



TRACING INDIA-SPECIFIC MODERNISM IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S RED OLEANDERS

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Abstract

The paper challenges the West-centric understanding of Modernism and attempts to trace an India specific experience through a close reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Red Oleanders. Through a critical reading of stage prop, characters, plot and space, the paper will first argue that the play is one such work that did not just culturally appropriate western modernist traits but also wrote a foreword to many trends like alienation effect and absurdism as seen in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Becket a few decades later. The paper will also read the character of Nandini as the New Woman of the Twentieth Century Bengal/India whose body bears the marks of many radical ideals that emancipated women from their conventional domestic roles and became an important entity facilitating a larger cause. This makes her character and the play an intriguing text that successfully blends modernist and nationalist ideas to create an India-specific modernist experience.

Keywords

Modernism, Colonialism, New Woman, Alienation Technique, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Twentieth Century dawned with a distinct pattern of deviation and departure from conventions and traditions in the field of art, culture, politics and architecture. Collectively these efforts came to be recognized as Modernism or the Modernist movement. Modernism has been defined as a “response to disturbance of old ways” (Haydon 1). The scientific and technical development, industrialization and the mechanization and the wars and mass destruction seem to have created fragmentation and disillusionment in the self of the modern man. It was this crisis of the destabilized sense of self that the modernist artists, through their various experimentations with language, form and concepts attempted to comprehend and resolve. Modernist culture thus was a paradox that made violent efforts to liberate “the future” from the “clinging hands of the past” (Haydon, 1) while appropriating the values and ideals of the past to their new intriguing reality. Though Modernism emerged as a world-wide phenomenon, yet especially in the context of literature and art, it continues to be popularly associated with the West. Moving beyond the Western connotation reveals that the modernist sensibilities undergo subtle changes with the change in socio-cultural and geographical contexts. Specifically in the context of the visual arts, Siva Kumar in “Modern Indian art: a Brief Overview” states that European discourse on the history of modernism might construct it only as the history of the “avant-garde” (Kumar, 14). Thus, to understand it in the eastern or the oriental context, there is a need to derive a different strategy. In his words “For this we must develop an alternate perspective that does not see it as a linear, monolithic, and fundamentally Western phenomenon but as several distinct mutations occasioned and nurtured by a common set of cross-cultural encounters experienced differently



from the two sides of the colonial divide” (Kumar, 14). Though Kumar focuses on paintings and discusses the works of Nandalal Basu and Raja Ravi Verma, the paper reads Rabindranath Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* or *Red Oleanders* in the same light. It endeavors to see, how a text written in a context and circumstances categorically different from the West, deals with certain issues and concerns that does not just qualify it as a play that talks of modernist concerns and sensibilities like alienation, mechanization or raising consciousness, but also as one that creates the required “alternative perspective” (Kumar, 14).

As a colonized state, India experienced the early Twentieth Century very differently from the West. Despite being abundant with a rich cultural and literary legacy, India was witnessing an oppressive imperialist regime that was brutally suppressing its past and exploiting its present. Enola Eno in his 1925 essay titled “Modernism in India” observed that while India, like the rest of the world, suffers disintegration due to the machine age, the problems were ‘intensified’ by imperialism. In this regard he states that, “India suffers, therefore, not merely all the disorganization of any industrial revolution, but the disturbances also of a foreign invasion” (Eno, 242). Allied to this was the forceful imposition of Western education that attempted an erasure of India’s own texts, language and literature. Thus, he proposes that, “Modernism in India can be understood only in terms of her “old ways”, her “fundamentals” (Eno, 239). Drawing on these works, India specific Modernism is understood as a cultural appropriation of Western ideals seamlessly blended with India’s indigenous culture, custom and ways. It is this fine balance that *Red Oleander* is able to achieve. While western modernists were addressing the loneliness and ennui of the alienated modern man, Rabindranath Tagore reverted to the spiritual concept of unity and righteousness. For him it is the only way to deal with the alienation and dehumanization of man. This appropriation of modernist sensibilities within the Indian context allowed him to resist the colonial power while creating a distinct aesthetic for contemporary Indian art and literature that was both modernist and nationalist. The play did not just culturally appropriate western modernist traits but also wrote a foreword to many trends like the alienation effect and absurdism seen in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Becket a few decades later.

***Yakshapuri* - The Waste Land:**

The play was published in the journal *Prabasiin* 1924. While it was popular in its time, it enjoyed the most vibrant afterlife with Sombhu Mitra’s theatrical production in the 1950s. In his essay “Building from Tagore,” Mitra reveals that their quest for a text that would allow them to create a unique identity for Indian theatre, ended with Tagore’s *Red Oleanders*. He states that in the play he found a “distinctive form of Indian theatrical expression” (Mitra, 202) that used “. . . multiple actions within a single dramatic area and presents inner and outer life, and the individual and the symbol simultaneously” (Mitra, 202). Mitra further describes the work as “a play about Modern industrial civilization, showing the internal contradiction that this civilization gives rise to” (Mitra, 204). The space where these contradictions are played out in the play is *Yakshapuri*. It is a fictional place where people work in a gold mine for a king whose presence is only felt through his voice behind a screen. T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” published in 1922, is a treatise in modernist crisis and attempts to project the decayed view of life and thus endeavor to evoke consciousness and attempt to restore the lost order. *Yakshapuri* is as waste a land as T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” It is a frightful town forever under an eclipse. The professor tells Nandini that the “The Shadow Demon” that resides in the gold caves has eaten into the town, “It is not whole itself. Neither does it allow anyone else to remain whole.” (Tagore, *RO*, 10). Meant as a warning to Nandini, the description highlights the grim and ghastly nature of the town. The darkness that shrouds the town also adversely impacts the people. This is evident when Nandini talks to the king and asks him passionately, “Don’t you see everybody here is either angry, or suspicious, or



afraid?’ (Tagore, *RO*, 15). Despite these similarities, *Yakshapuri* has what Eliot’s *Wasteland* lacks. While the latter might have a milieu of voices and images that in the guise of pessimism of the lost order spoke of an optimistic hope of restoring that order, but what it lacks, is the presence of one prominent and dominating voice of hope, that successfully outshined every speck of pessimism. It lacks an awakened feminine energy who can nurture it back to being fertile.

Derived from the legendary kingdom of yakshas, *Yakshapuri*’s fictional status has mythical overtones that immediately distance the audience from the context and allows them an objective view. In this disassociation, one traces Tagore’s attempt to subtly introduce a unique alienation technique that would disallow any familiar identification with the spectator’s immediate context while encouraging them to think that, if *Yakshapuri* was not to be found ‘anywhere’ then probably it existed ‘everywhere.’ By extension, people might not be working for gold mines everywhere but they were working for economic factors all over. Any possible identification is further disrupted by the innovative use of a screen as a stage prop which hides the king from both the subjects and audience. Much like the colonial crown that ruled India, or other dictatorial and autocratic regimes worldwide, his true persona remained veiled and screened. This further intensified the process of alienation that encouraged spectators - both contemporary and the eternal - to look beyond catharsis and make intelligent connections with their own context. Considering that the play was published in 1924 this effect of alienating the audience from overtly identifying with the events on stage comes nearly a decade before Brecht popularized it through his works. This effect allows Tagore to uphold pertinent socio-economic and political issues for the spectator and make them aware of their colonized/ruled state. He probably viewed this collective awareness as the only solution to attain freedom, not just from the British Raj but from any exploitative regime.

Like the Western modernists, Tagore was indeed experimenting with the form. His innovation went beyond the use of screen as the stage prop as he blends the genres of prose, verse and music to create a spectacle on stage. It is here that we go back to Haydon’s view that modernism aimed at adapting the values and ideals of the past to a new age of “larger knowledge and more complex activity” (Haydon, 1). The concept of using verse and music in theatre was neither new nor innovative. One of the folk forms of theatre in Bengal is known as *Jatra* and it makes use of “songs of choric group” (Mitra, 202) called *juri* (Mitra, 202). They use music to elaborate important sentences of the characters rhythmically. The intention probably was to enhance and stress what is being said and done. Quiet adept with *Jatra* performances since childhood, Tagore chose to use its unique performative energy of music and songs to emphasize his characters and their thoughts but like a modernist he appropriated the tradition to suit his needs and concerns. At a time when stage plays largely followed Western trends in their performances, Tagore created a unique India specific performative language. While *Jatras* traditionally retold mythological stories and used song and music to send didactic messages to people, Tagore uses it to highlight a radical statement of change and revolution. This is evident in the ‘Autumn song’ (Tagore, *RO*, 13). First introduced during her interaction with Gokul the gold digger and then again repeated in the voice of mutinous men in the end, the song sonically elaborated Nandini’s action of hoping and waiting for change and revolution. Drawing from the *Jatra* aesthetics of loud music and melodramatic performances, Tagore scripted the song sequence in such a way that on stage it could be turned into a spectacular experience of resisting and critiquing imperialist and capitalist powers that subjugated the rights of the laborers and common people.

Nandini - The New Woman of Twentieth Century India:

The Twentieth Century witnessed the emergence of the ‘New Woman’ across the globe. Studying the emergence of this figure as a phenomenon B. June West in the essay “The New Woman” states that, the ‘new woman who emerged during this time sought freedom from various



patriarchal structures. She states that, “Part of the independence sought by a “new woman” was economic. Some of it was the feeling of freedom growing out of the self-realization that could be found in some type of work. Particularly gratifying was the self-realization that might be found in some kind of creative endeavor” (West, 55). Discussing the feminist movement in America, West Gerald L Mariner observed that, for all its ambitions in the previous century, the women's movement had fallen far short of its goals. Still the 1900s brought new hope that change might be near.” Focusing specifically on American women he further argues that the heightened industrialization, urbanization and the difficult transition of the economy from agrarian to industrial, proved to be a blessing in disguise for women. It allowed them more time and opportunities for leisure and recreation that were not available to the farmer's wife. In the specific context of urban women of colonial Bengal during the period of 1900-1947, Bharati Ray observes that during the first half of the Twentieth century several factors contributed to a substantial change in aspiration and imagination of Bengali women. She states that while all ties with the past could not be severed and the change did not affect all women equally, “What began to emerge, although in an embryonic form, is an awareness of, and an attempt to change, women's subordination and disadvantages under patriarchy” (Ray, 4). She further studies that, along with western ideas of modern and emancipated women, the Bengali woman of the time was also influenced and impacted by the freedom struggle. Gandhi's non-violent methods became a worthy cause for women to come out of their sheltered domestic roles to be a part of a larger cause - the Nation's freedom. Bengal had already witnessed a heightened rise in female education since the 19th century. This was a part of the Bengal Renaissance that advocated for women's education as only an educated wife and mother could build a civilized society. Though their roles remained traditional, their access to education allowed them to develop critical thinking and break some patriarchal barriers. Bharti Ray's study presents data that indicates there was an even more heightened rate of literacy amongst women in the first half of the twentieth century.

Tagore seems to have carved his Nandini with all these radical ideas about ‘new woman.’ Nandini is a young unmarried woman, who has been brought to *Yakshapuri* supposedly by the King's people. She is bold and confident; this is evident when she tells the Professor that she is not afraid of *Yakshapuri*. She says that her beloved Ranjan calls her Red Oleander and thus she wears the red oleanders on her neck, breast and arms. Important to note that when we meet her, she is neither shown as a mother, nor a wife nor a daughter but as a lover. While she was brought to *Yakshapuri* by the king, Ranjan was left behind. Now she awaits Ranjan's arrival who is bound to bring change in the town, “My Ranjan's strength is like that of your river, Sankhini, - it can laugh and yet it can break. Let me tell you a little secret news of mine. I shall meet Ranjan to-day” (Tagore, *RO*, 8). The confidence with which she eloquently converses with Kishor, Professor and even the king shows that she bears the mark of a modern woman of the time who was not just educated but has also used her education to break away some of the poignant patriarchal shackles. Among the alienated and estranged inmates of *Yakshapuri* she is the ‘new woman’ and also the ‘awakened artist’ who tries to make the world around her meaningful, both for herself and for others. The inmates - majorly men - might be mechanized and fragmented beings and thus humans no more but she acts as the confident voice that attempts to generate hope and consciousness. It is important to remember that in the Indian context red oleanders are flowers that are used by the Tantriks in various Tantrik cults. In the play Tagore consciously builds a strong resemblance and connection between Nandini and her favourite flower the red oleander. She is not just fond of the flowers; the connection between them is almost indexical. She is the Red Oleander of *Yakshapuri*, whose beauty and radiance complements her role as the harbinger of change and freedom. The particular flowers are not just symbolic of energy and passion, but also an important part of the Indian tradition of mother worship. Along with the modern awakened artist making meaning of a



fragmented world, Nandini is also the mother goddess of *Yakshapuri*. Wearing a garland of red oleanders Nandini herself becomes a symbol of not just energized and passionate force of change, but also the worshipped mother who would indeed give the people of *Yakshapuri* a new birth, by raising their hopes and changing the heart of their king.

In the course of the play, Nandini can be seen boldly announcing the coming of the new age embodied by her beloved Ranjan, multiple times. In Bengali, the name Ranjan often means the one who brings colour and happiness. The world of *Yakshapuri* is truly in need of Ranjan. Though it is blazed with the shine of gold, the life of people lacks any shade of emotions. Order there can be achieved only through a dash of colour, which Nandini is waiting for. In Nandini's waiting, the play anticipates the absurdist turn that theatre in the West will take through the works of Beckett and Ionesco only in the 1950s. As Nandini waits for Ranjan one is instantly reminded of Vladimir and Estragon's eternal wait for Godot. Preceding Beckett's text by nearly three decades the similarity of Vladimir and Estragon's situation with Nandini ends here. While their waiting for Godot's was shrouded with doubt and unsurety "he didn't say for sure he'd come" (Beckett, 6). Nandini however had no such anxieties, she could confidently say, "I shall meet Ranjan today" (Crisis in Civilization, 8). The ambiguity that characterized the modern age and its sensibility is interestingly absent from the character of Nandini. Going back to Beckett's text, one can say that his tramps might have the assurance that "in this immense confusion, one thing alone is clear, that we are waiting for Godot" (Beckett, 72). But Tagore's Nandini has no confusion and doesn't find her purpose in the wait. Her purpose is to bring Ranjan and she is committed to that. Towards the end of the play, it is suggested that Ranjan is dead, probably killed by the king. Thus, unlike Godot, Ranjan comes but not in the way Nandini hoped, yet her spirit of hope remains alive as she declares to Phagulal, "I *did* await his coming, and he *did* come. I still wait to prepare for his coming again, and he *shall* come again." (Crisis in Civilization 118). Ranjan might be dead, Nandini is alive and through her Ranjan will always be alive. All one needs is to keep the hope alive and toil towards attaining that hope. It is this unconditional spirit of hope that made the play distinct in its approach. Like any modernist text *Red Oleanders* attempted to grapple with the destabilized modern world by grappling with the realities in a symbolic and allusive manner. This is aimed to appeal to people and allow them to find themselves amongst the characters of the play. Nandini as the awakened artist and the residing mother goddess of the cursed town prepares the people for an assured change. While she is unable to free their bodies, she appeals to their soul. Unlike many Twentieth Century works that end on a pessimistic note highlighting disillusionment, Tagore's play offers a resolution albeit non-cathartic. While the hopes of *Yakshapuri* people are kept alive by Nandini she proceeds to then change the King himself. Tagore's King in the play is a complex being. Despite being the representative of an oppressive regime, he can be seen constantly seeking validation from Nandini. When Ranjan dies - probably killed by the governor, he woefully cries "I have killed youth. Yes, I have indeed killed youth, - all these years with all my strength. The curse of youth, dead, is upon me" (Tagore, *RO*, 113). Such a portrayal of the king was different from how the West had portrayed rulers and hegemonic icons. This probably rested in Tagore's own ideology that had firm belief in the possibility of a change of heart of the perpetrator. Through Nandini he is able to recognize the repressive force that was unleashed on *Yakshapuri*. It is like the King's oppressive behavior is a result of an illusion or trance that Nandini manages to break and make him see the reality. In this humanization of the king, I see an important aspect of India-specific modernist tendency. Being a country that follows the tenets of forgiveness as primary duty, Tagore probably intended to show the utopic possibility of the oppressive force redeeming itself when faced by a dynamic and righteous feminine energy like Nandini. It comes as no surprise to the spectator/reader that the play ends with a mutiny by town people who decide to



fight for Nandini. In this uprising, one can trace the imprint of India's freedom struggle elevating Nandini to be the imprisoned Nation.

Conclusion:

In his essay, *Crisis in Civilization*, Tagore draws a harsh criticism of the British Empire. Written in an impersonal tone, the essay is an account of Tagore's initial appreciation of Britain's culture and his growing disillusionment with their brutal ways in India. He notes that while nations like Japan, USSR and Afghanistan prospered, India was being suffocated by the "dead weight of British administration" (Tagore, *CIC*, 7). Along with this was his absolute misery of witnessing his countrymen in absolute penury. In his own words, "As I emerged into the stark light of bare facts, the sight of the dire poverty of the Indian masses rent my heart" (Tagore, *CIC*, 4). In the light of this essay Tagore's play *Red Oleanders* can be seen as his response to this heinous treatment of India by the British Administration. The cursed town of *Yakshapuri* - much like the country is being crushed beneath the dead weight of the foreign rulers. In Nandini he creates the image of the "Unvanquished Man" who will "retrace the path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost heritage" (Tagore, *CIC*, 11). *Red Oleanders* thus emerges as a play that presents the India-specific modernist struggle that was not just discrete from Euro-centric modernisms, but distinctly characterized itself as one that took India as its nucleus.

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