

Relevance of Tagore: Study of the Themes of Conflict, Protest and Self-Discovery in the Play *Red Oleanders*

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali polymath has left behind a corpus of writing in varied in range with a possibility of never-ending study. He has put forward his ideas on every aspect of human existence and raised issues pertaining to the challenges faced by humanity as a whole. The play *Red Oleanders* brings to the fore the idea that with the growth of capitalism and industrialism, the exploitation of man has increased. Man's importance is negligible as compared to that of the machine. The machine rules and man's identity is reduced merely to numbers. Tagore's faith in humanistic values and culture was absolute. He strongly believed that mindless pursuit of materialistic wealth would lead man to total degeneration. He noted that the balance that exists between man and nature was being threatened by the blind pursuance of material wealth and prosperity. An attempt is made to study the undiminished relevance of Rabindranath Tagore's ideas presented in the play *Red Oleanders*. The paper also discusses the themes of conflict between man and machine, protest of the free human nature against all bondages and self-discovery and realization of higher purpose of human life.

Keywords: Red Oleanders, Man, Machine, capitalism and materialism, Conflict, Protest and Self-Realization.

Tagore in his skeptical mood once asked of himself "A hundred years from now, / Who are you reading this poem of mine?" ...And with it the thought, how would history remember him. "When I shall cease to be/Should you wish to remember me." ... An acute consciousness of his 'place in history, in the memory of his people, seems to be a trait marking out Tagore from many other authors. As he became an icon in his country, he repeatedly asked himself the

question, could ‘this image (putuli) that has been made’, escape the ‘hunger of the dust’? (Qtd. in Bhattacharya 1)

Tagore has not been forgotten. There are many aspects of Tagore’s life which remained unexamined for long. Considering the versatile creativity of Tagore and the astounding, varied range of writings over a period of over sixty years makes it a grueling job to attempt to understand his works as a totality. Tagore’s creative self-transformed and changed itself over and over again in his long creative life.

It is often said of an author that he is ‘in advance of his times’. According to Sabyasachi Bhattacharya it is truer of Tagore than of many others. His relevance in shaping the historical circumstances and the influence of his contemporary upheavals cannot be undermined (1-2).

Aptly described as “the myriad-minded poet and writer” description of the vast range of Tagore’s has left behind a corpus of literary output in the form of poetry, dramatic works, songs, essays, novels and short stories, which have been published in the thirty-one bulky volumes of his “Collective Works”. “It is given to very few to reshape the aesthetic sensibilities of an entire people and Tagore’s creative writings brought about a cultural change of that order” (3-4).

Rabindranath Tagore through his writings established himself as a radical and firmly protested against the prevalent social evils. It was not just the genre of drama in which Tagore emerges as a severe critic of the dogmatic institutions of society. This disapproval is reflected in his poems, stories and essays too, where he criticizes the evil customs and superstitious beliefs.

Tagore’s humanitarian approach propagates that mere animal existence can never be man’s destiny. He believes that man needs to discover his purpose of existence by realizing his kinship with the world. According to him Man has to come out of the shell of his self so that he can widen the range of his outlook and the scope of his awareness. The animal instinct of man wants to gain power by acquisition. On the contrary the universal in man achieves power by giving away and working in a detached way, by living the life of the soul, not of the self. This theme of self-discovery in relation to fellow-men and the whole universe is the major idea of his play *Red Oleanders*.

The age in which Tagore lived was an age of scientific advancement and discoveries. Man was busy grabbing materialistic powers which resulted in misery, suffering and lack of happiness. While Industrialism and capitalism grew side by side, man was treated more like machine.

In his play *Red Oleanders (Rakta Karabi)* Tagore presents a conflict between the machine and the free human spirit. He portrays a world of dead values, where greed for gold transforms man into a lifeless machine. "Science has liberated man from much of the tyranny of the environment but has not freed him from the tyranny of his own nature" (Das 57). Tagore's drama conveys this idea in no uncertain terms. In his own words the *Red Oleanders* "has a definite meaning which legitimately claims literary expression".

Red Oleanders an English translation of *Rakta Karabi* (1924) is a symbolic play acclaimed as Tagore's best play. Tagore wrote *Red Oleanders* and *The Waterfall* after he had returned from an extensive tour of Europe and America. The amorality of materialistic society and the dehumanizing effect of a social order subjugated by machines saddened and angered him.

Tagore's works are characterized by his own experiences and by the social movements of his times. Although belonging to an affluent family Tagore empathized with the underprivileged, poor and oppressed in the Indian society. Through his writings he consistently tried to raise such issues and give a voice to the marginalized that were subjected to exploitation and faced many other social biases and prejudices.

Tagore's disgust for the 'Machine Age' of the West gets expression through *Raktakarabi*. In 1924 he himself undertook the task of translating the play into English and named it *Red Oleanders*. In the October 1925 issue of *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Tagore wrote about *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)* that the purpose of the play was to show the avarice of western societies. He added that "the gain of affirmation (of acquisitiveness) is intensely real. It's hot breath is upon us, its touch all over our shrinking souls" (Raha 110-11). The play affirms his faith in freedom, beauty and human dignity and focuses on the theme of conflict and the note of protest leading to self-discovery.

The play, written in 1923-24, was begun during a visit to Shillong, Assam, and inspired by the image of a red oleander plant crushed by pieces of discarded iron that Tagore had come across while walking. A short time later, an oleander branch with a single red flower protruded through the debris, as if, he noted, "created from the blood of its cruelly pierced breast" (Lal 129-32). It has been suggested that the play's title might appropriately be translated as *Blood-Red Oleanders* to indicate the beautiful but toxic nature of the flower and its association with beauty and death in the play. (129-32)

Nandini, the protagonist is the archetypal *Femme Fatale* character who metaphorically awakens the diggers of the Yaksha mining town imprisoned by their own unquenchable greed for wealth. It is for this greed that their subjugation to dig for gold underground is even more undeviating. They knew nothing about the true purpose of human life and get exploited. They don't even know about the way out. It is only Nandini who makes diggers realize that they should protest against the exploitation and raise a voice of protest for their rights. The play is Tagore's criticism of the unscrupulous capitalism, environmental exploitation and the importance of human relationships.

The play *Red Oleander* is set in a strange town called Yakshapuri. Yakshapuri or Yakshpur literally means city of 'Yakshas'. The title of the play is symbolic as in Hindu mythology; the Yakshas form a class of demigods serving Kuber, appointed to guard the underground treasures of the earth (Ray 214).

Yakshapuri town in the play has a similar implication. The people of the town are enslaved to carry out the work of digging mines. The gold "dead wealth" is a metaphor for the corruption of the government and materialistic despotism. Though the author represents mythological name of the town, king and his officers, the theme of the play is connected with the serious and contemporary issues. It also provides a glimpse of Tagore's sensibility towards eco critical approach and environmental issues.

Their king remains in the background. It is the Sardar, his Assistant and the Headman who rule in the name of the King. The miners have no identity of their own. Their life has become mechanized and they are exploited by the powerful for their greed of gold. They are not known by their names but by numbers. Thus, their individuality has been reduced to numbers. One of miners, Bishu says: "There's no such thing as getting finished here....We go on raising gold nuggets, - after one nugget another, then more and more and more.... we are not men to them, but only numbers" (226).

The gold miners have to work hard continuously. Once they reach Yaksha Kingdom there is no way to go back home. One of the miners says, "The road to our home is closed for ever....we are closely fitted to their profits only,- like husks to grains of com,- with nothing of us left over?" (222) Miners do not enjoy freedom and wish to go back to their villages. "Freedom itself was enough for the holidays in our village" (222). The helplessness of the miners and the deep desire to be free is quite evident in these lines. Tagore also presents the difference between

urban and rural life, which implies the social, political and economic effects of industrial development on lower class citizens.

In his essay "The Spirit of Freedom" Tagore's comments on the loss of freedom in India, reeling under the yoke of the British rule are reminiscent of the plight of these miners, whose suffering seems interminable. By squeezing human beings in the grip of an inelastic system and forcibly holding them fixed, we have ignored the laws of life and growth. We have forced living souls into a permanent passivity, making them incapable of molding circumstance to their own intrinsic design, and of mastering their own destiny. Borrowing our ideal of life from a dark period of our degeneracy, we have covered up our sensitiveness of soul under the immovable weight of a remote past. We have set up an elaborate ceremonial of cage-worship, and plucked all the feathers from the wings of the living spirit of our people. (Tagore "The spirit of Freedom")

The feathers of the living spirit of the miners in Yakshapuri too seem to have been plucked. Their sense of rebellion, however, is unmistakably evident. Tagore's message is that the spirit of freedom cannot be suppressed eternally. Bishu plays a very significant role in the play. His words are full of meaning and carry a sense of revolt. He has very clearly understood the system of Yaksha Kingdom. Talking to his friend Phagulal, he observes:

Your Governor has closed the ways as well as the will to return. If you go there to-day you will fly back here to-morrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food (225).

These words highlight the bondage to which the miners are subjected. There is no end to their exploitation. They do not get adequate money in return for the hard work they put in. Moreover, once a person has entered the town, he can never leave it till death because: "...As soon as one enters the jaw of Yaksha Town, its jaws fasten, and the one road that remains open leads inwards" (225). The miners live and die in this world of gold where they have been robbed of the spirit of life. The situation remains dismal till Nandini comes to the town. Representing the spirit of love and liberty, she inspires the workers to rise up in rebellion. The Professor describes her as the "beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light which never owns any bond" (214).

Nandini wears a bracelet of red oleanders. "The red flowers become the identification of her courage. The red oleander is a symbol of love, passion, vitality, courage, beauty and nature" (Naik 70). Nandini possesses all these virtues. She makes the diggers realize that they are living

a purposeless and pleasure less existence. She makes the workers revolt against the brutality of the Sardar. And she is successful in luring the King to come out of his locked doors and put an end to the bondage of the miners. The whole scenario changes as Nandini stimulates the workers to the realization of what they are losing. To see the miners digging the mines endlessly, Nandini is astonished. She is puzzled to see a whole city groping with both hands in the dark. She sees no value in dead wealth that these miners keep digging underground.

Nandini is distressed to see the young men of the town who have been reduced to skeletons. The Professor aptly remarks: "those small ones continue becoming ashes, and the great one continues burning as a flame. This is the essence of becoming great" (167). Thus, Nandini is astonished to see the world where people are busy collecting money but have no time for love and leisure. She could see that everyone in Yaksha is angry, suspicious or afraid. The Professor describes the town to Nandini: "Yaksha Town is a city under eclipse. The Shadow Demon, who lives in the gold caves, has eaten into it. It is not whole itself, neither does it allow anyone else to remain whole" (216).

Tagore intensely depicts the hierarchy of power that exists in Yaksha Town through the use of symbolism. To illustrate the effects of industrial development on lower-class citizens, Tagore also employs contrasting imagery of the urban and rural landscape. The Yaksha Town is shown as a dark, bleak gutter where workers are stuck underground to work day and night. On the other hand, the rural landscape is depicted as a scenic place with lush vegetation and crops. The town represents enslavement and tyranny while rural life resonates the idea of innocence, freedom and happiness.

Finally, Nandini decides to see the King of the Yakshapuri kingdom. She learns that the King is not visible to anyone for he remains locked behind the doors. In the beginning of the play, the King is referred as the "Voice" symbolizing how remote the King is from his subjects. The King merely represents an "awesome force, strained of inhumanity" (143), who exploits the innocent workers. But Nandini is successful in teaching the King the real meaning of freedom. When she learns that Bishu has been arrested and whipped she decides to break "the golden chains" (155).

Nandini looks up to her husband Ranjan to fight the mechanized monsters of town. Ranjan is a rebel, who has resolved to bring God's own laughter to the diggers. Unfortunately, he is killed at the behest of Sardar. The realization dawns upon Nandini that it is not so much the fault

of the King that the common people are suffering, but it is the Sardar who is merciless and uncouth. She informs the King about the treachery of the Sardar. The King realizes that he has been tricked. His helplessness is evident in these lines: "These people have tricked me. Disastrous! My own machine doesn't obey me. Call, you people, call and bring the Sardar, bring him tied up" (182). Thus, begins the rebellion against the life of bondage.

The death of Ranjan flares up the revolt. The workers join hands with Nandini to break the network of gold to pieces. The imprisoned human spirit is ultimately freed. Ranjan's death not only crumbles the network of the king but it also brings a sudden transformation in the King. He tears the flag and breaks the staff. The world of crass materialism and industrialism crumbles and love and freedom are realized as representing the spirit of life.

Sombu Mitra rightly says: "This play has in it a total picture of the crisis of civilization of contemporary world. It deals with the frightful dilemma of the modern man in the grip of an acquisitive society" (Qtd. in Naik 71).

Nandini and Ranjan are rebels in the true sense of the term. They free the humanity from the bondage of exploitation. In the materialistic world of Yakshapuri both of them stand for the spirit of life. According to Tagore, "Nandini is the torch bearer for the oppressed. Ranjan is the symbol of joy in work, and together they embody the spirit of life. They bring down the barricade, but in the process they are broken" (Qtd. in Naik 71). However, their sacrifice does not go in vain. They successfully spread the message of the true secrets of life, love, affection and freedom.

Nandini is a girl with a free spirit in search for happiness. She with her vitality brings out the best in human nature. In Yaksha town where men are enslaved to mine gold, she makes them aware of their bondage and creates in them an urge to be free. She makes the way for self-discovery not just for these mine diggers but also to the King himself. Her presence inspires them. The tremendous vigor, with which Tagore portrays her, makes her a real living personality. She becomes the harbinger of change and in her death leads to rebirth for gold diggers by awakening them from metaphorical sleep.

The play clearly is the direct output of Tagore's own perspectives influenced by the socio-political and economic events of his times. Although written a century ago, the relevance of Tagore's play *Red-oleander* has only increased than diminished. The play describes the conflict

between free human spirit and tyranny of machines. The play proves the extraordinary intellectual and creative power of the writer.

R. N. Roy in his preface to *Rabindranath Tagore: The Dramatist* states “The title of the play indicates its purpose-to provide a survey and a critical appraisal of Rabindranath dramas” (Roy xiii). Radhiga Priyadarshini in her “The Royal Metaphor in the plays Rabindranath Tagore”, comments on the thematic aspect of Tagore’s *Red Oleanders*. “*Red Oleanders* is an apocalyptic play that deals with the conflict between liberty and tyranny (Commonwealth 40).

Asit Bandopadhyay in his *History of Modern Bengali Literature* makes an evaluation of *Rakta Karabi* in English for the English speaking/reading public. He says: “*Rakta Karabi* (1926) of Rabindranath is an outstanding symbolic play and is comparable with any great play of the world” (Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume 259).

The same theme of man and nature and the conflict which results into self-realization and protest against the bondage can be seen in the finest of Tagore’s play, *The Waterfall* (*Muktadhara*) as well. The plays *Muktadhara* (*The Waterfall*) and *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*) show his liberal thoughts and establish him as a rebel writer.

Uma Dasgupta while reviewing the translation of *Red Oleanders* by Nupur Gangopadhyay In the words of Lahiri “It is a play about evil and good, working side by side, about greed and human sympathy, about that which separates fellow beings and that which keeps us together” (Lahiri, Parabaas).

Red Oleanders is a powerful and moving play. It is the story of Nandini, a girl who recognizes no social barriers and taboos and discards them outright. Tagore effectively questions, challenges and makes us aware of the society full of truth as well as misconceptions. Through this play Tagore brings awareness to issues of social injustice through the perspective of the protagonist, Nandini, in Yaksha Town. He gives a strong voice to marginalized groups who have no voice and are being exploited. This play allows us to not only gain a deepened understanding of the underlying meaning of the play, but also gain perspective of our own lives. Despite the fact that this play was written by Tagore nearly a century ago, the themes and images used express a timeless universal truth that resonates with all the people and makes Tagore and his ideas still relevant.

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