

**DECOLONISING THE STAGE: PARADIGMS AND PRAXIS OF
TAGORE'S PLAYS**

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ABSTRACT

There has been, it is said, an intimate connection between the Bengal theatre and the British Empire. The Bengal theatre was the product of the English culture which began to spread its roots upon the educated elite of Calcutta. Setting a classic example of imitating the British masters' supposedly superior culture, the bhadralok class of Bengal began to evince interest in the colonial theatre. The Bengali theatre was, thus, by and large, imitative.

Rabindranath Tagore, however, departs from this type of theatre and explores new frontiers and means to decolonise the stage. His plays exist in the liminal space—a space provisionally created in the process of negotiation between cultures. His dramatic works may be compared to a stairwell that connects the attic and the boiler room of an architectural building that serves as a pathway, as a connective tissue that constructs and admits the difference between the upper and lower areas. Tagore's plays are never a photocopy of Shakespearean drama. Nor are they written in imitation of Sanskrit plays. His aesthetics emerges from 'the third space' that destabilizes the cultural authority of the coloniser and opens up sites of hybridity.

Tagore's acquaintance with the Western theatrical art was direct and took place at a very early age. He translated *Macbeth* at the age of thirteen on the insistence of his private tutor Gyanchandra Bhattacharya. The influence that exerted most on Tagore was Shakespeare. Tagore went to England in 1878 and stayed there till 1880. While staying there Tagore must have had an immediate brush with the British culture. Soon after his return from England, he wrote the musical play, *The Genius of Valmiki* where some songs were composed inspired by the Irish folk music—a fact confirmed by Tagore himself in the essay, "The Genius of Valmiki" included in his autobiography, *Reminiscences* (Tagore, "The Genius of Valmiki", Vol9:482). Following the stage-conventions of the Western drama, he was keen to create the illusion of the forest with actual trees for the staging of the afore-mentioned play. His two plays—*King and Queen* and *Sacrifice*, which were written after he had come back from Britain bore some striking similarities in dramatic structure with the Shakespearean drama.

Both the plays were written in blank verse and in Five Acts. Moreover, we find shadows of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Tagore's conception of some minor characters. For example, Revati seemed to have the evil motives of Lady Macbeth, as she instigated her husband to take murderous path to secure the throne. The blind and violent love of the hero, Vikramaditya had some affinities with Shakespeare's Othello. Tagore was perhaps inspired by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in his depiction of the Scene involving the mass.

Tagore's plays like *Sacrifice* and *King and Queen*, for instance used plots which incorporated the Shakespearean dramatic methods like anticipation, contrast between the scenes, and interlocking of diverse and disparate incidents. The dramatic suspense and curiosity are aroused by the use of disguise, mistaken identities and sudden deaths. The second phase of Tagore's dramatic craft harnessed the multiplication of incidents and the use of suspense, as evident in the startling discovery, for example in *Sacrifice*, that Jaysingha had royal blood in his veins or in *Malini*, the sudden information that Kshemankar conveyed to the king about Supriya's conspiracy. Tagore's *Sacrifice* is almost Shakespearean in plot and dramatic narrative. The hero of this play, Jaysingha is a conflict-ridden character, just like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The conflict here is primarily between the two opposed beliefs—the dogmatic religion of Raghupati and the humanist principles of the king, Govindamanikya.

But, by and large, Tagore departs from the British master in his conception of tragedy. In Shakespeare's tragedy, some tragic flaw or error of judgment seems to be responsible for the fall and death of the hero, say Macbeth or Othello. Tagore's heroes have rarely such ostensible flaw and mostly at the end they do not meet their death, but having gone through the ordeal of loss of their beloved ones, a spiritual conversion beacons them. The painful experience of shock leads to their transformation. For example, the character of Raghupati in the play, *Sacrifice* remains steadfast in his blind faith in the necessity of animal slaughter as integral to his worship of the Goddess Kali and he adopts all accessible means fair and foul to prove his faith. When the king, Govindamanikya banned killing in the temple, he demanded the royal blood in retaliation. He falsely claimed that it was the will of the goddess conveyed it to him, the temple priest. But when Jaysingha whom Raghupati reared up since his childhood, killed himself for fulfilling Raghupati's thirst for blood, he undergoes the spiritual awakening about the inefficacy of shedding innocent blood in the name of religion. He sacrificed his blind faith at the end.

The same process of metamorphosis can be seen in the character of the King, Vikramaditya in the play, *King and Queen* when the queen dies at the end. The conflict of this play springs from the king's desire to keep his wife, Sumitra confined in the fixed role of his beloved and the queen's attempt to get him out of this narrow notion and expand himself into the larger role of rendering service to his subjects. The king, who was so long engrossed in his selfish love for the beloved queen and ignored his royal duty of serving his subjects, eventually, realizes the humane principle of the queen that love can't be confined in one object or person only and the truth that it has to be all-embracing and expansive.

Tagore departed significantly the colonial notion of 'action' and its dramatic representation in relation to material glory and success. He decolonized the thematics of the colonial stage by pleading for a mystical conversion of the characters who, like Shakespeare's heroes often go to the battlefield, but, unlike Shakespeare's their heroism is not evolved in the dialectics of the weak and the strong, of material competition, but in the principles of cooperation and amity between the conflicting tendencies welling up in the internal theatre of the protagonists. Typically, Tagore's drama is keen on

exploring the internal conflict and the fights and battles which comprise the external conflict are often symbolic representation of the inner drama.

He is particularly critical of the use of painted scenery used in the Western model of theatre. He says, “In Bharat’s *Natyasastra*(*Dramatic Theory*) there is no mention of this and I think its absence didn’t do much harm (Tagore, “Rangamancha” Vol.13: 679,)”. He expresses his fondness for Yatra (Folk acting tradition) because of this. He believes that it is in the Elizabethan form of theatre that an artificial distance is created between the spectators and the actors. He expresses his reservation on the painted scenery of the Western stagecraft, in his preface to *Tapati*, calling it a nuisance that interferes with the dramatization of life which is ever-changing with its mute and still presence. When Tagore moved to Santiniketan, he was able to put into practice his notions of a new/parallel theatre, particularly in the productions of seasonal plays like *The Festival of Autumn* and *Falguni*. While staging *The Festival of Autumn*, in which he played the role of the Sannyasi (the ascetic), the students were said to have decorated the stage with lotus flowers, kash, leaves and foliage. Rabindranath allowed only a blue cloth to stand in for the sky and made Abanindranath remove the mica-sprinkled umbrella. Rabindranath was reported to have asked: “Why the royal umbrella? The stage should remain clear and fresh” (quoted in Sen 43).

The conflict in Tagore’s drama seems to be between the narrow idea of selfhood that the character has formed about himself /herself and the expanded vision of an enlightened self in tune with Nature and vast humanity. The plays generally end on the realization that the individual self can attain a kind of joyous sense of largeness when it relinquishes selfish interests and merges with the vastness of the sky and society. In these moments of heightened experience, the conflict of passions and personalities recede into the background.

Consequently, the structure of the drama underwent radical changes. There was neither the intricate plot making, manipulation of incidents nor the uses of anticipation. The texture here is delicate and perceived by a rhythmical repetition of some key phrases and symbols. The effect is intensified by the plethora of songs that create an atmosphere of majesty and beauty of Nature.

Clearly, Tagore is following the indigenous tradition in making use of 1)the continued action through long speeches rather than brisk dialogue, 2)the profusion of songs, 3)the evocation of a mood and the recreation of a spiritual resonance. Undoubtedly, Tagore engrafts the Indian tradition in his Season plays and Dance dramas, ignoring the dramatics of the colonial culture. These plays have little ‘action’ in the accepted sense of the term and have really the catastrophe that belongs to the concept of Western notion of tragedy. The Dance dramas of Tagore made profuse use of dance and in terms of technique, it asserted the importance of Drishyakavya. *The Worship of Nati* is perhaps the most important play where dance becomes the metaphor of the dramatic action itself.

Tagore used many conventions of the Sanskrit drama as well. In the ancient Sanskrit plays, for example, we come across a character called Sutradhar who used to appear first on the stage and introduced the characters and themes of the play to the audience. We find Tagore to adopt this technique in his play, *Falguni* where we come across a character called Kavisekhar, a poet who delivers the theme of the play at the beginning. In another play, *Spring*, we find the similar technique being employed by him. For here we hear a conversation between the king and the poet in which the former enquires about the stage show for the Spring festival and the latter answers that it is about an absconder. But even though he uses a technique from other sources, he always makes it a point to improvise it.

Secondly, the character of the Court Jester, the Bidushak, prominent in Sanskrit drama is occasionally used by Tagore, but of course in a modified form. The character of Devdatta in the play, *King and Queen* is a case in point. Even when this character is nowhere mentioned explicitly as a jester, the behaviour and the dramatic function of this character, who happens to be the king's boyhood companion, perforce conforms to the role of the jester.

More importantly, Tagore was greatly influenced by the dramatic works of Kalidasa and his essay, "Ancient Literature", is an eloquent testimony to this fact (Tagore, "Ancient Literature", Vol.13:717). This Sanskrit dramatist's use of lively imagery, his majestic awareness of beauty in the world of Nature and his unique recreation of the emotional effulgence of his characters have greatly moulded Tagore's artistic sensibility. Kalidasa's *Avighansakuntalam* and *Kumarsambham* are the two texts from where Tagore gets the inspiration for the creation of feminine self like Chitra, capable of transcending the limits of beauty and appearance. The insistence on the power of the feminine principle is a familiar motif in Tagore's drama and he seems to be in harmony with Kalidasa in this score.

The action of a Tagore play is driven by his vision of humanity and spirituality. Tagore resisted the colonial master's grand narrative of conquest and success on the materialistic plane by providing a counter narrative of spiritual enlightenment and the humanist ideal of confluence. The dramatic culture of the coloniser was based on the glorification of the mighty and the powerful, but Tagore's plays showed how fragile and shallow the weapons of the powerful and the masculine were, as he turned the table round and rendered his strong heroes like the King of *Red Oleanders* and Raghupati of *Sacrifice* humble and defeated before the powers of human virtues and affections.

In Tagore, the dramatic conflict springs more on internal beliefs and attitudes than on external forces. The bloody fight in the battlefield is neither triggered off on the external issues of kingship, of power and glory. Nor can this battle be resolved by the victory of the one and the defeat of another, as sanctified in the drama of the colonial masters. Tagore opposes this dominant discourse of the West by his deliberate employment of certain characters like Dadathakur/Grandfather and Raja, the King that appear in many of his plays.

The King in the Tagorean drama is not always the centre of ruthless power and authority. Sometimes he is the manifestation of divinity, as in the symbolist play, *The King* whom the Queen wishes to seek in the illusions of appearance and beauty. Sometimes, the king is the face of benevolent humanity as the king, Govindamanikya in *Sacrifice* who bans the slaughter of animals in the temple. Quite often, the King joins the little boys and girls on the occasion of the festival of seasons, as in the play, *The Festival of Autumn* and relinquishes the ancestral practice of undertaking the venture of conquering a neighbouring kingdom. Even when this character is projected as vicious as in *Red Oleanders* or violent as in *King and Queen*, he is inwardly weak and unhappy and goes through the process of conversion.

This projection of the character of the king who appears quite a contrast to our traditional perception of a ruler, is a dramatic strategy adopted by Tagore. It resists the colonial ideology and practice that always received its strength from the conception of the kingship as the source of absolute power. Tagore subverts the dominant image that the centre of material power is invincible and solid and therefore, sacrosanct. The King of Tagore is powerful, but his power lies not on materialism but in humanity which is an extended manifestation of divinity that erases the distinction of the potent and the weak, the coloniser and the colonised.

The character of Dadathakur who recurs in his plays is another mouthpiece of Tagore's ideology. This wise man is old in age, but young in heart .He is always there whenever the joyous and natural life principles are thwarted by the artificial, shallow forces of customs and politics. This old man is the modern incarnation of the ancient sages of Indian culture. He is the repository of wisdom that asserts the Tagorean belief that creativity and joy are the fountainheads of life, to be explored in Nature and spirit. He posits in the plays the alternative values of love and community, spirituality and companionship that oppose crass materialism and the notion of progress as self-aggrandizement made holy in the western hegemony.

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