

A Postcolonial Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Raktakarabi

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Abstract: The article attempts to read Rabindranath Tagore's play *Raktakarabi* as a play that internalizes the pain of the diggers subjugated by the cold iron rule of the King. Here the King is represented as the one with power and hegemony but who himself has been controlled by the iron clutches of the guardians of force and imperialism. It was important to break free from this suppression and liberate those caged in oppression and tyranny. Significantly, Tagore chose a woman, Nandini to stand up against all odds and instill into the minds of the people of Yaksha Town their rightful existence as human kinds. All that the people needed was a hand to lead them and show them the way. Nandini instill feelings of courage in the diggers and the King until they finally raised their hands against control walking freely towards liberty and emancipation.

Key words: woman, strength, control, force, freedom

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“ . . . postcolonialism [is] not just in terms of strict historical presentation, but as referring to disparate forms of representations, reading practices and values.” (McLeod. 5)

Raktakarabi (Red Oleander) by Rabindranath Tagore is a play that can be read as the writer's sensitivity towards the presence of the cold and strong hands of control, subjugation and suppression in his motherland. Written between 1923-24, when India was vehemently under the rule of the British, the symbolic resemblance cannot be overlooked and ignored. The allegory present in the play has at its stronghold the iron clutches of colonialism with a focus on the need to read the angst of the margin's discarded perimeter. Interestingly, in this play, the writer seems to be providing the marginalized with a space and a platform to voice and exhibit their views, priorities and prowess.

The beauty of literature lies in this bare truth that a litterateur can interpret and decode history to suit his purpose and creativity. The iron rule of the British and the subjugation of the people are historical truths that bear testimony to the numerous events recorded in history. In this play, Rabindranath Tagore was inspired by the *Raktakarabi* or the red oleander plant that he saw crushed beneath iron bars yet the plant was able to find its way through the cold iron bars, liberate itself and even bloom. This observation made by Tagore paved a way for him to relook and reread the situation that India was facing at that period in time. Thus he sees the iron bars as the iron rule of the coloniser while the plant as his fellow countrymen who faced suppression and dominance. Just as the plant was able to free itself, similarly, Tagore created characters that instilled courage and inspiration upon the downtrodden and weak to rise up and gear themselves preparing to fight against the use of force and control and finally free themselves.

Jone Johnson Lewis observes that:

A goal of historians has been to tell an “objective truth” – truth as it might be seen by an objective or unbiased, observer. But . . . even the historians who struggled hardest to write the objective truth about history, usually left out the perspective of women: women who played active role in the public events were often forgotten quickly.

What history may have failed to provide, a litterateur like Rabindranath Tagore was able to have as his protagonist; a woman. Sensitive towards gender balance and equilibrium, he presents a female character in Nandini embedded with strength and the willingness to inspire and to lead. Nandini has come to wake up the diggers from their slumber and trance. She has come to take them out of their despicable state when she voices her desire to see the people of Yaksha Town free from the clutches of degeneration and death.

Bharati Ray writes “. . . while on one hand Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition. . . . (Tagore) gives shape to the “new

woman,” whom he perceives as arriving in India in the near future.” Nandini is the new woman that stands for emancipation and free spirit. Through the character of Nandini, Tagore sees women as an embodiment of power and strength and competence to shoulder responsibilities. Nandini speaks her heart and mind and fears nothing and no one. She represents liberty and emancipation, individualism and life itself. She is that agent of strength that can seethe diggers wish to “run away from here, first thing” (222) but they fear because “As things are, one’s legs tremble even to walk straight.” (222). Nandini stepped in as a ray of hope. While the men are rolled “into solid lump” (226) with their feelings and awareness ignored, neglected and squandered, squashed and crushed they look up to her as the one who can lead them to emancipation.

She will leave no stone unturned to achieve this goal even if she has to motivate the one person that is feared the most, the King. His might does not deter her nor does his voice dampen her spirit. Rather she speaks freely without any apprehension and inhibition to the King. She is in actuality “the spirit of defiance” (NikhileshDhar) who challenges authority. The voice of the King does not alarm her instead she tells the King that “everybody here is either angry or suspicious or afraid.” (215) Nandini gives the King warnings of what may befall when the diggers will not only unearth the gold but unearth the curse of their slavery that is demonic, cruel, hard and envious. At the moment their will to retaliate is dead with fear but they will learn to rebel and fight against the enforcers of slavery and break free from Yaksha Town.

In a typical postcolonial concept and philosophy there emerges a significant display of the oppressed rising against the oppressor. Tagore makes an attempt to incite and infuse feelings of strength, courage and a belief in the self. It is the values of man that makes the application of force, oppression and subjugation devastating and distressing. Truly as the Professor says “. . . you [Nandini] awaken a cry in our hearts,” (211) Nandini has come crying out loud to make the diggers listen to the yearnings of their hearts that have so far been buried in the scaffold of their hearts. Indeed the Professor sees in Nandini “. . . the light that breaks through a cracked wall,” (212). She is the light that knows no bounds and entanglements. She is that ray of hope that glimmers amidst the darkness of their lives. She is the light that will guide them in their journey of freedom.

Fearless, she tells the King that he has unbounded strength that he must use for his sake and for the sake of his people. Understanding his limitations, he opens his heart before Nandini and asks her to help him seek life with all its happiness and simplicity. “I, who am a desert, stretch out my hand to you.” (217).

We see the child in the King crying for the want of something that is beyond his reach and for something that he is denied. The words of the King perhaps reflect the pain that most of our own fellow countrymen felt when they were torn between the love and adoration of their motherland and at the same time the fidelity they have surrendered upon their benefactors. This is an imposition of force and might that is felt by the King and his subjects.

While the King has a fear of his own in spite of his power and supremacy, the diggers express themselves very freely with a heavy heart and a tinge of pain. They yearn to be free but fear lurks within their minds. They see no hope of a release or an escape. There is pain in the words of Phagulal: “The road to our home is closed.” (218) They are made mere objects to yield profit for the masters. It is a world of materialism that the masters have imposed upon the diggers making it difficult or rather impossible for them to see anything else beyond the gold they are forced to unearth. Doors are closed for the diggers to leave Yaksha Town in the person of the Governor who tells them “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.” (220) Their will to return home is strong but they are like the caged bird who wishes to be set free but who no longer knows how to fly and hence return to its cage and confinement.

The fact of the matter remains that even if they make an attempt to leave they would surely meet their end. Bishu says: “Discovery only means death.” [221] Any form of revolt or a breakthrough will surely be dealt with severely by those in power. Interestingly, here discovery may be understood in two ways: discovery of a way to return home and the other is a discovery of the self. The diggers have to realize that they need to wake up from their trance and discover their real self and individuality. They need to do this otherwise there will be no release.

What really should be the path to righteousness is to wipe out all application of force and control. the upholder and guardian of authority, like the Governor does not acknowledge the diggers as human beings. Rather “we are not men to them, but only numbers. . . . No 47V . . . No 69Ng.” (221) The oppressor attempts to even wipe out their identity. But Tagore gives the oppressed diggers their identity and individuality and addresses all of them by their names like Bishu, Phagulal, Chandra, Kishor, Gokul and Gajju, Anup, Upamanyu, Shaklu and Kanku. Seeing the threat of oblivion of the oppressor, Tagore consciously demarcated the distinction between the enforcers of authority and the oppressed diggers. As if to mark a stark apathy for the oppressor and the enforcer of force and control Tagore addresses the oppressor by their positions and designations like the King, the Governor, the Deputy Governor, the Preacher, the Professor, the Headman. Making his stand very lucid, Tagore exhibits his clear leanings towards the oppressed diggers and at no cost is he willing to allow their identities and their individualities to be ignored, disrespected and disregarded.

In a true postcolonial spirit Tagore gives them a voice to be heard. Amongst the diggers there is Bishu who opens his heart to Nandini, Phagulal who holds her in deep respect and Kishor who is ready to lay down his life for her. Nandini is their voice of respect, adoration, love and emancipation. “. . . Rabindranath not only represents the role of women in bringing about liberation for the toiling mass but simultaneously makes their representative Nandini equal in all respect except physical strength of her male counterpart, the demon-king of the gold mines.” (NikhileshDhar) Nandini does really stand for power and strength when she tells the Governor not to belittle her because she is a woman. “God sends His thunderbolt through His messenger, the lightning spark-that bolt I have borne here with me; it will shatter the golden spire of your mastery.” (241)

To shatter the loyalty of force and control like that of the Governor, Tagore creates the character of Nandini. She succeeds in making the King shed terror and power as he prepares to break free and leave his wealth behind. “Let your hand unite with mine to kill me, utterly kill me. That will be my emancipation.” (250) Along with the King the diggers are eager and willing to fight and break the prison gate. “We may lose our lives, but we shan't fall back.” (251) Even the learned Professor throws away all his books to follow the King. “. . . the King has at last had tidings of the secret of Life, and has gone off in quest of it. I have thrown away my books to follow him.” (252) The King is determined to set himself and his people free from the clutches of terror and fear. He has fully surrendered himself to the call for freedom: “Yes, my fight is against them [the custodians of force and control].” (252) The King will now raise his hands to fight against the guardians of force and terror. He is not only willing but is eager and prepared for the future.

Tagore impresses triumph of liberation over control when the King and the diggers finally prepare themselves to be free from the hands of force that are lifeless. Nandini was successful in making the diggers realize their worth. For all that matters are to be free in one's soul and live with dignity and pride. No amount of oppression and subjugation should and can hold those oppressed from fighting back only if they have the will and the determination to do so.

Thus, Raktakorbiis a play that hinges on the oppressor and the oppressed a scenario that could be likened to a similar sorry state of affairs of the numerous individuals of the country living in that age and time under the clutches of colonization; whereby exploitation, force, control and degeneration were the call of the day, especially for the poor and downtrodden. Truly the play may be read as a contest between the oppressor and the oppressed as NikhileshDhar says: “. . . the conflict between the kingdom Yakshapuri and Nandini and the working class is in reality an eternal struggle between the exploiters and the exploited. However, above all, the play depicts the faith and conviction that Rabindranath Tagore has for women. In the persona of Nandini, Tagore carves a place of power, strength and determination for a woman. He celebrates women and provides them a significant role and space acknowledging their grit and courage as nurturers of the hearth and home and of humankind.

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