wants to leave the palace to teach Buddhism and reconcile the religious tension. She wants to be away from the luxurious palace life and live in the pain and suffering of common people. She reconciles religious beliefs and teaches love and tolerance as the essence of all religions, replacing hatred and dominance among followers of different faiths. She requests her father, "Listen to me, father. Those who cry for my banishment, cry for me... Leave me without regret, like the trees that shed its flowers unheeding. Let me go out to all men"(131). Malini requests her father to allow her to go out. Her comparison of the parents to the trees and children to the flowers is her true voice that comes from the agency that transforms her from a litter girl to a Buddhist. She tries to convince her father to compare her position with the flowers falling naturally from the trees, which brings no regret to the trees. She thinks her banishment is right and necessary for the transformation of her society to positive work. However, the King's agency does not let Malini be exiled from the palace and advises her to leave Buddhism for her father's sake and the country's people, but Malini does not accept her father. She feels it is easier to leave the palace than to be away from Buddhism. The King and the Prince fear the public demonstration and discuss the settlement. They neither support Buddhism as Malini's new religion nor the Brahmins' orthodox of Hinduism in Kashi.

The Queen's agency tells her that fulfilling the demand of the Brahmins to banish Malini from the palace for her new creed is a foolish game. She evaluates their demand as irrational and autocratic and motivated by the Hindu Brahmins' orthodox. The protagonist Malini's request to

the King for her exile from the palace is an injustice to the little girl because she has not harmed any creed in Kashi. The King and the Queen stand against the banishment of Malini for the sake of her new philosophy of Buddhism, enlightened by love, non-violence, and humanity. Buddhism has not dishonored Hinduism in religious practices, and the little girl Malini has not done any grievous religious offense to be banished from the lap of her mother and the motherland—the universal principle of criminology and penology advocates for a punishment suitable to the crime. The King's agency does not allow him to fit the heavy sanction to the minor daughter banished from the palace for her new creed. It is unethical from a moral and religious point of view.

The agency of other characters also plays a good role in Kashi's social transformation. Supriya, one of the play's central characters, is attracted to Malini and her new principle of Buddhism after Kemankar leaves him independent. He finds the answer to every unsolved religious query in Buddhism through Malini, which he has been trying to find in Hindu religious books but in vain. Now, his agency and personal autonomy urge him to break his old belief in Hinduism and change to Buddhism as a new and lively one. Other common Brahmins also change their traditional Hindu religious attachment when they find Malini at their home and are impressed by her love and grace to mankind. They find Buddhism more animated and scientific than Hinduism, which is limited to the ancient books of God.

The antagonistic force of Kemankar's agency does not allow him to change his Hindu religious belief, so he continuously resists Malini's Buddhism. He is a man of firm nature, and his ego blocks him from achieving transformation in life and religion. He goes to a foreign land to bring an army and restore Hinduism in Kashi, leaving his trusted friend Supriya to convey the inland information. However, he is betrayed and captured by the King's army upon arrival at the native land. Kemankar's conservative concept of religion disturbs religious harmony in Kashi, making the land unstable by religion. This religious disruption arises from Kemankar's ego and may benefit him but not the native land. He kills Supriya to die together and find the answer at the door of the

God in heaven who was right on the earth. His agency does not accept the supremacy of the King's power but of God, who is the ultimate judge of the earthly works. When the King looks for his sword to kill Kemankar, Malini requests the King to forgive Kemankar because the solution lies not in revenge but in tolerance and forgiveness. Forgiveness surpasses revenge for social and personal transformation. The historical conflict between Brahminical Hinduism and the newly introduced Buddhism Tagorean Humanism works for the solution. As Prafull D. Kulkarni observes:

In Tagore's intellectual considerations, the rigid, conventional religion based on inequality never answered questions when in problems nor consoled the men in agony. Buddha appeared with his message of humanity, universal brotherhood, non-violence, peace, and human welfare over 2500 years ago, which challenged the very basis of this conventional religion. Since then, there has always been a conflict of interests, sometimes bloody, between the two religious beliefs, the echoes of which are found even today in our day-to-day lives. *Malini* highlights such a conflict and draws the attention of the world to where stand the ideals of true humanity, religious tolerance, and secularism. (3-4)

The right solution to such religious conflicts is humanism, which respects all philosophies related to the welfare of human beings and does not divide into cults or religious groups. Humanism bridges all religions with the essence of love and brotherhood. Religious conflicts are only conflicts of group interest that do not bring peace and religious harmony to the world.

Further, Kulkarni quotes Beena Agarwal, stating, "The study of *Malini* creates the impression that Tagore is a Buddhist" (4). Tagore is not a follower of any dominant creeds like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam but a true follower of Humanity. In his famous conversation with Albert Einstein, the world's greatest scientist of the modern era, on 14 July 1930, Tagore himself throws light on his religious thinking. Einstein says, "My religion is in the reconciliation of the Super-personal Man, the Universal human spirit, in my individual being" (qtd. in Kulkarni 4). Thus, for him, man is the supreme creation of God, endowing agency and power of personal autonomy

to accept or reject any faith and religion. One can be neutral for the sake of humanity and human welfare. An individual can use his/her agency for social betterment, and an individual's agency is more crucial than the collective agency, which may sometimes lead to irrationalism. The individual agency backbones for the social and individual transformation as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Nelson Mandela, BP Koirala, and many other great personalities used for their objective in life. Tagore advocates the principles of humanity through his short play *Malini* to emerge the true agency of the reader for the universal unity in religious harmony, peace, and progress.

Tagore's *Malini* can be viewed from the love, tolerance, peace, and secularist perspectives that urge human agency to unite people. The religious conflict of Kashi guides the society nowhere but into chaos and confusion among the true followers. This conflict results not from religious differences in essence but from the domination of orthodox Hindu Brahminism over others. The old practices of Hinduism are going to be replaced by the newly emerged Buddhism represented by *Malini* with the support of *Supriya* and common Brahmins. The common Brahmins were only supporting *Kemankar* and Hinduism by the elite power prevailed in Kashi and the ignorance of the Brahmins to life and religion. According to Garnett, ignorance and personal motivation sometimes block human agency for smooth functioning (6). The ignorance of a prisoner, for example, to assemble the lock of the cell, keeps him in prison. The love of a curious reader for his motivation to read the books of interest confines him in the library, though the door is open. The reader's self-motivation blocks him out of the library. Similarly, the agency *Kemakar* is blocked by his self-motivation toward Hinduism, which does not allow any other creeds in him. But coming out of ignorance, the other Brahmins transform into Buddhism using their true agency and personal autonomy.

The common Brahmins can be compared to the subaltern people who are generally influenced by the elite in society. *Kemankar* and *Supriya*, for their vested interest, suppress them in

the name of religion. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” (90) and argues that the subaltern can’t speak for their issues and they need a conscious speaker to speak on their behalf. Malini speaks the voice of the subaltern Brahmins on their concept of love and religion in Kashi and enlightens them with a new life philosophy. Malini’s work transforms their life and religion. She makes their true agency active in them for positive transformation and accepts Buddhism in Kashi. Malini’s agency and personal autonomy dominate the play, changing the rigid Hindu society into religious harmony. She transforms rigid society not by revenge but by love and brotherhood as she requests her father to forgive Kemankar when he hits Supriya to death. She believes that peace and prosperity are possible through the joint efforts of all religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. The principle of negation of one by another does not bring religious co-existence and peace Tagore wants to message through the play *Malini*.

When Malini reaches the door of common Brahmins with her principle of Buddhism to breed love and tolerance in religion, they adopt her immediately. She encourages them to find the solution to the problem while keeping love and humanism at the center. The Brahmins worship her as their goddess, and she appears like a little girl. The common Brahmins realize the importance of love, tolerance, and humanism in religion as the dialogue between Malini and common Brahmins goes as follows:

Malini: I have come down to exile at your call. . . I am exiled from my home so that I make your home my home.

First Brahmin: Mother, you have come and taken your seat in the heart of our hearts. . . Your sweet voice brings tears to our eyes. You are the divine soul of this world. (134-35).

The Brahmins, who previously favored Hinduism and supported the demand for Malini’s banishment from the palace, have changed now through their true agency. They worship Malini as their goddess and pray that she sits in their hearts, not limiting her to the King’s palace. Her philosophy of love and reason in religion transforms them greatly, and they redefine their lives in reality.

The King fears the Brahmins' demonstration for the discontinuity of his throne results from his daughter Malini's creed. He alerts Malini, "My daughter, storm clouds are gathering over the King's house. Go no further along your perilous path" (130). It is reformed by the Queen's advice that the Brahmins are guided by their unquestioning beliefs in Hinduism. The Brahmins are attempting to dominate Buddhism not by reason but by the number of followers. Their voice for Malini's banishment comes from their blind belief in religion, not from the essence of the religion. They can't have equal perspectives to all religions to have love and kindness to all the natural creations. The voice of the majority is not counted in religion, unlike politics. Supriya unfolds the Tagorean philosophy of reason in religion: "I never admit that truth sides with the shrillest voice, and I am ashamed to own as mine a creed that depends on force for its existence" (133). Realism challenges the dualism that ultimately leads to truth and justice. Religion as a personal belief is not easily moved by coercion and external forces but by the true agency of the pursuers. Humanism uses human agency to overcome the division of Hinduism, Buddhism, or any other cults. Discrimination among people based on religion invites religious disharmony that leads to the disaster of human destiny.

Supriya pays homage to Malini as a living Goddess with love and kindness, advocates for secularism in Kashi, and advises his close friend Kemankar to prepare for it. He rejects the earthly happiness of life and truly follows Buddhism, though it seems to be a betrayal of his friend Kemankar. His agency requests the King to forgive Kemankar when the King's army captures and brings him in front of the King. He always favors non-violence and promotes humanism in all human beings. He discloses his true agency, refusing stately rewards from the King, including Malini. He truly supports the King, Malini, and Buddhism for the love and peace in Kashi. His love for Malini is not physical but spiritual for the betterment of humanity and the world. He supports Malini despite Kemankar's full trust in him. He disclosed Kemankar's plan, saying that "Kemankar alone was unmoved. He left me behind him and said that he must go to the foreign land to bring soldiers and uproot the new creed from the sacred soil of Kashi. You made me live again in a new world of

birth. Love for all life (140). Malini's love and non-violence in real life attract Supriya to Buddhism, which replaces Hinduism and his childhood friend Kamakar. He takes Kemankar as an intellectual Hindu elite Brahmin who can organize people for his focused interest. According to Antonio Gramsci, every social group, at least an *elite*, must have the capacity to be an organizer of society in general, including all its complex organism of services, right up to the state organism, because of the need to create the conditions most favorable to the expansion of their class (49). Kemankar organizes other Brahmins to place him in the center by religion. His negative agency blocks him from accepting complete religious freedom in Kashi, and he goes to foreign military aid for support.

Conclusion

This paper concludes with the place of agency for mitigating socio-religious conflicts in the world. Tagore's *Malini* uses human agency well in the characters to minimize the religious tension between Hinduism and Buddhism. Religious conflicts are the result of a lack of human agency as the followers fail to understand the essence of the religion is the same: to create love, tolerance, and non-violence in men. The domination of one religion based on the number of followers can't be justified. The development of true human agency from a humanitarian point of view treats all religions harmoniously for social welfare. All religions favor love, non-violence, forgiveness, brotherhood, religious tolerance, and humanism. As an integral part of human society, religion works for social transformation and comes from wisdom and an impartial mind. The right use of human agency controls follies and absurdities for religious harmony. State secularism brings religious and social harmony, keeping aside all the religious controversies. Human agency and personal autonomy are the keys to all socio-structural transformation as they develop a comprehensive vision in men to understand and accept all the differences as their own and work to respect the freedom of others.

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