



“THE WORLD AS IT IS BUT OUGHT TO BE: TAGORE’S *THE CROWN* AND *RED OLEANDERS* AS VIRTUAL CASE STUDIES”

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ABSTRACT

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, playwright, painter, musician, philosopher, educationist, lyricist and a wonderful story teller. He delved and penned his thoughts on issues related to such divergent matters like politics, economics, education, amelioration of women’s lot and so on. Through his writings he shed light on almost all fields of human knowledge and understanding. Having a great faith in the natural goodness of man, Tagore viewed that if man is caught in the gyre of his selfish desires, then his instinctive knack becomes a triviality.

The strife between the right and the wrong, the conscious and the unconscious desires, and the rich and the poor have been deftly dealt by Tagore. He was aware that man has made progress but such a progress has been unable to provide benefit to those in the lower strata of the society. This has only facilitated the progression of the deep chasm already present between men. Though discoveries, inventions and innovations have made time and space almost redundant, yet man remain alienated from his fellow beings. It is in this light that an effort is made here to investigate issues such as those mentioned and their relevance in the contemporary world of ours through a study of his two plays *The Crown* and *Red Oleanders*. Through the vision of the visionary, an attempt is made to visualize that time is not yet over for us to redeem what we have done to ourselves.

Key Words: deception, capitalism, subaltern, other, binary oppositions, existentialism

Primary Sources of Information: The article is based on Rabindranath Tagore’s plays *The Crown*, originally written in Bengali as *Mukut* in 1918 and *Red Oleanders*, originally written in Bengali as *Raktakarobi* in 1923.

An attempt is made here to study the two plays as Case Studies offering divergent views and opinions. Each in their own rights is trying perhaps to speak

one and many similar but dissimilar opinions and views.

About the Plays: Briefly *The Crown’s* plot is based on the background of the princely state of Tripura. The story revolves around the three princes – the loving eldest prince and heir apparent, Chandramanikya; the heroic middle prince, Indrakumar; and the willy youngest prince, Rajdhar.

The play dramatizes the conflict between the three princes with the crown at the centre of dispute. The eldest prince admires the heroism of Indrakumar and at the same time indulges in the caprices of the much maligned youngest prince, Rajdhar. Rajdhar always feels neglected of his abilities and hence resorts to lies and deceit. Indrakumar is extremely impatient of Rajdhar's mean tricks and constantly indicts Rajdhar, so much so that Rajdhar is pushed to the extreme path of treason. However, the play ends on a melodramatic note with both Indrakumar and Rajdhar realizing their folly, seeking forgiveness from the mortally wounded Chandramanikya at the battlefield where the crown is at last placed on the head of Rajdhar.

Red Oleanders talks of Yakshapuri ruled by an inhuman and brutal king who remains unseen for the most part of the play. To him, his people are only machines for the production of gold. The workers in the gold mines are nothing short of numbered automatons. Their greedy urge for cruel hoarding has made them banish all life's sweetness from the place. There is no free life in the land. The king is a prisoner of his greed while his workers are victims of oppression. Then there enters Nandini, the energy of life. And she casts her impact on the machines. Nandini makes the people restless and they long for freedom. The king desires to possess Nandini, but she succeeds in eluding him. Later, his death heralds the dawn of life and love, and freedom is in the air. The harvest-song heard at a distance signifies the renewal of life.

INTRODUCTION

The progress and growth of human beings is largely contributed to the inquisitiveness they harbour. However, not all curiosity has led humans to the path of glory. Blemishes scattered on the pure, fine cloth of moral prying, due to their own activities, have denigrated themselves. Greed for power and avarice has made a sham of all social, cultural and scientific inventions and innovations accomplished. The struggle for authority has become strife to prove the others' worthiness and the unworthiness. The quality of life led is often questioned in such circumstances. Simplicity and contentedness are passé. Love and regard for the fellow human is mere flattery. Are we happy and proud of what we have done and achieved? The world order, somewhat

utopian in nature though, is shattered, but is not impossible to regain. That is the crux of what Tagore wants to impress and impart through his dramas *The Crown* and *Red Oleanders*.

The World as it is:

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.
To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man. (Wordsworth, *Lines Written in Early Spring*, Lines 1-8)

The lives of many people on this earth are based on lies, deception, treachery, and so on. Some one or the other is always ready to pull the other down if they see the other climbing the ladder of success steadfastly. This has become the order of the day. Presenting two very divergent settings, Tagore skillfully portrays this part of human nature.

In *The Crown*, the youngest prince, Rajdhar, is an anti-thesis of his eldest brother Chandramanikya. He resorts to all forms of lies and treachery and gloats over them as an achievement attained. He shirks not when he steals arrows from Indrakumar's weapon-room and nor does he think twice to come in pact with the Raja of Arakan to see his brother defeated in the battle, just to gratify his sense of inflated ego and hurt sentiments.

In like manner, Yakshapuri goads simple villagers to it in the hope of better life, which, however, it offers not. The king of Yakshapuri, who mysteriously remains in veil all the time, is the biggest epitome of deceit then. His Governor and Priest with the glib of silver tongue sweeten the bitterness among the workers of the dungeon.

Freud links deception to an unconscious compromise in which self-interests prevail. Too little restraint leads to recklessness; too much to frustration and resentment. Neither permits conflict to be comfortably entertained. When moral implications are readily discounted, treated as if they are not really real, deception and transgression are likely consequences. And this is exactly what Rajdhar and the King of Yakshapuri do. Their self-interests are put above the comfort of the others. It is the

'super-ego' which stops the 'id' from doing what it should rightfully do.

Tagore lived to see the fall and rise of two centuries. He had known and felt what Industrial Revolution was and with it the birth of Capitalism and the greed for power, authority and wealth. The presence of the scramble for power, authority and wealth can be felt in both the plays.

Though *The Crown* shows no physical evidence of capitalist theory at play, yet the conflict between the princes over the legitimacy of a rightful heir to wear the crown is proof enough of the power hegemony race. Though history is besought with such cases where princes fought among siblings for the crown, yet the goal to be achieved was the same – to yield power and authority. Capitalism is based on the private ownership of goods and means of production – and this is exactly what the Rajdhar was looking for. He wanted to be the king so that he could have ownership over every asset of the kingdom.

Red Oleanders is, on the other hand, a perfect example of what happens in a laissez-faire capitalistic society. The humans become automatons, their identity reduced merely to numbers, to work as slaves brought from distant lands, to dig deep into the earth to find gold in order to fill wealth into the coffers of the King, whose Governor, Priest, Police and Spy are ready to punish those who even think of returning to their home or take rest. The image that is invoked is of an African Slave working in the fields of America, his feet tied with chains, his body bearing the marks of the lash whipped so cruelly, and in hunger, pain and penury he dies with just dreams of returning home. All these are done in the name of development and the modern economic theory of capitalism.

Capitalism brought with it the evils Colonialism. The race for a hegemonic power structure comprising of several colonies, led to the establishment of an excluded society. In post-colonial literature studies, that excluded society is referred to as subaltern. Subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. A subaltern is a person rendered without human agency by his or her social status.

In Marxist theory, Gramsci uses the term as a synonym for the proletariat, but it is Bhabha who defined subaltern as oppressed minorities, who

none the less are in a position to subvert the authority of those who hold the hegemonic power.

Taking cue of what Bhabha says, Rajdhar can be said to possess the traces of a subaltern. He considers himself as a minority in the palace, who is thought by all as useless and worthless, never to be taken seriously but as a joke. But it is he who ultimately has the influence to turn the table of power towards him by subverting the authority yielded by others.

In *Red Oleanders*, the workers are but all part of that subaltern group. They are tortured and oppressed. They have no say of theirs. But it is the free spirited Nandini, a subaltern who thinks of the welfare of the others, who imbues love, life and fellow feeling, is the one who delivers them all from the injustice and tyranny of the immoral King.

However, Gayatri Spivak finds that the term subaltern is just a *classy word for the oppressed, for the Other*. She feels that just by being oppressed does not make one a subaltern. They can be seen as the Other. The Other opposes the same. It denotes a person other than the self. It often constitutes the self in both psychological and philosophical sense.

With imperialism spreading and later with the rise of colonialism, there was always a necessity to maintain an unequal balance between the ruler and the ruled. The subordination of the ruled was termed as the subordination of the Other people from whom resources can be taken and exploited. The creation of the Other is done by extenuating the moral responsibility of the stronger self to educate, convert or civilize depending on the identity of the Other.

Hence, Rajdhar is an overt Other for being belittled and scorned at always. But the scorners realize their mistake only at the end, when all go wrong, change themselves and their perception towards him. Rajdhar is an Other to his elder brothers. He is not counted as heroic as themselves. Rajdhar is an Other to the situation he is always put to, and not by his birth.

The workers in the gold mine in the *Red Oleanders* who can then be also called as the Other, shine in their weakness to convert the despot and with his death restructure entire Yakshapuri with love and life.

The two plays can also be looked from the critical theory of binary oppositions. It is a pair of related terms or concepts in meaning. Though Saussure developed the concept of binary oppositions to determine the value or meaning of language, yet it was Pieter Fourie who found a deeper level of binary which would help reinforce the meaning.

The binary oppositions in the play include:

- i. Haves and Have-nots
- ii. Presence and Absence
- iii. Good and Evil;
- iv. Hero and Villian

While Chandramanikya and the King can be seen to belong to the Haves, Rajdhar and Nandini can be seen in the category of Have-nots. Again, while Nandini and Chandramanikya are seen as binaries of Presence, Good and Hero, the King and Rajdhar are to be seen as the oppositions of those binaries as Absence, Evil and Villain respectively.

The World ought to be: The central proposition to what ought to be is existentialism. Existence precedes, which means that he or she is an individual – an independently acting and responsible conscious being. Human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning to their life.

Tagore's characters are existential in as much as they are aware of what they are doing, though for some the realization dawns later in life like that of Rajdhar and the King of Yakshapuri. However, on the other hand, there are others who act freely of their own choice, not to satisfy or justify their actions. Indrakumar does and says what he feels, knows and thinks is right, and so do Nandini and Bishu in *Red Oleanders*.

Keeping this view in mind, it can be asserted of what Mikhail Bakhtin asserts of Dostoevsky's prose as polyphonic, signifying not a single vision but describing situations from various angles. Life is an amalgamation of several binaries. Their presence is made up by the absence of something. The rise of autocracy, capitalism and colonialism would not sustain if there were no oppositions to them. That the characters in both the plays fought and opposed all these is a proof that they can be analysed from several conflicting views.

CONCLUSION

Tagore was a humanist who emphasized the value and agency of human beings – individually and collectively. He was a Romantic too. He validated strong emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing emphasis on such emotions as love, hatred, apprehensions, horror, terror and awe. In this context, the two plays become Bildungsroman. They certainly look for answers and experiences in this world. The plays are, therefore, virtual case studies of life, society, polity, economy and social mores. And the hope for all to regenerate is given by Tagore in the harvest song at the end of *Red Oleanders*:

*Poush toder dak diyeeche
Aire chute ai ai ai!
Dala jetar bhore aache paka
foshole
Mori hai hai hai!*

(As translated by me: The harvest season beckons us to come out freely. But look, their winnowing trays are already filled with ripened corns.)

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