

Woman's quest for love: A few Tagorian insights in Drama

Kathakali Sen Gupta

Abstract

This paper wants to underline and at the same time explore the nature of woman's quest for love, as seen by Tagore in *Raja (The King of the Dark Chamber-1910)* and *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders-1924)*. It seems that in these two plays Tagore attributed a rare quality of articulation to woman, engaged in finding out the terms of love, on which man and woman, engaged in finding out the terms of love, on which man and woman should accept each other. The result is a wonderful unravelling truth, mysterious and at the same time fascinating.

Keywords: Tagore, Drama, Woman, Quest for love, *Raja*, *Raktakarabi*.

In the present social context, gender-based discussions hold a major place of importance; but on the other the violence is being inflicted upon women ---physically, morally and intellectually. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore's two major plays *Raja* and *Raktakarabi* and their female protagonists demand a careful reconsideration.

Love in almost all the major plays of Tagore is a social relationship between genders and their acceptance of each other. Love, for Tagore's characters is not only about physical happiness but also signifies a pure mental bliss. In the ultimate state the characters attain a mystical state of realisation about the powerfulness of love to transcend the limitations of human existence. For Tagore, "Love is life in its fullness like the cup with its wine." (Sen, 140)

Tagore's concept of love is of three kinds: Physical, Spiritual and Mystical. At first, they are attracted at the external level but then attain a height of spiritual realisation. In this context *Raja (The King of the Dark Chamber-1910)* and *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders-1924)*, two of Tagore's major plays that examine man-woman relationship to the core are felt to need special focus.

Besides the comic plays and the *Muktodhara-Sharadotsov-Dakghartrio*, *The King of the Dark Chamber* is the first major play by Tagore to focus on the debated question of external glamour in love. The play revolves around Sudarshana the damsel and the queen who seeks to

see her king in the world of pomp and glitter. The play charts out the journey of Sudarshana from illusion to realisation. Tagore himself attests his belief in this manner: *“the realisation of truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover (i.e. God). (Sadhana, 116)*

In *The King of the Dark Chamber*, the King represents an allegorical figure that is omnipresent. He cannot be seen through naked eyes and meets his queen only in the dark chamber. As she tells Surangama:

“Sudarshana: I have not seen him yet for a single day. He comes to me in the darkness and leaves me in the dark room again...I must see him at any cost.” (KDC: 26-27)

Surangama, however, is spiritually quite awakened and sustains the queen with the real self of the king. Like queen Sudarshana, the multitude of the state has not seen the king and doubts his existence. However, this signifies the basic spiritual ignorance of human soul.

As the ignorant human soul often does, the queen is also attracted by pomp, glitter and handsomeness and completely smitten by the imposter Suvarna. Led by the king of Kanchi, princes of Avanti, Koshala, Vidharbha, Virat, Panchala and Kalinga plotted along with Suvarna to possess the queen; king of Kanchi, sets the palace on fire after this incident. Having passed through such trials, tribulations and humiliation, the queen finds her ego shattered and then alone she is able to meet his king at his own level. The queen’s quest for love achieves its final goal and finite meets the infinite.

The woman here lifts her soul to another level to achieve freedom through love. She realises the supreme power of the king but is so ashamed of her own deeds that she has no courage to meet the king. She renounces all her desires for worldly wealth to meet her king and surrenders her own self to him:

“Sudarshana: I am the servant of your feet...I only seek the privilege of serving you ...I was repelled from you because I had sought to find you in the pleasure garden, in my Queen’s chamber; there even meanest servant looks fairer than you. That fever of longing has left my eyes for ever. You are not beautiful, my lord---you are beyond compare.”(KDC: 111-112)

Prior to this, no other protagonist in Tagore’s drama had reached this height of sublimity, having thus created *The King of the Dark Chamber* a landmark in Tagore’s plays.

Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders) (1924) may be considered to be the next milestone. In *Red Oleanders*, Nandini, the female protagonist, exults while speaking about love between Ranjan and herself,

“I love Ranjan as the rudder in the water might love the sail in the sky, answer its rhythm of wind in the rhythm of waves.” (RO, 42)

Touched by his love Nandini becomes the torch-bearer of the message of love and delight for everybody in her world. To adapt the king’s words she symbolises the rhythm of the world which makes her beauty simple yet perfect. At the end of the play when Ranjan arrives but as a dead-body she surrenders herself to her object of love and pronounces wildly (here she articulates the voice of the woman in quest of love or the woman who conquers by means of love.)

“My love, my brave one, here do I place this blue-throat’s feather in your crest, your victory has begun from today and I am its bearer.” (RO, 96)

This is the final proclamation, but ever since she arrives in Yaksha-town she begins to transform everybody by the worm touch of her love. In Yaksha-town greed for gold has transformed most of the human beings into lifeless machines. As Tagore himself says:

“Nandini is a real woman who knows that wealth and power are ‘maya’ and that the highest expression of life is in love, which she manifests in this play in her love for Ranjan...woman will one day prove that the meek in soul, through the sure power of love, will rescue this world from the domination of the unholy spirit rapacity.” (Tagore, 1925, 283-85)

As hinted by Nandini the colour of Ranjan’s love is red like the red-oleanders which she wears on her neck, on her breast and on her arms.

It is interesting to note how the adolescent who is successfully named ‘Kishore’ is touched by her love so much that he can dedicate his soul to her. The Professor is also touched by her but only theoretically. This love reaches its culmination when she says to Vishu about the king: *“He is hungry for love and wants desperately to live.” (RO, 34)*. It is true that, as is usual with him, the king tries to overpower Nandini during their encounter but is finally overwhelmed by her touch of love. It is he who becomes a rebel against his own machinery, hand in hand with Nandini, though the local governors of the system refuse to be trampled.

It may be said that love of Ranjan has gone through a reincarnation in king in *Red Oleanders* as in *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Sudarshana's quest is never complete until she realises the king's love for her. As they stand these two women are strong examples of what Tagore thought women can do, not being separated from men, but hand in hand with them. This seems to contain a germ of what is called today 'androgyny' in feminist theory. Along with this very contemporary reference, one is reminded of Shelly's soul-stirring verse drama *Prometheus Unbound*, where the vision of a better future can never be envisaged by Prometheus (symbolising humanity and its aspiration) until Asia (symbolising love and sympathy) joins him. A radical transformation through love which seems to be the message of the two women also whose roles Tagore under covers in his two major plays.

References

Tagore, Rabindranath, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Shrijee Book International: New Delhi, 2003. Subsequent references to the text are from this edition and have been indicated in the text by KDC and pagination.

-----*Red Oleanders*. London: Macmillan and company Ltd., 1938. Subsequent references to the text are from this edition and have been indicated in the text by RO and pagination.

-----*The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Oct. 1925, pp. 283-85.

-----*Sadhana. The Realisation of Life*. 1st edition, 1913, London, Macmillan, 1957, 116.

Sen, N.M. *Glorious Thought of Tagore*, New Delhi: New Books Society of India, 1965, 140.

Kathakali Sen Gupta is a Teacher of English at Christ Church School, Kolkata, West Bengal and may be reached at kathakalisengupta703@gmail.com