

# The Symbolical Impact of the Inclusion of the Ring Parable in The Drama “Nathan Der Weise” By Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

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ජර්මන් ජාතික සුප්‍රසිද්ධ කතුවරයකු වූ ගොට්තෝල්ඩ් එග්යිම් ලෙසින්ග් විසින් වර්ෂ 1779 දී රචනා කරන ලද “Nathan Der Weise” ඔහු අතින් බිහි වූ විශිෂ්ට නාට්‍යයක් ලෙස සැලකිය හැකි ය. එහි ප්‍රධාන තේමාව ආගමික සමඟිය යි. විශේෂයෙන් ම කිතුනු, යුදෙව් සහ ඉස්ලාම් යන ආගම් අදහන ආගමික භක්තිකයන් අතර පැවැති විවිධ ආගමික මතවාද සහ ගැටුම්කාරී තත්ත්ව මෙයින් පිළිබිඹු වේ. තව ද, එකී ආගමික භක්තිකයන් අතර පැවැතිය යුතු ආගමික සංහිදියාවක අවශ්‍යතාව ද මෙහි දී වැඩිදුරටත් සාකච්ඡා කොට ඇත. මේ නාට්‍යයේ දැකිය හැකි සුවිශේෂ ලක්ෂණය වන්නේ “Ring Parable”, එනම් මුදුවක් පිළිබඳ ව කියැවෙන උපදේශාත්මක කතා පුවත පදනම් ව නිර්මාණය වී තිබීම යි. ලෙසින්ග් සිය නාට්‍යයට එකී උපදේශාත්මක කතා පුවත උපයෝගී කරගැනීමේ අරමුණ සහ එකී අරමුණ කොතෙක් දුරට සාර්ථක වී ඇත් ද යන්න පිළිබඳ ව මේ අධ්‍යයනයෙන් විමසුමට ලක් කෙරේ.

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## **The Symbolical Impact of the Inclusion of the Ring Parable...**

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“Nathan der Weise” is a German didactic drama written by the renowned German writer of Enlightenment: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing which specifically revolves around the thematic aspect of religious tolerance. The drama has been effectively set on the background of Jerusalem. Developing on the themes of peace and understanding in between the followers of the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the dramatist incorporates the symbolical parable of the rings in order to stress this specific thematic aspect. This paper discusses the symbolical impact of the inclusion of the Ring Parable into the main plot of the drama.

According to Michael J. Cummings, the main purpose of Lessing in writing the drama “Nathan der Weise” was “to produce a worthy literary and stage achievement, promote religious tolerance and humanitarianism in general, and to refute the ideas of Johann Melchior Goeze, who verbally attacked Lessing and other Enlightenment thinkers for their unorthodox theological and moral views.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, the purpose of implying religious tolerance itself becomes the main theme of the drama.

The Ring parable is included in the third act of the drama, where it sets the base to the gathering of the three major representatives of the three religions together. Nathan is a rich Jewish merchant, who has a daughter named Recha. Saladin on the other hand is the Sultan. When Nathan, the main character of the drama appears in the third act, he meets Sultan Saladin, the Islamic representative of the drama. Nathan was summoned by Sultan Saladin in order to borrow money to continue fighting against the Crusader knights. The intention was to make Nathan feel upset, so that he could place him in a difficult situation. Sultan also asks Nathan, who is considered a wise person to explain the paradox of the existence of the three different but “true” religions.

“**Saladin:** I want your teaching as to something else;  
Something far different and since it seems,  
You are so wise, now tell me, I entreat,  
What human faith, what theological law,  
Hath struck you as the truest and the best?”<sup>2</sup>

To answer this question, Nathan relates the parable of the ring. As Karen P.L Hardison mentions, the implication of the ring parable is that “humankind’s knowledge and capacity for knowledge are limited and imperfect; therefore one must do the best one can to rule justly and with compassion and love within one’s own province.” She further mentions that “Nathan equated this parable with God’s equal love for all people and God’s expectation that all people live according to justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, and love.”<sup>3</sup>

Hence, Lessing includes the Ring parable as the key part of the play, where it brings out the moral or the didactic essence of the whole story. Lessing includes this ring parable in to the drama as the reply of Nathan to the question asked by Sultan: “which is the true religion of all?”, where Sultan Saladin stressing on his pure faith of the teachings of Islam, requests Nathan to speak of his point of view as follows.

“**Saladin:** And I a Mussulman:  
The Christian stands between us. Of these three  
Religions only one can be true.  
A man, like you, remains not just where birth  
Has chanced to cast him, or, if he remains there,  
Does it from insight, choice, from grounds of preference.  
Share then with me your insight - let me hear  
The grounds of preference, which I have wanted  
The leisure to examine - .....Speak then..Speak.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Symbolical Impact of the Inclusion of the Ring Parable...

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The ring parable plays a key role in the drama “Nathan der Weise”. According to the Mariam Webster dictionary, a parable is a “*usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle*”. Thus, the ring parable follows the same principle where it illustrates a moral attitude on religious tolerance. Lessing took over the essentials of the Ring parable from the poet Giovanni Boccaccio, who formulated this particular idea in the 13th century in a story. However, the resources show that, stories similar to this can also be found in the medieval collection of texts such as “Gesta Romanorum”. As Iris Shagrir mentions in his research paper : “*The parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history*” Lessing’s well-known parable of the three rings is based on Boccaccio’s novella in the Decameron, which is known in the Western culture as reflecting values of religious toleration and relativism inherent in the term ‘religious truth’.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Warren. R. Maurer, in his study : “*The intergration of the Ring parable in Lessing’s Nathan der Weise*” points out that “in writing his ‘Nathan’ Lessing began with a parable and constructed a drama around it, much in the manner of weaving and sewing a coat to suit an intricate, shiny button which he had found by chance”.<sup>6</sup> However, with or without prioritising the parable or the main plot, it is possible to state that both the plot and the mini story are blended smoothly together to produce the major theme of the drama.

In answering Sultan Saladin, Nathan, who is also characterised as a wise and intelligent person, takes a few minutes to ponder on the manner of reaction of Sultan Saladin, which will definitely depend on his answer to this tricky question. Thus, he intelligently relates the parable of the ring (Ring parable) as the answer and so he begins as;

“**Nathan:** In days of yore, there dwelt in east a man  
Who from a valued hand received a ring  
Of endless worth: the stone of it an opal,  
That shot an ever-changing tint: moreover,  
It had the hidden virtue in it to render  
Of God and man beloved, who in this view,  
And this persuasion, wore it. Was it strange  
The eastern man ne’er drew it off his finger,  
And studiously provided to secure it  
For ever to his house. Thus - He bequeathed it;  
First, to the most beloved of his sons,  
Ordained that he again should leave the ring  
To the most dear among his children - and  
That without heeding birth, the favourite son,  
In virtue of the ring alone, should always  
Remain the lord o’ th’ house -  
You hear me, you hear me Sulthan?.....”<sup>7</sup>

The ring parable relates the story of a man and his three sons. This man has a family heirloom, a ring, which has the ability to make its wearer receive blessings from God and other human beings. This ring was inherited over many generations from father to the son, he loved the most. The story reveals a father who does not like to favor any of his sons. Therefore he prepares exact copies of the ring and gave each of his sons one of these rings.

After the death of their father, the three sons begin to think about the real ring and go to the court to litigate and find the real one out of the three. However, the judge was unable to determine that, since the three rings are completely identical and then he is reminded of the fact that the real ring possesses the magic of attracting the blessings of people. Thus, he argues that, if this magic power had not occurred to any of them, then definitely the genuine ring has been lost. Hence, the judge stresses on the fact that, each

## **The Symbolical Impact of the Inclusion of the Ring Parable...**

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of the three sons should believe that his ring was the real one and that their father had loved all three of them equally, which keenly implies the fact that the good beliefs and good deeds would naturally become the magic power to bring blessings and good luck. It is through the advice of the judge that the themes of religious tolerance and interfaith are explored and it effectively connects with the themes of Unity against division and diversity as well. The parable highlights the necessity of having a pure faith on the religion one may follow, while the ring story connects allegorically with the main plot by the symbolisation of the God, religions and the followers. Hence, it depicts the essence of unity and harmony even among the people who follow different religions and who have different faiths.

Furthermore, the scene which includes the parable of the ring can be considered as the climactic point of the drama, where it explicitly brings out the very essence of the whole play: necessity of having religious tolerance. The parable is basically an allegory. The three rings, the three sons and the dispute of finding the real ring symbolise the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the followers of those three religions and the dispute of finding the true religion respectively. The major moralistic idea is being brought out through this allegorical connection.

Moreover, in the main plot, every character specifically represents a religion. As for example, Nathan is a Jew, Saladin and his sister Sittah are Muslims, while the knight who falls in love with Recha is the Christian son of Assad, the deceased brother of Saladin. On the other hand Recha, who is the adopted daughter of Nathan, is actually the daughter of Assad. Thus, Saladin becomes the uncle of the knight and Recha, where Nathan thus becomes the adoptive father of Recha and the non- blood brother of Saladin. It is as if, the main plot of the drama weaves the links in between the characters, who specifically are said to be representing three different religions, which are in conflict. It is at the end of the play

that we understand that they all become one family, highlighting the fact that whichever religion or faith one may follow, we are all human beings and as in the Ring parable, similar to the father's unconditional love for the three sons, God's love is the same for all the human beings. Thus, the essence of the ring parable as well as the main story can be generalised as well.

Moreover, this allegorical story revolves around the traditional aspect of Family tradition, where there is a father who passes a treasure to his most loved son. This idea specifically indicates the idea of a religion being passed from a generation to the next generation. It will be important to have a general look at how the new born babies get a particular religion and a faith from their mother and father depending on the traditional concept of passing of a specific faith from generation to generation. It is an acceptable matter that most of us follow and believe in our religions not because we have a clear understanding of the teachings, but because most of us have obtained it directly into our birth certificates from our parents. This in fact appears to be a blind faith compared to those who have gained the true essence of a religion and believe in them.

The parable can be also considered a drama within a drama, where this mini story of the Ring parable plays the basement for the final meeting point of all the characters, representing different religions. It is after Nathan's narration of this story, that Sultan gets impressed by his intelligence and offers his friendship, where it becomes the base for Nathan to reveal the true story of Recha and Sultan to reveal the story of his deceased brother Assad.

Moreover, it is after the narration of the Ring parable, that the audience understands the extent of the wisdom within the soul of Nathan, the main character of the play and thus it directly connects with the title of the drama "Nathan der weise",

### **The Symbolical Impact of the Inclusion of the Ring Parable...**

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characterising the very wisdom that he possesses. Hence, it is possible to state that the narration of the ring parable, apart from playing as an allegory emphasising the major theme, also engages in a characterisation of the main character of the story.

When looking at this from a universal point of view, it becomes clear that the theme; necessity for religious tolerance, effectively implied from the ring parable can be generalised and related to the current social conditions, where the human beings fight against each other upon different religions, about the essence of the teachings of the religions: love, faith, brotherhood and such. When taking about Sri Lanka, which is a multi-national, multi religious country, for instance, we begin to observe the conflicts in between, disputes raised against, killings and destructions done, basing on the different faiths in different religions. This becomes a general aspect which is applicable to any country or nation which suffer from religious as well as ethnic problems. Hence, the essence of the ring parable would be a influential lesson for all those who do not recognise what the real beauty of a religion is and that it, on the other hand, is basically about respecting other peoples' faiths and beliefs and tolerating the variety and diversity. Thus, it demands the necessity of 'making a better world' for all human beings on earth.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the ring parable is the key of the whole drama, which specifically highlights and stresses the very theme of the main plot and that the parable plays as an allegory to the larger plot and characterisation within the drama. Moreover, the necessity for peace and harmony between the religions, expressed through the main story of the drama is further emphasised with the inclusion of the ring parable, proving that the insertion of the ring parable is more productive as well as symbolically effective.



## End Notes

1 Nathan the Wise: a Study Guide Study Guide

Available at :<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides5/NathantheWise.html>.

2 Nathan der weise, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; act 3, scene 7.

.The Drama “Nathan der Weise” was translated in to English and published in 1980 by William Taylor. This paper includes the quotations taken from his English translation of the drama “Nathan der Weise”

Nathan the Wise; a dramatic poem in five acts by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3820/3820-h/3820-h.htm> .

3 What is the meaning of the ring parable in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s plays Nathan the Wise?

Available at: <http://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-meaning-ring-parable-gotthold-ephrain-146177>.

4 Nathan der weise, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; act 3, scene 7.

5 The parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Available at: [http://www.openu.ac.il/personal\\_sites/iris-shagrir/download/The-parable-of-the-Three-Rings.pdf](http://www.openu.ac.il/personal_sites/iris-shagrir/download/The-parable-of-the-Three-Rings.pdf).

6 The Integration of the Ring Parable in Lessing’s “Nathan der Weise”.

Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30160682>.

7 Nathan der weise, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; act 3, scene 7.

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