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THEORETICAL/CRITICAL ESSAY ARTICLE

### The Theme of Resistance in Rabindranath Tagore's *Malini*: A Humanistic Perspective

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#### Abstract

*This paper explores the themes of resistance emerged in a Hindu kingdom after the pervasion of a new religion namely the Buddhism in Rabindranath Tagore's play Malini. The primary conflict arises when princess Malini follows the Buddhism in the land of orthodox Hindus. Her conversion and the conflicts that it drives, thus, is the major issue of this paper that invites a systematic exploration with the perspective of resistance theory. The ground of resistance solidifies with the oppositional feelings, beliefs, and the milieu of rebellions. Thus, these inciting aspects are enough to give birth to the resistance. As a qualitative applied research, this paper draws on ideas and theories of resistance postulated by the scholars like Kasper Masse, Miguel Tamen, Jocelyn A. Hollander, and Rachel L. Einwohner to observe the revolt and resistance in the play. Malini and Kemankar stand as the representatives of their respective religious ideologies, and their struggles against the "power bloc" expose the nature of the resistance. This resistance remains as the harbinger to spread the voice of humanity throughout the world. Tagore's idea of universal humanism sustains if only the religious dogmatism and fanaticism stop to judge, discriminate, and lynch people. It is only the resistance to such dogmatism that gives birth to the voice of humanity when the rationality rules the world.*

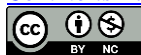
**Keywords:** Agent, conflict, religion, rebellion, resistance, violent

#### Introduction

Religion conversion seems the most controversial subject matter in South Asian Literature. Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) poetic play *Malini* (1896) is set in the palace of a Hindu king. Seeds of conflict appear in the king's palace when princess Malini begins to follow the new religion the Buddhism in the land of Hindus. In the meantime, Brahmins of *Kashi* demand for the banishment of princess Malini from the king's palace. Here begins the revolt of princess Malini and Brahmin leader Kemankar. Since they represent their respective religious ideologies, Supriya becomes the victim of their

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religious conflict. From the nature of their revolt, it happens that the new religion gives birth to an agent, but it hardly articulates the voice of common people. The consequences of religion conversion include lynching and crusades that result in displacement and the separation from the family. Therefore, religion conversion cannot spread the voice of humanity in the chaotic world, but it is possible when the rationality guides the world. If the conversion becomes agenda in religion, the religion does not carry the real spirit; rather it becomes politics. If political religion encompasses the voice of humanity, then the chaos and anarchism merely rule the world. This emit of political religion ultimately gives birth to resistance. The play *Malini* obviously enriches this theme.

Rebelling forces appear as a new power giving birth to an agent. The common people have been opposing excessive use of power and dominance for a long time. Conflict arises in each and every sphere of life when people empower themselves with knowledge. Neither societies nor states are free from it. In most of the cases, the idea of denial grows strongly against the hegemony of dominant culture, religion, and politics. As a result, resistance begins in the form of protest, revolution, and sacrifice. Thus, an agent presents himself as the representative of the voiceless people in an active way during the time of revolt. It appears exactly in the same way in Tagore's poetic play *Malini*.

Religious controversy has caught the eyes of the readers ever since the publication of Tagore's *Malini*. As the play is set in a Hindu kingdom, the new religion, the Buddhism, is interpreted in contrast with the dominant religion of the state. Yudhisthir Singh and Mamta Sharma declare, "*Malini* depicts a conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism, true religion and false religion" (196). Although both religions are different in their principles, the comparison is extremely provocative. It is surprising in the sense that how a religion can be true and false. Sometimes, their teachings might create that impression in a traditional society. On the other hand, Edward Thompson admits, "To read *Malini* is to understand the opposition his work has aroused. There can be no question as to the meaning of a poet who so plainly identifies himself with a thesis and who refuses to stand apart from his theme" (127). Thompson explains that the poet identifies himself with a thesis and it is a source of disagreement with the established religion. Therefore, religious conflict provides space for resistance.

Some critics observe the new religion in colonial India and they find it radical. But, some others perceive the new religion with charm and affection. In the meantime, as Mario Vallauri realizes, "...religious sense has flickered uninterrupted..." (120) in the midst of colonial rule. It clarifies that religious sense has shimmered like the stars. The sparks of education are responsible for spreading religious sensitivity in India. On the contrary, David Kopf claims that even Tagore's father refused "...to dilute our supreme national religion into a vague universalism" (39). The intent of refusal is emotional rather than rational. Unlike his father, Tagore has developed progressive ideas on love and religion. Indeed, religion cannot be free from weakness despite its popularity among the public.

The intervention of a new way forms the necessary condition in all the ages. It is possible when the new idea challenges the established ones. Without doubt, religion, culture, and tradition all go on changing in course of time. These changes give new vibrations to the world and the civilization. Such attempts give life to the ways of human life and society. The orthodoxy of life requires an agency to break it down. B. C. Chakraborty compares Tagore's *Malini* with his another play *Sacrifice* (1890). His comparison also centers on religious conflict of the contemporary society. Chakraborty observes:

In both these plays we find a conflict between orthodox religion and conventions on the one hand and the claims of humanity on the other. There is also a close similarity between the main characters in the two plays. Raghupati (*Sacrifice*) and Kemankar (*Malini*), Jaisingh (*Sacrifice*), and Supriya (*Malini*) closely resemble each other. (115)

The parallel structure of characters and subject matter in both the plays reflect two different minds and worlds. Similarly, K. R. Srinivas Iyengar writes, "In *Malini* again in *Sacrifice* a new ethic challenges an outmoded old ethics: and once more it is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury but also signifying a good deal" (129). New ethic is the mystical vision of the protagonists in the matter of love, life, and religion. Iyengar asserts the spirit of Buddhism flourishing in Indian literature.

The peace and harmony disappears from the world with the rise of power and supremacy of one religious group over the others. Chaos becomes the parcel of the people in their everyday life. In this regard, Tagore wishes for substantial reformation in the community life. In his view, the means to reestablish harmony in this univocal world lay in social practices and ideas conducting "freedom" (*mukti*) rather than enforcing "power" (*shakti*) and "coercive discipline" (*shasan*)" (Niyogi De 42). However, Tagore's plea for universal harmony disappears without spreading the knowledge. But, Kopf considers this philosophical ideology as an idea of "drawing all peoples together" (303) at the time of religious turbulence. Tagore aims at bringing all the people together to flourish the idea of humanity in the world. In fact, his idea of universal humanism is growing sharply even today. All these critics have overlooked the significant role of the human condition and their critique centers on either religion or on characters. Amiya Kumar Bagchi arrives with the critical ideas of Tagore. "Like many other great thinkers and artists of the world, Rabindranath Tagore pondered the different ways in which human beings exercised their agency and were deprived of their freedom by the constraints of freedom" (Bagchi 38). Bagchi interprets Tagore's ideas on agency. People fight against the authority when they are forbidden from freedom or the authority is against social reform.

Tagore's *Malini* has already been interpreted from the religious perspective, therefore, this paper examines how resistance begins with princess Malini in a king's palace when the Buddhism enlightens her in the domain of orthodox Hindus. Her divine power threatens the crown of the monarch, but Kemankar acts as an agent of dogmatist Hindus. His power play with kingship ends with Supriya's death. As a result, it is clear that Tagore's ideas on universal humanism collapse on violent resistance. That is why, rationality is more powerful than religious orthodoxy for indivisible religious liberation. This study discards the authentic voice of the other religious community because it is limited only to a single play *Malini* by Tagore.

This study is based on the descriptive textual interpretation of the play *Malini* by Tagore through the lens of resistance theory. By keeping Kasper Masse' concept of "clash of interests" in mind, Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner's idea of "recognition" and "intention" have been used to analyze the religious rebellion in the play. It has been used to display the rebellious attitude, temperament, and vision of the characters. The opinions and ideas of other critics have also been included so as to support the main argument of the paper.

### **The Concept of Resistance**

Various disciplines in humanities and social sciences reflect the concepts of resistance. This paper draws on particular ideas on resistance from Kasper Masse. Resistance, according to Masse, takes place when there is "a clash of interests between

'the people' and 'the power bloc'" (45). The difference of interests occurs when there are opposite thoughts and feelings between the authority and the people. As a result, people resist overtly. The critical insights of sociologists Hollander and Einwohner analyze the diversity of resistance. They write, "Scholars have used the term *resistance* to describe a wide variety of actions and behaviors at all levels of human social life (individual, collective, and institutional) and in a number of different settings, including political systems, entertainment and literature, and the workplace" (534). Scholars recognize it in diverse situations mostly through the issue of intention and recognition. In that case, the greatest emphasis lies on action and opposition in protest. Interpretation itself is an act of resistance. Miguel Tamen believes, "...expressions of resistance are always relative to intentions, purposes, and goals" (218). No act of resistance is purposeless, or purposeless act cannot be resistive. Consequently, breaking established norms or questioning against the authority is the beginning of the revolutionary journey. These theoretical insights and other critical thoughts have been used for the analysis of the new religion in order to explore Malini's journey of rebellion in the play *Malini*.

### **Resisting the Orthodoxy and the Birth of Agents**

Religion instigates the most controversial issue in South Asian literature. It is often regarded as a permanent identity of human beings that develop the feelings of belongingness within a nation. In the meantime, religion conversion looks like a topic of utmost debate among intellectuals inside and outside South Asia. Its consequences include: killings, violence, mass migration, lynching and even crusade. If so, why does princess Malini choose the new religion? The question is so appropriate to study how Malini's rebellion begins from the king's palace. What motivates her to do so? Sometimes, even if the good intention has to face a lot of hurdles until it establishes its norms and values. In fact, religion is a source of conflict whether in a king's palace or in a nation. Malini proceeds her rebellion from the king's palace, her own home, undermining its possible consequences.

The opening of the play depicts the atmosphere of rebellion inside the king's palace. As soon as the princess Malini begins to follow the new religion, king's family is afraid with her religious consciousness. New religious idea has to struggle a lot for its acceptance whether in the king's palace or in the society. Therefore, resistance seems complex in any circumstances. Hollander and Einwohner argues that resistance is a complex concept that incorporates "a complex set of thoughts and behaviors" (549). The deeper understanding of complex phenomena leads us to the functioning of resistance. Malini initiates her resistance in a complex philosophical tone:

MALINI. The moment has come for me, and my life, like the dewdrop upon a lotus leaf, is trembling upon the heart of this great time. I shut my eyes and seem to hear the tumult of the sky, and there is an anguish in my heart, I know not for what. (Tagore 129)

Malini's utterance reflects her inner voice because the new religious faith nurtures her. She admits her religious conflict with the old religion, Hinduism. She feels herself like a dew drop on a lotus leaf. The phrases "trembling upon the heart", "tumult of the sky", "anguish in my heart" suggest her intention. Anyway, the new religion has awakened Malini with a mystical vision in the play. Her new evolution begins from that awakening.

Malini reveals her dissatisfaction with the old religion while arguing with her mother. She looks as if she is endowed with divine power. Her act of interpreting the new religion is suspicious to her mother. Tamen advocates, "Resistance provokes redescriptions and tempts you to participate in an ongoing discussion..." (213).

Redefinition is an act of interpretation and the purpose of it is to persuade the opponent. This is what Malini exactly does with her mother:

MALINI. 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 130)

Malini looks dissatisfied with her present condition in the king's palace. Her purpose unfolds to seek treasure in poverty because she is against the material pleasure. As a result, Malini begins to persuade her mother towards the new religion. In short, she believes in the precepts of the Buddhism.

On the other hand, king's fear increases with the agitation of Brahmins who were demanding the banishment of princess Malini from the palace. Brahmins' protest is a reaction to Malini's critical interpretation of the religious creed. They are united against a Hindu monarch in the name of religion. "Religious leaders creating political opportunities for resistance movements are not uncommon" (Lee 135). Religious leaders' politics is to create the proper environment for protest by the common people. The king's expression is the better evidence of it:

KING. My daughter, storm clouds are gathering over the King's house.  
Go no further along your perilous path. Pause, if only for a short time.  
(Tagore 130)

The king requests Malini not to take "perilous path" because her rebellion has aroused the reactions of Brahmins. The storm clouds signify the complexity of the royal family. It clarifies that the king tries to settle the religious conflict because he notices the signs of resistance from the side of Brahmins.

There are multiple ways of resisting against the authority. Malini sacrifices the worldly pleasure of the king's palace. Actually, she ignores the advice of her father to keep her faith with herself. In the words of the queen, Malini is a "pure flame of fire" (Tagore 131), and she is prepared for her destination. What a powerful expression! Does not the flame of fire presuppose the radiance of resistance? She wants to perceive the outside world in order to interact with human beings. Bagchi comprehends, "...complete human being is one who is connected with other human beings..." (40). Human beings must have connection with the other human beings out in the society. Malini's request with her father signals her humanitarian philosophy:

MALINI. Father, grant to your people their request. The great moment has come. Banish me. (Tagore 131)

She wants to sacrifice herself for the sake of others. This benevolent spirit shines when the power of resistance drives that better to sacrifice for the truth than live a life of sloth in material glories. Malini demonstrates her concept of humanity when she hears the voice of the common people. She asks her father to banish from the palace because she is enlightened by the new religion. Malini initiates her mission to lead the people in order to provide freedom from the darkness. Indeed, she believes in selfhood rather than the power.

Malini's revolt gets help from the queen as well as from the Brahmin leader Supriya. Malini's thought and sanctity of Buddhism influence Supriya too. The queen also asks the king to welcome the new religion because it is growing popular day by day. Brahmin leaders Kemankar and Supriya involve in a hot debate on the issue of Malini's banishment from the king's palace. Kemankar and Supriya's concept of religion is enough to understand their vision of humanity. Alex Demirovic argues, "...we see resistance emerge in a variety of forms and from a variety of actors" (36). Demirovic advocates numerous possibilities of resistance by multiple actors. Supriya's plea with Kemankar is the best evidence of it:

SUPRIYA. Religion? I *am* stupid. I do not understand you. Tell me, sir, is it your religion that claims the banishment of an innocent girl? (Tagore 132)

Supriya, a Hindu reformist, is not happy with the decision of Brahmins who demand the banishment of the princess Malini. He opposes the idea of Kemankar by asking a question – Is it your religion that claims the banishment of an innocent girl? As Supriya is against the decision made by the crowd, his question appears as a threat to Kemankar. At the same time, Supriya is firm in his action and thought because Malini's philosophy attracts him a lot. Malini and Kemankar's resistance continue in their own way.

Kemankar begins his political strategy to unite all the Brahmins to fulfill his mission. He does not let his childhood friend Supriya go away although some Brahmins ask him to leave the assembly. Kemankar is conscious about the power of the king. “In some cases, resistance may contribute to the exercise of power” (Hollander and Einwohner 548). Power is exercised to fight against the authority, the establishment. Kemankar reveals his far-sightedness in the following utterance:

KEMANKAR. No, I will not. I know you are firm in your action, only doubting when you debate. Keep silence, my friend; for the time is evil. (Tagore 133)

Kemankar admits that Supriya is firm in his action. He warns Supriya to keep silence because the time is evil. Otherwise, Kemankar's mission will be disturbed by the power play of the king. In this way, Malini's concept of rebellion differs from that of Kemankar; first promotes non-violent activities and the latter vice versa.

Malini's simplicity, noble thinking and love for humanity reflect the functioning of her enlightenment. Her mystical transformation looks like a Goddess figure for the common people. Likewise, her desire to understand the sufferings of the world seems parallel to Tagore's philosophy. Malini's voice expresses the “shadows of an anguished mind” (Kopf 293) like Tagore. The deep turbulence in her mind can be vanquished by escaping the shadows. Malini utters:

MALINI. I was born in a king's house, never once looking out from my window. I have heard that it was a sorrowing world, — the world out of my reach. But I did not know where it felt its pain. Teach me to find this out. (Tagore 135)

Malini's intention is to be one with the poor people. Therefore, she is not blocked by the prosperity of the king's palace because she is eager to know the outside world. The pain and sufferings of the common people stimulate Malini in her mission. Evidently, Malini asks people how to find out the sorrowing world. In fact, her transformation itself is an act of resistance.

Consequently, Kemankar revolts with the king in order to protect his father's creed that is Hindu religion. He urges Supriya to give up “the novelty of falsehood” (Tagore 137). Kemankar asks Supriya to be free from his dreams reminding their permanent affinity. He shares his plan to fight the king by bringing soldiers from the foreign land. Amitai Etzioni argues, “...foreign powers can rarely be accomplished and tends to be very costly, not merely in economic resources and those of political capital, but also in human lives” (1). It is better to rethink the way of seeking foreign powers to fight against the authority because it destroys human lives. Kemankar's decision signals the bloody protest:

KEMANKAR. To foreign lands. I shall bring soldiers from outside. For this conflagration cries for blood, to be quenched. (Tagore 137)

Kemankar's determination to go to a foreign country to bring the army in order to fight the monarchy reveals the principle of power and protest, which gives rise to the resistance He is really worried about the recognition of Hindus. His rebellion proves to

follow the violent strategy to end the religious conflict in *Kashi*. Kemankar's readiness to sacrifice the blood for his religion confronts with Supriya and Malini's philosophy of non-violence.

In the meantime, Malini returns to the king's palace with the complex experience of the outside world. Her act of breaking the walls of the royal court is an attempt to resist in a Hindu state. It is not as comfortable as she has thought because majority of people are suffering from poverty, hunger, and the lack of rights. "The potential connection between resistance and social change is another likely reason for the increasing attention to resistance in the past decade" (Hollander and Einwohner 550). Social change for the voiceless people becomes impossible without resistance if we look at the pages of history. This is the real experience of Malini in her own words:

MALINI. (*embracing her mother*): Mother, I am tired. My body is trembling. So vast is the world. —Mother dear, sing me to sleep. Tears come to my eyes, and sadness descends upon my heart. (Tagore 139)

Malini embraces her mother after her return to the king's palace. She realizes that the outside world is too vast. Likewise, Malini's tears and sadness are the consequences of her attempt for intent social reform in the banner of religion. So, the critical religious thinker Supriya follows her footsteps.

Supriya betrays Kemankar by exposing the danger for the king and the kingdom. He perceives Malini's religion conversion as a sign of religious sensibility. That is why, Supriya stands against his childhood friend Kemankar's mission. It proves Supriya's rebellion against orthodox religion in silent manner by supporting Malini. Demirovic observes the tendency as "negation of the existing order" (33). Denial against the established order is a way of rebellion. Supriya refuses Kemankar's mission in this manner:

SUPRIYA. ...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 know what followed. You made me live again in a new world of birth. "Love for all life" was a mere word, waiting for the old time to be made real,—and I saw that truth in you in flesh. My heart cried for my friend, but he was away, out of my reach; then came his letter, 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. — I could wait no longer. I showed the letter to the King. (Tagore 140-41)

Supriya's long narrative articulates what makes him betray his childhood friend Kemankar. Malini impresses Supriya by her philosophy of love for all human beings. Then, Supriya stands against his friend's violent rebellion. In the meantime, Supriya reveals Kemankar's secret plan of abolishing the new religion and killing Malini in front of the king. He stands with Malini while negating the ideas of Kemankar.

As a result, the king captivates Kemankar and puts him in iron chains and king's authority. On the other hand, the king is happy with Supriya for his generosity, and he is ready to offer him the hand of his daughter. Supriya denies the worldly pleasure and affinities offered by the king. In this way, Kemankar's mission is in a trap by the king's power. D. W. Lee insists, "...just a single exposure can completely rob the movement of authenticity and legitimacy..." (140) in the matter of foreign support. In the absence of secrecy, no rebellion rises to its heights and reaches the destination and the movement loses its purpose. This is the fate of Kemankar too:

KING. Bring him in. Here comes he, with his eyes fixed, his proud head held high, a brooding shadow on his forehead, thunder-cloud motionless in a suspended storm. (Tagore 143)

Kemankar's physical appearance still reflects his defying temperament even after he is captivated by the king. The powerful king forces him to confess his crime. However, Kemankar does not agree for confession and give up his mission. This brings the point how the vibrations of resistance have distilled Kemankar as a person of rigidity.

Kemankar stands against the king's authority by taking the life of his friend Supriya. Malini asks her father to forgive Kemankar because she is enlightened by the nobility and humanity of her religious ideology. Both Malini and Kemankar have the knowledge of the past and the vision of the future, but they lack power in the present. In this sense, Malini and Kemankar's mission is unfulfilled by the shadow of the king's power. Lee writes, "Successful resistance movements generally develop their own internal mechanisms to generate resources in order to avoid being perceived as a puppet of outside influence" (140). The efficiency of resistance movement depends on the internal strength rather than external support. As Kemankar has deep faith in foreign power, his determination near the end of the play is still intact:

KEMANKAR. Then come to my heart. You had wandered far from your comrade, in the infinite distance,—now, dear friend, come eternally close to me and accept from one who loves you the gift of death.

(*Strikes Supriya with his chains and Supriya falls.*) (Tagore 145)

Kemankar and Supriya represent two different polarized worlds of religions. They cannot exist together in the same state. For this reason, Kemankar kills Supriya by using his chain as a weapon to resist against an opponent thought. In fact, religious conflict is the cause of Supriya's untimely and sad death.

Tagore's poetic play *Malini* ends with the demise of a humanitarian thinker Supriya. His death raises a question whether it is wrong to judge religion according to its strength and weakness. Why do not we have any rights to criticize religion? No religious orthodoxy is justifiable, and it is an injustice to kill Supriya in the name of religion. Supriya's death reflects the violent side of the rebellion whereas the king's demand for a sword suggests the power play of an authority. Ultimately, any rebellion or resistance movement takes the life of an innocent people like Supriya. Hence, resisters are either killed or forced to remain silent against the hegemony of the dominant religion in spite of their genuine issues.

### **Conclusion: Arrival of a New Religion**

Tagore's play *Malini* has established itself as a milestone to portray the true picture of religious conflict in colonial India. Religion entails in the mind of fellow Brahmins despite the diversity of art, culture, and literature in India. Brahmins are intolerant about the arrival of a new religion just as the ruling class cannot forgive the resistant for the sake of power. They perceive the new religion as an evil in the sacred land of *Kashi*. Malini's transformation adduces Kemankar to act as an agent of the safety of his religion. Their mission is not successful in any sense. In other words, their unflinchingly rebellion lacks the combination of knowledge, power, and vision that is essential for a successful resistance. Malini launches the grand projection of her resistance by adopting the new religion inside the king's palace. This causes Kemankar to revolt against Buddhism to preserve his traditional religion. When the two equal forces come into the state of collision, chaos is sure to prevail. However, when the antagonism merges, then obviously it brings the positive vibes for the civilization. The entire course of human history and civilization have established this fundamental truth. There is growth in antagonism and conflicts. In this sense, the resistance of Malini and Kemankar lead the society forward with the new insights. The conflict, in the play, ends with the death of Supriya. His death from the hand of a Hindu religious activist Kemankar



provides space for critical thinkers to assume that traditional religion has the influence of colonial rule.

Hinduism and Buddhism are two different religions according to their sacred principles. Everybody has the right to have opposite thoughts and feelings in the religious discourse. Religion conversion is a matter of personal choice. Sometimes, it brings dramatic topsy-turvy in a nation. But, killing people in the name of religion calls for immediate solution. Therefore, religion must integrate the people rather than dividing and killing each other in a nation. Tagore's idea of universal humanity flourishes only after spreading religious consciousness and harmony in the people so that they can respect each other's dignity. So the role of religion to spread the idea of universal humanism can be another better topic for further research.

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