

POETRY

THE MOTHER'S PRAYER

Rabindranath Tagore



Prince Duryodhana, the son of the blind Kaurava King Dhritarashtra, and of Queen Gandhari, has played with his cousins the Pandava Kings for their kingdom, and won it by fraud.

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : You have compassed your end.

[DURYODHANA](#) : Success is mine!

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : Are you happy?

[DURYODHANA](#) : I am victorious.

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : I ask you again, what happiness have you in winning the undivided kingdom?

[DURYODHANA](#) : Sire, a Kshatriya thirsts not after happiness but victory, that fiery wine pressed from seething jealousy. Wretchedly happy we were, like those inglorious stains that lie idly on the breast of the moon, when we lived in peace under the friendly dominance of our cousins. Then these Pandavas milked the world of its wealth, and allowed us a share, in brotherly tolerance. Now that they own defeat and expect banishment, I am no longer happy but exultant.

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : Wretch, you forget that both Pandavas and Kauravas have the same forefathers.

[DURYODHANA](#) : It was difficult to forget that, and therefore our inequalities rankled in my heart. At midnight the moon is never jealous of the noonday sun. But the struggle to share one horizon between both orbs cannot last forever. Thank heaven, that struggle is over, and we have at last won solitude in glory.

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : The mean jealousy!

[DURYODHANA](#) : Jealousy is never mean—it is in the essence of greatness. Grass can grow in crowded amity, not giant trees. Stars live in clusters, but the sun and moon are lonely in their splendour. The pale moon of the Pandavas sets behind the forest shadows, leaving the new-risen sun of the Kauravas to rejoice.

[DHRITARASHTRA](#) : But right has been defeated.

[DURYODHANA](#) : Right for rulers is not what is right in the eyes of the people. The people thrive by comradeship: but for a king, equals are enemies. They are obstacles ahead, they are terrors from behind. There is no place for brothers or friends in a king's polity; its one solid foundation is conquest.

DHRITARASHTRA : I refuse to call a conquest what was won by fraud in gambling.

DURYODHANA : A man is not shamed by refusing to challenge a tiger on equal terms with teeth and nails. Our weapons are those proper for success, not for suicide. Father, I am proud of the result and disdain regret for the means.

DHRITARASHTRA : But justice—

DURYODHANA : Fools alone dream of justice—success is not yet theirs: but those born to rule rely on power, merciless and unhampered with scruples.

DHRITARASHTRA : Your success will bring down on you a loud and angry flood of detraction.

DURYODHANA : The people will take amazingly little time to learn that Duryodhana is king and has power to crush calumny under foot.

DHRITARASHTRA : Calumny dies of weariness dancing on tongue-tips. Do not drive it into the heart to gather strength.

DURYODHANA : Unuttered defamation does not touch a king's dignity. I care not if love is refused us, but insolence shall not be borne. Love depends upon the will of the giver, and the poorest of the poor can indulge in such generosity. Let them squander it on their pet cats, tame dogs, and our good cousins the Pandavas. I shall never envy them. Fear is the tribute I claim for my royal throne. Father, only too leniently you lent your ear to those who slandered your sons: but if you intend still to allow those pious friends of yours to revel in shrill denunciation at the expense of your children, let us exchange our kingdom for the exile of our cousins, and go to the wilderness, where happily friends are never cheap!

DHRITARASHTRA : Could the pious warnings of my friends lessen my love for my sons, then we might be saved. But I have dipped my hands in the mire of your infamy and lost my sense of goodness. For your sakes I have heedlessly set fire to the ancient forest of our royal lineage—so dire is my love. Clapsed breast to breast, we, like a double meteor, are blindly plunging into ruin. Therefore doubt not my love; relax not your embrace till the brink of annihilation be reached. Beat your drums of victory, lift your banner of triumph. In this mad riot of exultant evil, brothers and friends will disperse till nothing remain save the doomed father, the doomed son and God's curse.

Enter an Attendant

Sire, Queen Gandhari asks for audience.

DHRITARASHTRA : I await her.

DURYODHANA : Let me take my leave. [*Exit.*

DHRITARASHTRA : *Fly! For you cannot bear the fire of your mother's presence.*

Enter QUEEN GANDHARI, the mother of DURYODHANA.

GANDHARI : At your feet I crave a boon.

DHRITARASHTRA : Speak, your wish is fulfilled.

GANDHARI : The time has come to renounce him.

DHRITARASHTRA : Whom, my queen?

GANDHARI : Duryodhana!

DHRITARASHTRA : Our own son, Duryodhana?

GANDHARI : Yes!

DHRITARASHTRA : This is a terrible boon for you, his mother, to crave!

GANDHARI : The fathers of the Kauravas, who are in Paradise, join me in beseeching you.

DHRITARASHTRA : The divine Judge will punish him who has broken His laws. But I am his father.

GANDHARI : Am I not his mother? Have I not carried him under my throbbing heart? Yes, I ask you to renounce Duryodhana the unrighteous.

DHRITARASHTRA : What will remain to us after that?

GANDHARI : God's blessing.

DHRITARASHTRA : And what will that bring us?

GANDHARI : New afflictions. Pleasure in our son's presence, pride in a new kingdom, and shame at knowing both purchased by wrong done or connived at, like thorns dragged two ways, would lacerate our bosoms. The Pandavas are too proud ever to accept back from us the lands which they have relinquished; therefore it is only meet that we draw some great sorrow down on our heads so as to deprive that unmerited reward of its sting.

DHRITARASHTRA : Queen, you inflict fresh pain on a heart already rent.

GANDHARI : Sire, the punishment imposed on our son will be more ours than his. A judge callous to the pain that he inflicts loses the right to judge. And if you spare

your son to save yourself pain, then all the culprits ever punished by your hands will cry before God's throne for vengeance,—had they not also their fathers?

DHRITARASHTRA : No more of this, Queen, I pray you. Our son is abandoned of God: that is why I cannot give him up. To save him is no longer in my power, and therefore my consolation is to share his guilt and tread the path of destruction, his solitary companion. What is done is done; let follow what must follow! [Exit.

GANDHARI : *Be calm, my heart, and patiently await God's judgment. Oblivious night wears on, the morning of reckoning nears, I hear the thundering roar of its chariot. Woman, bow your head down to the dust! And as a sacrifice fling your heart under those wheels! Darkness will shroud the sky, earth will tremble, wailing will rend the air and then comes the silent and cruel end,—that terrible peace, that great forgetting, and awful extinction of hatred—the supreme deliverance rising from the fire of death.*

* * *

Fiercely they rend in pieces the carpet woven during ages of prayer for the welcome of the world's best hope.

The great preparations of love lie a heap of shreds, and there is nothing on the ruined altar to remind the mad crowd that their god was to have come. In a fury of passion they seem to have burnt their future to cinders, and with it the season of their bloom.

The air is harsh with the cry, "Victory to the Brute!" The children look haggard and aged; they whisper to one another that time revolves but never advances, that we are goaded to run but have nothing to reach, that creation is like a blind man's groping.

I said to myself, "Cease thy singing. Song is for one who is to come, the struggle without an end is for things that are."

The road, that ever lies along like someone with ear to the ground listening for footsteps, to-day gleams no hint of coming guest, nothing of the house at its far end.

My lute said, "Trample me in the dust."

I looked at the dust by the roadside. There was a tiny flower among thorns. And I cried, "The world's hope is not dead!"

The sky stooped over the horizon to whisper to the earth, and a hush of expectation filled the air. I saw the palm leaves clapping their hands to the beat of

inaudible music, and the moon exchanged glances with the glistening silence of the lake.

The road said to me, "Fear nothing!" and my lute said, "Lend me thy songs!"