

Rabindranath Tagore's Playtexts : Refashioning Source-materials—I

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Tales, events, epiphanies

For the plots, narratives, themes or ideas of his playtexts, Rabindranath drew upon a varied array of sources ranging from tales of mythical/historical/folk origins to experiences of actual events, dreams or epiphanies. But whatever the nature of the source-materials, they were always refashioned to cater to his own particular needs. Many playtexts, therefore, moved through several phases of revision/modification/alteration, often prompted by the need to meet specific purposes—whether to suit the needs of philosophical perceptions or to load the narrative with ideological underpinnings or even to cater to more immediate theatrical exigencies.

The theme of *Rajarshi*, the source novel for the play *Visarjan*, came to him in a dream, in which he seemed to see a young girl shuddering at the sight of sacrificial blood staining the white steps of the temple:

At this sight, intense fright, immense sorrow played upon the girl's face. She repeatedly asked her father in a pitiful voice, Father, why so much blood? The father strove to stop her. Then the girl tried to wipe the blood stains with the trail of her own saree. .. The story was actually about the conflict between the aggressive celebration of power and the non-violent offerings of love.¹

Though the novel moves on to engage with several other issues, when he refashions it in a dramatic form as *Visarjan*, this theme defines the central concern of the play. In fact, the stage copy for the 1923 production, not only restores the characters of Hashi and Tata of the novel (while retaining the role of Aparna), but even mentions Hashi trying to wipe out the stains of blood spilled due to the animal sacrifice.² The English version, *Sacrifice* (published by Macmillan in 1917) updates the centrality of this thematic concern in the light of the First World War that had just ended by dedicating the play to 'THOSE HEROES WHO/ BRAVELY STOOD FOR PEACE/ WHEN HUMAN SACRIFICE/ WAS CLAIMED FOR THE/ GODDESS OF WAR'.³ The dramatic text of this play, in fact, moves through several revisions/editions (as has been discussed later in this paper).

The idea of *Malini* also suggested itself in a dream. At Tarak Palit's house in London, when, tired after a dinner party while the others were still revelling, Rabindranath retired for the night and dreamt of what looked like the enactment of a drama:

The subject was the conspiracy of a rebellion. Of the two friends involved, one, from his sense of duty, discloses the plan to the king. The rebel is caught and

brought before the king. When his final wish is granted—to see the friend again—he strikes him on the head with the chains that bound his hands and kills him. ... At that time, my mind was engrossed with the idea of a religious urge not located on the pristine but aloof heights of the snow-clad mountains but emerging as a flow of benign fellowship in the world of humans.⁴

Malini was perhaps the earliest of his dramatic compositions to engage with Buddhist philosophy, which was close to his heart, and to which he returned time and again.

Chitrangada was the fruit of a 'vision' engendered by the sights of the natural landscape during a train ride from Santiniketan to Kolkata:

It was perhaps the month of *Chaitra* (March-April). Beside the rail tracks were clumps of weeds, with yellow, purple, white coloured flowers. I suddenly remembered that within a few weeks the flowers, with their colourful hues, would vanish like the mirage under the blaze of the sun. Then, as the village groves will offer the mangoes, nature would reveal her more permanent identity with her fruitfulness. And suddenly it struck me that if a young beautiful woman feels that she has enchanted her lover's heart only with her youthful charm then she would hold her beauty at fault for depriving her of her primary worth.⁵

In trying to express this idea, he turned to the 'Chitrangada'-story of the *Mahabharata*, infusing into it the god-gifted boon of a transfiguration, a detail that is absent in the original epic.

The genesis of *Raktakarabi* had intrinsic links with the image of the red flower which the Poet is said to have seen blossoming on a green shoot that had emerged from a pile of discarded iron

scrap; the flower seemed to hail the very spirit of life, blooming despite the odds heaped upon it. One may recall here the letter that Pramathanath Bishi received from Kshitimohan Sen, mentioning Rabindranath's views on life and death a few days before his demise. In that context, describing the 'epiphany' that prompted the naming of the play, the Poet is reported to have said:

In front of my room some rejected iron stuff had been stacked up. A small oleander plant had been buried under that heap. Its presence went unnoticed when the iron objects were piled upon it, and it could not be recovered even when some of the garbage was removed. All of a sudden one day, from under that mess of iron heap, a beautiful oleander sapling surfaced bearing a red flower. The harsh blow seemed to have made its heart bleed, with which it emerged, bearing a smile of cordial greetings. It seemed to say, I am not dead, you could not kill me. This stirred up a sense of pain in my heart. So I could not be contented with the name *Yakshapuri* or *Nandini* for the play, but renamed it *Raktakarabi* [*Red Oleanders*].⁶

That he was overwhelmed with a sense of death while writing *Dakghar* is attested by several letters which he wrote around that time. A letter written in the same year that he wrote the play (1911) states: 'For some time I had been feeling as though Death had struck me with its final arrow and it was time for me to depart from this world. But, Death and Deathlessness are manifestations of the same Entity—the Immortal has once again touched my soul.'⁷ He confesses that the visit to Shelaidah (from where this letter was written) helped to rejuvenate him. In fact, that his obsession with death had continued even after the play was written

is to be found in a letter of 1915. He writes to Rathindranath how he was prescribed Aurium for certain ailments, but this had disastrous side-effects; he lists the side-effects of the drug mentioned in *Materia Medica* and confirms they match with his own:

Melancholy, with inquietude and desire to die. –Irresistible impulse to weep. –Sees obstacles everywhere. –Hopeless, suicidal, desperate. –Great anguish. –Excessive scruples with conscience. –Despair of oneself and others. –Grumbling, quarrelsome humour. –Alternate peevishness and cheerfulness.

All these symptoms mentioned in *Materia Medica* may be found in me. Night and day, an urge to die seems to haunt me.⁸

In spite of some of these lingering anxieties, he seems to have found a catharsis for this fixation with death through the writing of the play, which left him with a sense of pleasurable relief. An address that he delivered at Santiniketan on 4 Pous 1322 (December 1915) points in this direction:

When I was writing *Dakghar* my mind was swimming in a sea of emotions. ... A huge urge arose in me: Come, come away; before you go, you have to go around⁹ the world, you have to acquaint yourself with the joys and sorrows of people living here. At that time I was busy with work related to the school. Yet, at two or three in the night, on the dark terrace my soul seemed to spread out its wings. ... I felt as though something would happen, perhaps death. I was filled with a sense of pleasure at the thought of leaving the station in a quick leap. I felt I was going from here, I was being relieved. Since He had called me so urgently, I needed to have no qualms. This call to go elsewhere, this message of death ... was articulated in *Dakghar*. ... I will not remain, I will go, all are moving on in joy,

all are calling out to me as they go, and will I stay behind? This sorrow, this urge has to be expressed. One unacquainted with this urge may be puzzled, but one who has felt this pain within will comprehend its meaning.¹⁰

Though at the end of *Dakghar* Amal falls asleep (an obvious metaphor of death), with the arrival of the royal physician carrying missives from the King, the play holds out a promise of fulfilment at the end of the journey. This is also echoed in the Introduction that W.B. Yeats wrote for the English version of the play:

The deliverance sought and won by the dying child is the same deliverance which rose before his imagination, Mr. Tagore has said, when once in the early dawn he heard, amid the noise of a crowd returning from some festival, this line out of an old village song, ‘Ferryman, take me to the other shore of the river.’ It may come at any moment of life, though the child discovers it in death, for it always comes at the moment when the ‘I’, seeking no longer for gains that cannot be assimilated with its spirit is able to say, ‘All my work is thine’ (*Sadhana*, pp. 162, 163).¹¹

This movement from darkness to light, from blindness to vision, from ignorance to enlightenment, informs his major plays mostly composed in his Santiniketan-phase. This movement, in fact, was first suggested in the 1884–*Prakritir Protisodh* [*Nature’s Revenge*].¹² Though not among his mature writings, this early play carves out the trajectory of movement towards final fruition that the later plays were to follow. Notably, in his reminiscences, Rabindranath has an entire chapter explaining the thematic significance of this play and its impact on his entire literary career:

This [the narrative of the play] was to put in a slightly different form the story of my own experience, of the entrancing ray of light which found its way into the depths of the cave into which I had retired away from all touch with the outside world and make me more fully one with Nature again. This *Nature's Revenge* may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my literary work; or rather this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt—the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite.¹³

This theme of a journey from darkness/ignorance to light/enlightenment is at the core of the plays beginning with *Sarodotsav* (1908). This is the quest of Upananda (*Sarodotsav*), Panchak (*Achalayatan*), Sudarshana (*Raja*), Amal (*Dakghar*), the group of young men (*Phalguni*), the oppressed subjects in the kingdom of Ranajit (*Muktadhara*), both the common miners and the King of Yakshapuri (*Raktakarabi*), the regimented card-people in Card-Land (*Tasher Desh*); in this quest, their more enlightened fellow-humans usually come to their aid—Sannyasi/Emperor Vijayaditya (*Sarodotsav*), Dadathakur (*Achalayatan*), Thakurda and Surangama (*Raja*), Thakurda/Fakir (*Dakghar*), the blind *baul* (*Phalguni*), Abhijit and Dhananjoy Bairagi (*Muktadhara*), Nandini and Bishu (*Raktakarabi*), the Prince (*Tasher Desh*).

With his adroitness to rework old themes in new formats, Rabindranath recast the idea of the revenge of nature to serve the requirements of a comic form in a play like *Chirakumar Sabha*. This comedy was originally published in *Bharati* as a farce (in 1904); then it was reworked into a fictional narrative, though retaining much of the dramatic dialogues, as *Prajapatir Nirbandha* (in 1908); yet later, it was

redone in the form of a full-fledged comic drama, and its initial title reinstated (this final version being written in 1925 and published in 1926). If the hermit of *Prakritir Pratisodh* had transgressed the dictates of nature in isolating himself from the usual human ties, the bachelors' club of this comic play is similarly set up to evade marital bonding, in a gross violation of the ways of nature. This only helps to promote incongruities, and ultimately cannot but surrender to the instinctive attraction between the sexes.

II Reworkings

For his stories and/or themes, Rabindranath is known to have rummaged diverse sources—ranging from the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, to the Buddhist tales of *Jataka*, to folk rituals concerning the vegetative myth and the cycle of seasons.

Buddhist sources figure prominently in several of his plays, providing primarily the narrative but sometimes also the spirit of self-sacrifice and the philosophy of non-violence. This is notably present in the early *Malini* (1896) and the late *Natir Puja* (1926), the latter being a dramatisation of the poem 'Pujarini' that appeared in *Katha* (1900)—both exude the Buddha's teachings of love and sacrifice, and refer to characters related to Buddhist history, though not directly borrowed from the tales of *Jataka*. Similarly, in *Chandalika* (prose drama: 1933; dance drama: 1938), the historical Ananda, a foremost disciple of Buddha, makes his appearance to enlighten the social-outcast Prakriti with the message of love and equality. From the *Jataka* tales he uses the story of Kusha-jataka in *Raja* (1910)/*Arupratan* (1920) as well as in

Shapmochan (1931). In the original *Jataka*-tale, though Kush, with his ugly looks, is initially repulsive to his queen, Sudarshana, he is ultimately accepted and loved by her after his transformation through a supernatural intervention which helps him to use a jewel to remove his ugliness and make him handsome. With Rabindranath, of course, the ‘jewel’ becomes the jewel of inner worth, a comprehension of which removes all darkness/ugliness; significantly, it is mentioned as the ‘*arupratan*’, ‘the formless jewel’, in the 1920 revised version of the play suitably titled *Arupratan*. For the narrative of ‘Parisodh’, a poem in *Katha* (1900), and which ultimately evolved into the dance drama *Shyama* (1939), he uses Buddhist sources again. Of the Indian epics, he resorts to various episodes of the *Mahabharata* for plays like *Chitrangada* (verse-drama:1892; dance drama: 1936) and playlets like, *Gandharir Abedan* (1900) or *Karna-Kunti Samvad* (1900)¹⁴ and *Viday Abhishap* (1912)¹⁵, while he reconstitutes the myth of the *Ramayana* into a modern myth relevant for contemporary concerns in *Raktakarabi* (1924).

What is most striking is the way Rabindranath makes use of the original sources to suit his aesthetic and/or ideological requirements. His recensions are always infused by the power of his own myth-making. Thus, he takes liberties with the story of ‘Chitrangada’, as available in the *Mahabharata*, and recreates a myth of his own. The original Chitrangada was a fair princess to start with, and Arjuna wanted her as his bride precisely for her beauty; he had only to submit to her father’s condition that his child by her would be the ruler of that land

(Manipur). The Chitrangada of the *Mahabharata* did not have to plead with the gods to transform her ugliness into fairness, even if temporarily, to please the eyes of Arjuna. With this twist Rabindranath gives the narrative a different signification altogether, and out of the innocuous legend weaves a tale of carnal desire and eroticism that finally culminates into companionable love.¹⁶

The concept of a vegetative myth, based on the cycle of seasons, seems to be instilled into the theme of his seasonal plays, like *Sarodotsav* or *Phalguni*. If the primitive vegetative myth was based upon the idea of a vegetative god—supposedly born in spring, reaching primehood in summer, maturing in autumn, dying in winter, only to be reborn in the next spring—then, Rabindranath’s seasonal plays project a journey towards a realization of this order, not only encapsulated in the cyclic pattern of the seasons but even in the greater order that defines and regulates life. As has been suggested above, a ceaseless quest for the Eternal/Infinite/Truth/Light informs not only the seasonal dramas but also plays like *Raja*, *Dakghar*, *Achalayatan*, *Muktadhara*, *Raktakarabi*, *Tasher Desh* or *Kaler Jatra*. This theme of a passage from darkness/ignorance to light/enlightenment works in most of these plays with the help of two major *leitmotifs*—one, an enclosed space; second, an open path or road. The enclosed space—a cave (*Phalguni*), a dark chamber (*Raja*), a walled-in institution (*Achalayatan*), a quarantined room (*Dakghar*), a web enveloping the palace portals (*Raktakarabi*), a regimented kingdom (*Tasher Desh*)—is circumscribed by the delimiting constrictions of ignorance and repression. By contrast, the path or road—with its expansive openness—promises a journey towards enlightenment and

emancipation; this motif recurs in all these plays, as well as in *Sarodotsav*, *Muktadhara*, *Kaler Jatra*. In fact, the repressive cave and the open road both were already available in early embryonic forms in his *Prakritir Pratisodh*.

Raktakarabi

Rabindranath's myth-making potentials perhaps reach a crescendo in *Raktakarabi*, which, by his own accounts, looks back to the *Ramayana*. In the explanatory passages he has later added as appendices to the text of the play, there are repeated references to how he applies his reading of the *Ramayana* to his own creation:

We might suddenly feel that the *Ramayana* is an allegory, more so when we realise that the names Rama and Ravana signify opposite meanings. Rama connotes comfort, peace, while Ravana is clamour, turbulence. In the one, there is the beauty of the green, the soft lilt of the foliage; in the other, there is the crazy siren of the demonic chariot speeding down the paved roadway.¹⁷

He elucidates the nature of power wielded by the King of Yakshapuri, and the acquisitive system of exploitation that he has unleashed:

There is a king in my drama. Writing in the present times, I did not have the courage to equip him with more than one head or two hands. Had I the nerve of the ancient poet, I would have done so. The powers of science and technology have added innumerable but invisible hands, feet and heads to the human entity. That the king of my drama extracts and devours by such excessive powers is indicated in the play.¹⁸

But he also goes on to hint at the schizophrenic schism within this power-system; the self-contradiction in the King (between his Ravana and

Vivishana personae) pulls him in opposite directions that would bring about the inevitable collapse:

The ancient poet had no dearth of room in his seven chapters. So he allotted separate spaces to Ravana and Vivishana. Yet, he did hint that they were the same, brothers born of the same womb. The same locale has nurtured both sin and its destructive agent. In my terse play, the representative of Ravana is both Ravana and Vivishana, rolled into one; he destroys himself ultimately.¹⁹

Even as the myth of the ancient *Ramayana* is played out through the reconstituted myth of *Raktakarabi*, it also becomes inflected with significations derived from related mythical/legendary origins. Notably, the region is given the name of *Yakshapuri*.²⁰ The *Yaksha*, in Indian mythical sources, was a follower of *Kubera*, the god of acquisitive wealth, which was hoarded and accumulated, not expended fruitfully. The system of exploitative acquisition at *Yakshapuri*, initiated by the King and perpetrated by the Governors, re-invokes Rabindranath's image of the European Nation-State, constructed mainly in the negative. His fashioning of *Yakshapuri*/Yaksha Town as the setting of *Raktakarabi*/*Red Oleanders* (1924/1925) recalls his polemical discourses on European nationalism. The dehumanizing, impersonal, aggressive, organised state-power at *Yakshapuri* tries to erase human identities and create automatons, the 'neatly impressed bales of humanity'²¹ that Rabindranath referred to in a different context. When Nandini is horrified by the show of men reduced to mere shadows—'the King's leavings'²²—the Professor clarifies the *modus operandi* of exploitation in Yaksha Town: 'These small ones are consumed to ash, that the

great ones may leap up in flame. This is the principle underlying all rise to greatness.’²³ It is precisely against this oppression that Nandini and Ranjan (present in absentia)²⁴ voice their protest, and finally persuade the King to tear apart his web and join in the fight against the system, which by then has gone beyond his control. The acquisitive urges of *Kubera* are in sharp contrast to the benediction of *Shree* or *Lakshmi*, the goddess of plenitude and abundance, who

bestows prosperity and welfare on all. Rabindranath’s own experiences of acquisitive capitalist societies had moved him to comment: ‘*Lakshmi* is of a kind, *Kubera* of another—the difference is vast. The inner essence of *Kubera* is acquisition, which leads to amassing of wealth.’²⁵ This very succinct observation of the contrariness between *Kubera* and *Lakshmi* informs the theme of *Raktakarabi*. ■

(To be continued)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Preface, *Rajarshi, Rabindra Rachanabali* [Complete Works] vol. 8 (Kolkata: West Bengal Government Centenary Edition, 1961) p. 114; subsequently referred to as *RR*. Also, all translations from the Bengali original into English, unless otherwise specified, have been done by me for purposes of this paper.
- 2 *Bichitra: On-line Tagore Variorum*, School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, bichitra.jdvu.ac.in, RBVBMS_134 (i), 7 (image 7).
- 3 Rabindranath Tagore, *Collected Poems and Plays* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2001; 1st Indian reprint 1991; originally 1936), p. 651.
- 4 Preface, *Malini, RR*, vol. 5, pp. 485-86.
- 5 Preface, *Chitrangada* (verse-drama), *RR*, vol. 5, p. 438.
- 6 Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Natya-prabaha*, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 1958), pp. 157-58.
- 7 *Chithipatra*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1942), p. 21.
- 8 *Chithipatra*, vol. 2, pp. 27-32.
- 9 The Bangla word used (‘*pradakshin*’) often connotes a religious sense of going around the idol in the temple.
- 10 As cited in Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Natya-prabaha*, vol. 2, pp. 101-02.
- 11 W.B. Yeats, “Preface” to Rabindranath Tagore, *The Post Office*, trans. Devabrata Mukherjea (London: Macmillan, 1914; rpt.1961), pp. v-vi.
- 12 Though *Nature’s Revenge* is closer to the original Bengali title, the English version (an auto-translation) has been titled *Sannyasi* or *The Ascetic*.
- 13 Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences* [trans. Surendranath Tagore] (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 238-39; see also the original Bangla passage in *Jibansmriti, RR*, vol. 10, p. 109.
- 14 The first two playlets, whose Bengali originals appeared in *Kahini* of 1900, were translated as *Mother’s Prayer* and *Karna and Kunti*, and included in *The Fugitive* (London: Macmillan, 1921); *Mother’s Prayer*, however, had been published earlier from Calcutta in 1919.
- 15 *Viday Abhishap* appeared as an individual playtext in 1912, and was not a part of the original *Kahini* of 1900, which contained the other playlets. However, in *The Fugitive*, its English version (*Kacha and Devajani*) was included along with the translations of the other verse playlets.
- 16 Rabindranath was taken to task by Dwijendralal Roy precisely because of this: ‘In the Mahabharata ...Arjuna during his sojourn in Manipur was struck with the beauty of Chitrangada and married her with her father’s consent. This tale was much too prosaic for Rabindra-babu; to seek for the consent of the father to marry the daughter is what all do. If Rabindra-babu does as much, then he would have to stoop to the level of Vyasdeva.’ (*Sahitya*,

Jaistha 1316 B.S., May-June 1909); cited in Rakhi Mitra, 'Chitrangada Bitarka O Kabichitter Vibartan' ['The Chitrangada debate and the evolution of the Poet's Mind'], *Parikatha*, 14th year, No. 1, December 2011, pp. 161-184; here quoted from p. 161.

- 17 *Raktakarabi* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1926), p. 110; this prose piece appeared first in *Probasi, Baisakh* 1332 (May 1925) and was later appended at the end of the playtext.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 107-08.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 20 Many held that the play had initially been titled *Yakshapuri*, but none of the drafts found bear this name: some early manuscripts use the name *Nandini*, to be replaced by *Raktakarabi* from the eighth draft. The confusion probably arose because Rabindranath himself referred to the play as *Yakshapuri* in some letters, while he was in the process of composing
- it (for instance, letter to Ramananda Chattopadhyay, dated 19 *Bhadra* 1330 [1923], in *Chithipatra*, vol. 12, 1986, p. 86); for details, see Mology Rakshit, *Raktakarabi: Path O Pathantarar Bhabnay* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2009), especially pp. 49-50.
- 21 'Nationalism in the West' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2, p. 420.
- 22 *Red Oleanders* (Delhi: Macmillan India, 1962; 1st edn., 1925) p. 95.
- 23 *Red Oleanders*, p. 98.
- 24 Ranjan's overwhelming presence throughout the play, though in absentia (except discovered as a corpse at the very end of the play), is a yet another masterstroke of dramaturgical innovation in this play.
- 25 'Sikshar Milan' (*Aswin* 1328 B.S., 1921), *Siksha, RR*, vol. 11, pp. 664-98; here quoted from p. 669.

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