

**PASSION PLAY, HUMAN FRAILTY AND REGAL MAJESTY: SOUMITRA
CHATTOPADHYAY IN AND AS RAJA LEAR**

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Abstract

Soumitra Chatterjee, veteran Bengali actor has throughout his illustrious career spanning half a century been accoladed by the media critics as the flagbearer of Ray's films. Starting from *ApurSangsar* to *Sakha Prosa* and albeit the famous Feluda series, Chatterjee has earned an almost surreal resemblance to Satyajit Ray, so much so that he has been referred as his Protégé. Theatre critics however are quick to point out Chatterjee's fine craftsmanship on stage as an unprecedented brilliance, setting further the debate of Chatterjee as the film star vs a stage actor, for the veteran actor himself had acted on stage even in the best years of his film career. *Raja Lear*, a play which he was extremely passionate about (based on Shakespeare's King Lear) has till now been one of his best performances. Directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, Soumitra Chatterjee picked up every little nuance of the characterisation of King Lear, from his insanity at having been forsaken by his dear daughters, to the disillusioned old man, his sufferings, trials and tribulations to the realization of his foolishness and ultimate redemption. The tragedy depicted by Soumitra Chatterjee in *Raja Lear* draws similarity with the Passion Plays of Rome and Italy, just as in the Passion Plays of Jesus Christ in the earlier days. The play exemplifies in every act, the sufferings and isolation of King Lear, ultimately leading to his death. It is one of the finest tragedies of Shakespeare, that Chatterjee enacts with such zeal and gusto. The research paper delves in one hand on the new tradition of Commercial Theatre introduced by Chatterjee in the Hatibagan Para culture, to his involvement in *Raja Lear*, where Chatterjee ultimately becomes King Lear. The insanity of Lear, the divine madness, the concept of sin and redemption, the onset of disorientation, denial, improbabilities all get to be delivered in sheer brilliance, thanks to the acting prowess of Soumitra Chatterjee. It is my humble ode to the maestro on his death on 15th November 2020. Long live the King!

Keywords: Passion Play, *Raja Lear*, insanity, sin and redemption, denial, Hatibagan Para Culture.

*“The weight of this sad time we must obey...The oldest hath borne most. We that are young/
Shall never see so much, nor live so long”.*
- King Lear

1.1 Introduction: The Theatre Personality vs the Star

“If he was on the stage you wouldn’t look at anybody else”.

After his death, Soumitra Chatterjee was remembered by the Indian Express in the above line. When Minerva Repertory Theatre, which was under the aegis of the West Bengal government, was planning a gala Shakespearean reproduction, they thought of Soumitra Chatterjee. The actor spoke of his great desire to do Hamlet when he was young, but when asked when he planned to enact Hamlet, he said “*Now I’m too old for Hamlet. The character which I can do is King Lear.*”

It is said that when Suman Mukhopadhyay started directing *Raja Lear*, he found that the veteran actor had a child-like innocence and curiosity about everything. Every time they rehearsed for *Raja Lear*, he “behaved like a student of theatre”. This is what made him perhaps a true artist. Owing to the cultural milieu of his childhood, Soumitra dabbled in theatre since a very tender age, his guru being the great Sisir Bhaduri. It was Bhaduri who had propelled him to experiment in theatre, saying that Chatterjee was oblivious to the fact that he had a great voice, and with that he could rule the stage. This is the time when Chatterjee acted in Bhaduri’s play *Prafulla*. Not only this, Soumitra Chatterjee is also said to have acted in “*Mukhosh*” an adaptation of the ‘Monkey’s Paw’ by W.W Jacobs. His next production was “*Bidehi*” adapted from Henrik Ibsens ‘The Ghost’. The year 1973 was crucial as far as his film career was concerned as he gave superhit films like ‘*Basanta Bilap*’, ‘*Nishikanya*’, ‘*Ashani Sanket*’. But unlike matinee idols of his time, he never cared about his star image and kept on directing and enacting in theatre which was his first love. He directed ‘*Rajkumar*’, ‘*Krushbiddho Cuba*’ along with UtpalDutt and Jnanesh Mukherjee’s ‘*Bishe June*’. In 1978, he did ‘*Naamjiban*’ which he himself proclaimed to have changed the face of professional theatre forever. More recognition on stage followed with plays like ‘*Neelkantha*’, ‘*Tiktiki*’ and ‘*Ghatak Biday*’, ‘*Otoyeb*’ and others.

“*The most important part of your acting skill is how you throw words. If you don’t know the language well, it will not happen. So, your acting will not flourish,*” he had once said. Many

legendary directors were, therefore, deprived of this great Bengali actor who could have been so prolific in the roles given to him in international films. But despite that, his work stretched far beyond the Bay of Bengal. He was considered an actor of eminence and excellence of world stature.

Chatterjee never grew wary of playing on stage. Even at the ripe age of 78, he had the child like desire to portray *Raja Lear* for stage. In the words of director Suman Mukhopadhyay, “*Sometimes he would muddle some lines on stage but his control and grasp over the language was so deep that he would make up his own while retaining the flavour of the Shakespearian verse—which was so flamboyant, so classical, and he would do that with ease. After Lear I wanted to do Brecht’s Galileo with him. He almost agreed and finally we couldn’t stage it, but I remember him asking me, ‘Do you think I can do it? So much dialogue’.* He had a problem memorising lines in the fag end of his career. His main concern was not physicality, but that he may forget his lines on stage.

“We used to start at 6 pm—which is quite early for Bengalis to come and watch theatre—and end at 9 pm. After the show, we would do a post-performance kind of a thing, where we would introduce each other. That took 10-15 minutes, and nobody in the audience walked out. We got a standing ovation after every performance. I have been born and brought up in a theatre family. I have seen performances of Shambhu Mitra and UtpalDutt when they were doing their best stuff, and I felt that spirit of response from the applause towards Chatterjee”.

The main attraction of *Raja Lear* was Soumitra. The majority of the audience in mid-forties and above did gather in large numbers to savour Chatterjee’s one of his finest performance. And it was one of his last as well. The element of nostalgic remembrances towards Bengal’s foremost international acting talent, arguably the greatest thespian who donned Bengal theatre and acted with same finesse on screen as well. There are other greats in the long tradition of Bengal’s performing art culture but none is as creatively successful in both the platforms as Chatterjee. He used to be on stage for more than close to three hours. The physical acting was stupendous. There was this violent impetus, the blind swagger against any voice that is not relenting, the royal impatience – King Lear was embodied in flesh and soul. The original play and this adaptation as well successfully vacillated between the ebb and tide of emotions, embedded with typical Machiavellian villains, of deceit and misconceptions. In the same way swayed the mood of Lear – from the king of England to pauper at heart – he earns pity from the audience for being confronted in haste by his cold-

blooded elder daughters, his longing for being loved and for being cradled by his daughters make the Fool jibe at him - "*he has made his daughters his mother's*". The father's innate love and fervour makes Lear endearingly human – and not just a royal crown. Soumitra's pathos, the anxiety, the wounded father is as much the king as any Bengali father. In deft touches he plays to the heart, connecting to the soul which gets wounded seeing at the battered father.

However, this is not to forget that there has always been a raging debate on Soumitra Chatterjee the theatre personality vs the Star. He has been hailed as the protégé of Satyajit Ray. Remembering his affluent presence in the silver screen Frontline writes its obituary, "*The year was 1961. Uttam Kumar, the superstar of Bengali cinema, was at the height of his powers. To stand up to him on screen, let alone upstage him, was inconceivable to cinemagoers of the time. So, when all eyes on the screen suddenly turned away from Uttam Kumar to a tall, handsome young man with a roguish spark in his eyes, it signalled the arrival of a new era in Bengali cinema. The film was 'JhinderBandi,' Tapan Sinha's adaptation of SharadinduBandopadhyay's novel of the same name based on Anthony Hope's novel The Prisoner of Zenda. Although Uttam Kumar was the hero and had a double role, it was young Soumitra Chatterjee as the charismatic villain, Mayurbahan, who stole the show—unthinkable in an Uttam Kumar-starrer*".

Soumitra, then a new sensation, announced himself two years earlier in Satyajit Ray's *ApurSansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959, the final segment of the maestro's Apu trilogy). No character could be more different from the swaggering, deadly Mayurbahan than the beautiful, romantic man-child Apu who looked at the world "*with wide-eyed wonder in spite of life's vicissitudes*". For more than 60 years, the genius and incredible versatility of Soumitra Chatterjee captivated and enthralled lovers of serious cinema. With his death on November 15th, 2020, India has lost one of its greatest screen and theatre artistes.

Even in his 80s, he could single-handedly carry a movie by his own charisma, just as he single-handedly carried an entire film industry on his shoulders since 1980 when his great rival and friend Uttam Kumar suddenly passed away at the age of 54. Even when he was well past 80, the audience would watch a film simply because it had Soumitra Chatterjee in it. He could redeem a mediocre film by his presence.

In world cinema, Soumitra Chatterjee's legend is inextricably linked with that of Satyajit Ray's. After making his historic debut as Apu in *Apur Sansar* (1959), he went on to act in

many Ray classics and others. It was a collaboration that captured world cinema by storm right from the start, and kept audiences across the globe enthralled for four decades.

Between 1959 and 1990, Soumitra starred in 14 of Ray's films, making their partnership as iconic as those between Ingmar Bergman and Max von Sydow, Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune, Federico Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni, and Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski in world cinema. But there was still one film by the master he wished he had been in: *Jana Aranya (The Middleman, 1975)*. He once told *Frontline*: "*That bitter role of a pimp. I would have really liked to do that. I cannot say how differently I would have played it, but I would certainly have invested some amount of social awareness in the role.*"

Even though for most international audiences, Soumitra's fame rests on his collaborations with Ray, his work with other eminent Bengali directors such as Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Asit Sen, Ajoy Kar and Goutam Ghose was no less significant. Soumitra himself acknowledged, time and again, the immense contribution Tapan Sinha had on his career. If Satyajit Ray shaped his attitude towards art, cinema and life itself, Tapan Sinha played a major role in honing his craft. Soumitra said: "*In my first film with him (Khudito Pashan, 1960), he almost taught me how-to walk-in front of a camera.*" Soumitra's portrayal of a man haunted by the ghost of his beloved from a previous birth was one his most iconic early roles. He said: "*Even in my later films with Tapan Sinha, after I had become an established actor, he would very subtly open my eyes to certain things.*" While he always acknowledged the influence, Ray had on his life and career, he was also very aware of his own contribution to Ray's films and legacy. He once said: "*...how Satyajit Ray would have been able to make some of his films without me is also a matter of conjecture.*" He was one of the few actors to whom Ray gave a lot of freedom to interpret a role.

In a career spanning over 60 years, Chatterjee acted in over 300 films. The sheer variety of roles he played is staggering. Romantic comedies, social dramas, crime thrillers, political films, biopics, period pieces—Soumitra did them all. Almost every character that he played, he made his own, making it practically impossible for anybody else to reprise or redefine the role. There have been others who played Ray's iconic detective Feluda, most notably Sabyasachi Chakraborty, but when one thinks of the Bengali sleuth it is the image of Soumitra that comes to mind, even though he played the part only twice, in *Sonar Kella* and *Joy Baba Felunath*.

Similarly, one cannot think of anyone other than Soumitra in the role of the loveable roadside Romeo turning over a new leaf under the influence of the girl he loves in the superhit *Teen Bhubaner Paare* (1969); nor the sensitive intellectual Amal in Ray's *Charulata*; nor the revolutionary village school teacher Udayan Pandit in Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. It seemed as though each of these roles was tailor made for Soumitra, and there was no part that he could not handle—be it a glamorous heartthrob, a ragged villager, a decrepit old man, a helpless victim of circumstance, a schizophrenic, or a sinister villain.

The obituary written by Frontline goes- *“The sheer range of characters he immortalised is perhaps unprecedented in the history of Indian cinema. Soumitra’s body of work was astounding, ranging as it did from the rustic, tough Punjabi driver with a heart of gold in Ray’s Abhijan to the rich, sophisticated, slightly cocky city slicker on holiday in Aranyer Din Ratri; from a passionate swimming coach exhorting his protege to “fight” in Kony (1984) to the mild-mannered scientist who would not bow under public pressure to surrender to superstition in Ganashatru; from the hapless school teacher terrorised by political goons in Atanka (1986) to the crippled doctor helping a rape survivor get her life back in Wheel Chair (1994)”*. Like the Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni, he was as magnificent in commercial films as he was in parallel cinema.

Neither his appeal nor his stardom waned with advancing age. He continued to remain the most sought-after actor in the Bengali film industry, and delivered seminal performances in Ray's *Ganashatru* and *Shakha Proshakha*, Tapan Sinha's *Atanka* and *Wheel Chair*, Goutam Ghose's *Dekha* (2001), and Raja Mitra's *Ekti Jiban* (1990). But Soumitra did not bank on his genius alone. Right until the end he brought to the film sets the same passion, discipline and commitment that he had been known for as a young artiste. He revelled in competition; playing opposite formidable actors inevitably brought out the best in him. Once, speaking of his co-star, the legendary Sabitri Chatterjee, he said: *“Whenever there was any scene with Sabi, I would rehearse multiple times for it, because she was a scene-stealer.”* Sabitri was the actress he admired the most. He had once said: *“There are great actresses, but all have some limitations. Sabitri doesn't have any. She can do anything.”*

The admiration was mutual. Sabitri Chatterjee told *Frontline*: *“As a man and as an artiste he was of a different level. Whatever be the size of the role offered to me, if Soumitrada was in the film, I would accept it. The sheer variety of the roles he played and the authenticity he brought to the screen was something unique. Very few people can do serio-comic roles like he could.... If only he were alive, his words would be enough to inspire people.”* She

said *Apur Sansar* was the only film she had ever watched twice in succession: “*I saw the afternoon show and then the evening show. I have never ever done that with any other film.*”

Just as his screen image did not always conform to the stereotypical hero, in real life too, Soumitra was not the quintessential matinee idol like Uttam Kumar. In many ways he rejected his own stardom with his refusal to compromise with his political beliefs and ideology. He was involved with the Left movement from his college days, and never made a secret of his political leanings. He took part in protest rallies and processions and always made himself accessible to the common people. He was perhaps the first “*people’s movie star*” of India.

Ever the opponent of right-wing forces, he had no hesitation in signing a protest petition against the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act. In June this year he was among the 500 prominent citizens who signed an open letter demanding the immediate release of activists like Varavara Rao and Safoora Zargar at a time when “a pandemic is raging across the country”. While Uttam remained the unapproachable distant lone star with magical glamour, Soumitra never lost his touch with the masses. He admitted: “I would often move around like a common man, take part in processions... [and do] so many things that Uttam Kumar would never do.” No superstar had ever displayed such casual indifference to his own stardom and yet remained such a huge matinee idol as Soumitra.

1.2 Passion Play and its use in theatre: The trials and tribulations of *Raja Lear*

In Theatre, *Raja Lear* has been hailed as one of the greatest successes of Chatterjee. Even at the age of 78, he proved to the theatre lovers of Kolkata his undying passion for the medium. There are elements of Passion Play throughout the play, where Chatterjee excels beyond himself in the portrayal of the agonies and sufferings of King Lear. In earlier days, Passion play was referred to as a religious drama of medieval origin dealing with the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Christ. Early Passion plays (in Latin) consisted of readings from the Gospel with interpolated poetical sections on the events of Christ’s Passion and related subjects, such as Mary Magdalene’s life and repentance, the raising of Lazarus, the Last Supper, and the lament of the Virgin Mary. Use of the vernacular in these interpolations led to the development of independent vernacular plays, the earliest surviving examples being in German. Such plays were at first only preludes to dramatic presentations of the Resurrection. The introduction of Satan (which became typical of German and Czech plays), and thus of introductory representations of the fall of Lucifer and the Fall of man (as in the early 14th-

century Vienna Passion), and of scenes from the Old Testament and of the Last Judgment, led to development of cyclic plays similar to the Corpus Christi cycles. The great Celtic Passion cycles of Cornwall and Brittany, and the St. Gall Passion play (which begins with the entry of St. Augustine, who introduces the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, and also includes the marriage at Cana), exemplify this type of Passion play.

The most famous of the Passion plays to survive into the 20th century is that performed at Oberammergau, in the Bavarian Alps. According to tradition, the play has been presented every 10 years since 1634, in fulfilment of a vow made after the village was spared an epidemic of plague (shifting to decennial years in 1700), except in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War and World War II, when religious plays were banned. It remains an entirely local production, with villagers taking all the parts and singing in the chorus. Since 1930 roofed seats have protected the audience from the weather. The production runs from May through September. Some villagers and some Jewish organizations have protested anti-Semitic overtones in the 1860 text. Traditional Passion plays have also been revived in villages in the Austrian Tirol. In northern Spain, during Lent and Holy Week, a Catalan Passion play is performed by villagers; and in Tegelen, in the Netherlands, a modern play by the Dutch poet Jacques Scheurs is given every five years.

In Act 1 when we first encounter Soumitra Chatterjee as *Raja Lear*, all dressed up along with his crown and heavy makeup, he is not a lunatic, although in his lack of judgment, in the excitability of his nerves, and in his unmanly yielding to passion, we discover a decided predisposition to insanity. As Dr. Bucknill says, "*if we regard this trial of his daughters as a fabrication of a sane mind, we must admit that the play is founded on a gross improbability, and the action of Lear in the subsequent scenes is inexplicable*". It is true that improbabilities of circumstance are not of infrequent occurrence in Shakespeare. We have a ghost in *Hamlet*, fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and witches in *Macbeth*, then which no fabrications of the brain can be more improbable. But we never have the systematic development of strength from weakness. As in the after-part of the play we stand before the vast ruin of Lear's mind, immethodized from the ordinary pursuits of life. No; Lear is already far on the way to that unsound state of mind to which "*not alone the imperfections of long engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them,*" have been urging him.

The very cruel acts of insulting King Lear when he went with his 100 knights to stay with them reveal that both Goneril and Regan, in actuality, hate their own father. Such mean attitudes are heart-breaking and cruel enough, but coming from a very close blood relation, a bond, such as a daughter, make them even worse since they are simply unnatural. Consequently, King Lear becomes isolated and exiled as an outcast by his own flesh and blood. As a result, he comments by the following when he is first unexpectedly turned down by Goneril:

*I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.
I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell.
We'll no more meet, no more see one another.
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood.(2.4.216).*

At this point, King Lear is in a state of immense suffering, he is totally disturbed both psychologically and mentally. He finds no comfort where comfort is to be sought, so he simply departs to nature where a violent storm takes place. The storm is considered here to illustrate the turbulent condition King Lear is suffering from in the sense that it is to mirror his agonies and despairs by becoming an old madman with no one to turn to and nowhere to go. Here the macrocosm in that regard, the natural forces depicted in the storm, are employed to correlate with the disturbed state of the microcosm, man as illustrated by King Lear in the sense that his suffering is reaching to a paramount.

Like King Lear, the Earl of Gloucester is deceived by the cunning schemes of his illegitimate son, Edmund, against his legitimate son, Edgar. These well-constructed plans finally succeed and result in the abduction of Edgar by Gloucester. This taken measure to a great extent the abolishment of Cordelia by King Lear. Bradley argues here that the main purpose of the parallel similarities between the two plots of the story in terms of turning the hearts of fathers against their children and the hearts of brothers against each other is to suggest a universal existence of such conditions created by the conducts of these characters that would definitely lead to suffering.

Like King Lear, Gloucester suffers both physically and morally. To elaborate, he is being punished by the Duke of Cornwall for being loyal to the King by refusing to hand over the letter. Cornwall is enraged to be disobeyed and captivates Gloucester in his own home and plucks his eyes out. So, Gloucester suffers due to the friendship and obligation that he shows towards his Monarch. He, consequently, becomes blinded and wanders in the woods. But here his suffering does not remain on one level which is physical, but it also expands to another mental level.

It is relevant to point out here that even though Gloucester loses his eyesight, yet he starts to gain some kind of inner insight which enables him to discover the wicked plotting of Edmund against Edgar, and it is here that his agony is aggravated since he is a father that sided with one son against the other without adequate investigation. As a result, Gloucester reaches a great state of despair and suffering which he cannot tolerate any longer, therefore, he sets his mind on taking his own life in order to put an end to his ongoing torment had it not been for the prompt intervention of Tom o' Bedlam. It is evident from the above examination that all the suffering that King Lear goes through is basically a consequence of his own actions. Likewise, all the other tackled prominent characters suffer one way or another due to their own conducts regardless to whether these acts were basically intended to be good or bad. In other words, the suffering of these key figures in King Lear is self-inflicted, but this is not the case in terms of the selected characters in Julius Caesar.

King Lear's actions send the mind back to the time when a vigorous, comprehensive intellect was held in strict subjection to the noble impulses of an upright heart. We see him gradually yielding to the influences to which nature and political station have subjected him, until all the nobler qualities generosity, sympathy, disinterested affection, all that makes a man lovable have degenerated into mere selfishness. Through all faith in filial piety controls his action. When that faith is lost and anarchy sets in, the elements which have been before buried, are thrown up again in the wild convulsion. Lear's trust in filial piety is justified by the event, though his judgment, as to the proper person to whom it should be given, was wrong. Lear's purposes were right, but he lacked the judgment and the strength of will to carry them out.

Every nuance of the Passion Play in *Raja Lear* was perfected by Chatterjee. In the words of the director, in an interview, "Lear was him, he got personally attached to the character.

Every day, after the performance, he'd say, "*I feel completely blank.*" Lear dies at the end, after him dead, there are almost six-seven minutes of the play remaining before the curtain comes down. He'd always say, "*In those moments, while lying there on the stage floor, I feel that I'm hanging in some strange place, I know not what that is.*" Since it was his dream role, he gave everything possible into the making of the character. He had just one grudge. He'd say, "*People always talk of me as a cinema actor, but I never stopped doing theatre. Even the intellectuals don't highlight my theatre acting. Why?*" That was his deep anguish. He was doing theatre continuously, right until the lockdown. The acting, his candour, physicality, his rumbling voice, his cadence, pronunciation, towering presence, he would make a small stage/space look bigger. If he was on the stage, you'd not look at anybody else.

1.3 Insanity, and Divine Madness in *Raja Lear*

William Shakespeare is famous for countless contributions to the literary world, both poetic and theatrical. However, it is his portrayal of a foolish King that serves as a resounding example of the behavioural qualities attributed to melancholy and madness. Alexander M. Truskinovsky explains the fascination: "*Shakespeare's plays, and in particular King Lear, have been a favourite source of clinical observation and diagnosis for psychiatrists for the past two centuries. Most authors agree that the description of Lear's mental symptoms is remarkably consistent and close to life*".

Next is the portrayal of Lear himself. Several scholars insist that he exhibits his mental illness immediately from the opening of the play; whereas others insist that his circumstances and desperation exacerbate an underlying condition which manifests itself in his deterioration and perceived madness as the toll of the cataclysmic events catch up to him. Then the factor of his age must be considered when determining his mental state. Was Lear of sound mind and body? Are his early behaviours a result of senility? J.C. Bucknill is quoted as saying: "*The wilfulness with which critics have refused to see the symptoms of insanity in Lear, until the reasoning power itself has become undeniably alienated, is founded upon that view of mental disease ... that insanity is an affection of the intellectual, and not the emotional part of man's nature*".

Madness as portrayed in King Lear, seemed to have dangerous repercussions throughout the second half of the play. In fact, this madness in Lear which kept on growing in Lear was not without political leanings. The fact that he was thrown out of Kingship on his own volition

and whatever was happening to him as an aftermath, was against law. Perhaps, Shakespeare brought in this concept of lunacy as a form of protest against the lawlessness that was prevailing in his kingdom of at that time. For critics, it seems that King Lear crosses into madness in Act 3, Scene 4. However long he has feared it, whatever signs have augured it, whichever lines display hints of it, when Lear projects his own plight onto the suddenly-appearing Tom, his madness is manifest. But if attention is moved to a statement occurring fifteen lines earlier from this confrontation, there occurs another confrontation—one that Lear himself names and shrinks from: “*O Regan, Goneril, whose frank heart gave you all, — O that way madness lies, let me shun that; No more of that*”.

Audience who have seen the Bengali adaptation of the play- *Raja Lear* recall with nostalgia, of the dedication that Soumitra Chatterjee put in depicting the lunacy of Lear’s wrath, his shock, or both things taken in conjunction with his frailty. In the same parlance he has used the emotions of a child, lost in the woods to the mature and aging King, broken and tired from the constant ignominies from his two daughters, crying out loud in desperation, cursing, despairing and then again raging in fury. Some critics have compared Soumitra’s acting with that of Amitabh Bacchan in Rituparno Ghosh’s *The Last Lear*- saying that Bacchan’s acting seemed almost amateurish, compared to the interplay of emotional turmoil that Soumitra enacted in *Raja Lear*. Chatterjee superbly reflects the mental disorder that is so typical of him and the Earl of Gloucester that is disclosed in the dialogue delivery. The way to *Raja Lear*’s madness, when cried out by Chatterjee on stage, “*provides an Elizabethan perspective on man’s historic disengagement from reality and the cultural damage sustained thereby. The gravity of what is lost in the chaos of Lear’s madness can be explicated in terms of the historic laws concerning madness, and the role that the King played in their disposition*”.

Foucault’s work on the history of insanity explains one dimension of the malady that is particularly relevant here. The mad, like the leprous, were considered fearful and scorn-worthy from the early perspective, but they also retained an aura of the supernatural about them. The visitation of the scourge could be seen as the gift of suffering, a mortal badge of soul-sickness, obtaining for the sufferer a kind of white martyrdom. This may in some way rise from another idea that Foucault considers – the “madness of the cross.”

In *Raja Lear*, Soumitra Chatterjee brings the audience to a visual treat when he portrays the vulnerability of Lear to its behest. The audience sees, the “love trial” in which, Lear performs a monumental perversion of the law. A tribunal is made in which love is tried.

Lear's tribunal asks what love is, an ontological inquiry of the highest order. But as the love test shows, he is not actually interested in ontologies, but in word games, the appearance of love, not the substance. In contrast, Cordelia's first words are ontological in nature: "*What shall Cordelia speak?*". The absurdity of this event is only matched by its execution, as Lear is supremely unprepared to make the proper judgment. This is so because he has no knowledge of his weaknesses – how prone he is to flattery – and as such cannot defend against it. As a result, he chooses what is pleasing to hear rather than what is possible to know. His vanity is an easy mark for his eldest daughters to hit, and is matched by his irrational wrath, which proceeds "dragon"-like until spent in dispossessing Cordelia. Susceptible to both flattery and wrath, his misjudgement in the "trial" has consequences, grave and great. There is even a sense in which the king here is anarchist. He divides the realm and disinherits the one heir who is worthy. To have sliced up the kingdom would alone be considered shocking and unwise, but to divide a house between corrupt sisters, Regan and Goneril, and to banish the only hope of the land, Cordelia, is to work the destruction of all. Lear does not know how to discern love because he does not know how to judge; he cannot judge because he has no basis from which to "see" rightly, to compare and to measure, as Kent so adamantly advises him: "*See better, Lear, and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye*".

Raja Lear's a long, waking madness, and the audience only enters upon the first of the last, the beginning of his final descent. "*Lear's perversion of law, so that it becomes love's rack, is a failure to appreciate law's proper use and its built-in limits. Again, this is only a visible exhibition of an innate irrationality – or better yet, an irrationality – that flows from his rejection of self-enquiry in favour of pure will/appetite. He cannot know other things, or judge other things, because he has no basis from which to make those judgments, no acquaintance with his true self and his diminished capacities. Through his resulting perversion of the law, tragic Nature rushes, disordering all. That Lear's sanity is among the first to sustain the blow is not surprising, as it is the portal through which the enemy has made its way*".

While enacting this insanity in *Raja Lear*, Suman Mukhopadhyay reminisces about Chatterjee- "*I remember the first performance. We had rehearsed for 3 months from 10 am to 6 pm almost every day. The make-up is done. He is wearing his golden crown, and sitting— he would always arrive 3 hours early, and before 15 minutes of the show, would go to the*

backstage and sit in the dark—and I went and held his hands, 'All the best, Soumitra da.' And he says that, 'Suman, parbotoh? Hobe toh? (Can I do it, will it be okay?). I still get goosebumps thinking about that because here is an artist who has given house-full performances. He has gone international and has won accolades after accolades, and even after all that he has this sense of uncertainty. This creative vulnerability is what makes a true artist, shedding all vanity. I never saw him being complacent. He was minutely involved in every step of the process. He used to draw sketches of Lear, work on how he should look. He would write poetry ruminating on the character.

In *Raja Lear*, we often see Soumitra as *Raja Lear* ruminating on the misdeeds of his two daughters, Goneril and *Regan*. Such brilliant is his dialogue delivery, the mock accusations, that the audience gets a feel of the broken man, gradually becoming insane. At times we see Lear to be comparing his daughters to an animal, and Chatterjee does a marvellous job in portraying the gradual insanity swallowing up *Raja Lear*. Goneril, who has little patience for her father and his knights, casts him out of her court. He compares her to a bird of prey, “*Detested kite, thou liest!*”, calling her out for what she is. He is so upset by her lies that he wishes Nature would make her infertile and then compares her transgressions to the biblical creature that led to the fall of man, “*How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is/ To have a thankless child!*.” He once again compares Goneril to a predatory animal when he says that Regan will “*flay thy wolvisish visage.*” It is these comparisons that really get to the truth of the matter, where Lear wakes up and realizes that he has been used, and his power preyed upon. When he finds that both Goneril and Regan deny him and his knights lodging he himself is reduced to an animal’s level, because he has nothing left. He pledges his revenge, once again referencing nature and the earth, “*No you unnatural hags,/ I will have such revenge on you both/ That all the world shall- I will do such things- / What they are yet I know not, but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth. You think I’ll weep; No, I’ll not weep,*” something he is not able to fulfil because the sisters receive punishment at their own hands.

Though throughout the play the audience does not get *Raja Lear* to shed tears, but Nature here is used as a metaphor, forming a storm and tempest that reflects his inner agony, as if on cue. Here chaos exists in nature, as well as in the world of man—the kingdom is in shambles, and Lear is wandering the countryside. The only glimmer of hope is the return of Cordelia, but not really, because she brings the French with her, something the people in the audience were unlikely to support. The ties to nature continue until the tragic end. Albany becomes

more sympathetic to Lear's cause as time wears on and he discovers the infidelity of his wife. He too, compares Goneril to a snake, calling her a "*gilded serpent*". Like the serpent was instrumental in the biblical fall of man, Goneril was instrumental in the destruction of Lear's England. Aristotle said that tragedies require an admirable but flawed character as the lead, but there is little that redeems Lear.

His time in the storm allows him to see where he has gone wrong, but he does little to change what he has begun. His greedy desire for the power of a monarch but none of the responsibility is what plunges the kingdom into a chaos. A chaos that can only be conquered by the death of most of the main characters, as in many other Shakespearian tragedies. Even the innocent Cordelia falls victim to this natural order propagated by greed. In this world good has no place, overwhelmed by the evil surrounding it. This fatalistic viewpoint is tragic in itself, but it is Lear's appearance with Cordelia's limp body in his arms that is most tragic of all. Lear sums up his bleak nihilistic view of the earth when he says, "*I know when one is dead and when one lives;/ She's dead as earth.*" There is no discussion of the afterlife or hope for the future, this is it. The tragedy in this outcome is so profound that later productions altered the ending because it was too depressing. It suggests that there is no purpose or meaning to human life, other than to return to the earth, the nature that Lear and Edmund put so much faith into. In this play the just and loving Christian God is not present and in its place is the cruel Nature. Living a virtuous life like Cordelia will only lead to the very same end as her sisters, death.

When considering the emotional aspect of his behaviours we must also consider one of the themes that dominates Lear's internal conflict: the driving force that is revenge. Lear is oblivious to the obvious value of unconditional love and seeks to humiliate and punish Cordelia, along with Kent, for their perceived betrayal. The effort to maintain his authority while simultaneously restructuring the power of the land according to ownership makes the Bengali adaptation of *Raja Lear*'s hold on reality and superiority sketchy at best. One such factor in the all-consuming impact of vengeance is that "*in place of consciousness of honour and behaviour true to principles, wealth and possessions are the determining factor for the reputation and influence of a member of the group*". Lear suffers the effects of his folly to an exaggerated degree and the audience is compelled to consider him a victim rather than a tyrant. It is not only Lear's journey that captures the audience's interest; Cordelia and Gloucester are also noteworthy characters in terms of the overall moral messages that

Shakespeare inserts into every major theatrical piece. In addition, it is his uncanny ability to portray behavioural characteristics that are attributed to “madness” and sheer desperation that makes King Lear a monumental piece of literature for both the original to the contemporary literary and scientific scholars.

Among Shakespeare’s tragic characters, like Macbeth and Hamlet who suffer from disturbed mental states, King Lear is one of the most famous when the discussion is on madness. As Kenneth Muir argues in the introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of King Lear, the concept of madness in King Lear leads to debates such as ‘madness in reason’ versus ‘reason in madness,’ furthermore he states that “wicked children of Lear are all destroyed” by the end as big sister Goneril going mad kills the second, Regan and then commits suicide, thus madness leads to a punishment for the wicked (Shakespeare, 1991, p. ii). In fact, madness is not only a punishment or a tragic flaw in King Lear but also it is a mental state that enables Lear to see the world from a new perspective by giving him awareness thus contributing to his character development with this awareness.

In Suman Mukhopadhyay’s *Raja Lear*, we see Soumitra Chatterjee from beginning to end, how he enacts and vacillates his acting prowess on the concept of power changes within the subplots of the play which is presented as light motifs. At first, it is only a family crisis caused by Lear’s childish acts. Cordelia’s honesty raises the problem of unfair treatment and she ends up losing all her power in England. As Lear distributes his lands to his other daughters and their husbands, power change stays no longer as a family issue. It becomes more serious, worse, traumatic, and turns into a political issue.

Herold suggests that Shakespeare’s characters’ personal problems are very much interrelated to a “*political crisis and these should be interpreted together*”. The harmony is shattered in the very beginning when Lear decides to distribute his lands which are the symbols of his power. His personal problems make him take rash, in some sense childish, decisions and this leads to a crisis in both political atmosphere and in Lear’s mind. As soon as he gives away his power, he begins to ask whether he is going crazy or not. Suddenly the king turns into an old, vulnerable madman who desperately needs his daughters’ help. Duncan Salkeld interprets this situation as, “*concepts of reason and madness frequently served as metaphors for the ruling power and the threat of insurrection*”. For him, madness and authority are very much interrelated and King Lear is a good example. The new power, in other words, authority

becomes Goneril and *Regan* who are represented as wicked characters that cause Lear's madness as well as a disorder in the political arena. The power shift indicates the corrupted side of human nature and instantly Lear becomes a victim of the corrupted authority. Seeing his daughters' true colours, Lear feels powerless and abandoned. His reason, associated with the theme of power, gives way to madness which is seen as a subversion by Salkeld. Lear's madness and crises are clearly caused by the disorders in political and social changes. His destruction takes place in different perspectives. As Herold says "*The poles of sanity and madness...collapse through a historicized King Lear into a proliferation of voices and discourses of disorder – confusion in the moral, psychic, and political orders*".

Raja Lear was a portrayal of tragic reprisal and dementia. How Chatterjee gave life to the hallucinating old Lear is not quite his tragic flaw in this tragedy, yet the observable stages of his madness are milestones in the play because they mark certain moments. In the play one of the key moments is where he decides to divide the kingdom between his daughters according to the measure of the love they bare for him: "*Tell me, my daughters, / Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where merit doth most challenge it?*" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 102"). This is indeed a delicate moment because it gives a start to the following conflicts. Lear expects rhetorical shows of affection from his daughters to get their share of the kingdom (Bulman, 1985, p. 148). When he cannot receive the required answer from his favourite daughter Cordelia, he suddenly decides to disown her forever: "*Here I disclaim all my parental care, / Propinquity, and property of blood, / and as a stranger to my heart and me / Hold thee from this for ever.*" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 105, i.105-107). This is a shocking and an illogical decision, the other characters in the play criticize Lear because of it. France comments on it saying: "*This is most strange, that she that even but now / Was your best object the argument of your praise, / Balm of your age, most best most dearest, / Should in this trice of time commit a thing / so monstrous to dismantle / So many folds odd flavour.*" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 111). As John Draper evaluates in his article, "The Old Age of King Lear:" The progress of this madness, like the progress of Lear's earlier change from happiness to melancholy develops by fine degrees. In the very first scene, Kent, by a sort of dramatic prolepsis, calls the old King 'mad' though he means foolish rather than insane. At the end of the Act, when the Fool refers to Lear's age and folly, the old man seems first to fear madness: he had always been so certain of himself, and now this certainty is gone.

Late in the second act, he feels himself succumbing to hysteria passion, and with deepest pathos beseeches Goneril, “*I pray thee, daughter, do not make me mad.*” Some lines later, in bitterness at his unmanly tears, he cries that he’ll not weep, but rather he’ll ‘go mad.’ In Act III, as his “wits begin to turn,... His wits ‘begin to unsettle’ and finally, late in Act III, his ‘wits are gone.’ In Act IV, he is ‘*as mad as the vex’d sea.*’ (Draper, 1940, pp. 536-537). While enacting the lunatic revelations of *Raja Lear*, director Suman Mukhopadhyay says about Soumitra Chatterjee- “He was curious, investigative and engaging, worked on his dialogues, made sketches, doodled on his script, on the characters, wrote poetry, that was my learning. Every note, every feeling, every new thing, he’d write down on his script. One morning in the car, he showed me a sketch, and said: “look, this is the face I saw of Lear in my dream”. He’d arrive three hours before each performance, after doing his make-up, changing into his costume, 15-20 minutes before the play, he’d go sit in the background darkness, alone, contemplative.

Ribner (1947) in the article “*Lear's Madness in the Nineteenth Century,*” categorizes madness as congenital, super-induced, and fictitious which are represented by the Fool, Lear and Edgar respectively (p. 125). Lear’s madness is a temporary one and his reason returns at the end of the play, a scene in which one can no longer see a madman but an old wise man. For a while, he really becomes a madman and he use madness as an unconscious tool of recovery. On the other hand, Edgar pretends to be a madman. Jerome Mazzaro (1985) in “*Madness and Memory: Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear,'*” argues that, “Gloucester’s son Edgar assumes a mask of madness in order to camouflage political intentions, achieving in the disguise greater security and a better chance of effecting his will. Success depends upon the pretender’s skill ingiving the impression that he is mentally incapable of any responsible action that might threaten the political motives of his associations”. King Lear’s madness has several roles such as the indication of power change and character development.

Madness, caused by his misjudgement and his daughters’ actions, is used to describe the power change in both personal and political spheres. The contrast between sanity and madness helps him understand the nature of human beings and makes him a better man by developing his vision. It should be reminded that madness doesn’t manifest itself solely in characters. Often it can be seen reflected in or caused by chaos. Lear rapidly loses power, authority, and control over those who were once his subjects – excluding Kent and

Gloucester. This type of rejection of political authority is described by Karin Coddon (1989) in the article “Such Strange Designs” as ‘*an intolerable ignorance, madness, and wickedness, for subjects to make any murmuring, rebellion, resistance or withstanding [...] against the dearest and most dread sovereign Lord and king...*’ (p. 54). Rejection of the power of the King both in Elizabethan culture and the play is a sort of ‘political madness’ (Coddon, 1989, p. 56) and it is an example of chaos.

1.4 Sin and Redemption: Soumitra giving his best on stage

Although Shakespeare creates this turning point for Lear, he is actually paving the way for a greater tragedy. Lear loses everything he has – authority, family, and sanity, but now he faces his greatest loss – the chance for redemption. After the storm, Lear is finally reunited with Cordelia as he struggles to regain his sanity. Cordelia never loses her love for her father even after he has disowned her, and after seeing him, she cries, “*O my dear father, restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / repair those violent harms that my two sisters / have in thy reverence made*” (IV.vii.27-30). The mention of restoration signifies Cordelia’s ability to redeem Lear of his previous mistakes. When Lear wakes up, he admits, “*I am a very foolish fond old man – I fear I am not in my perfect mind*” (IV.vii.61,65). This reveals Lear’s new regained understanding of himself and his admittance to his faults, a sign of the first step towards redemption. At this point, after all the turbulence, the audience takes a sigh of relief, feeling positive and seeing hope for Lear. Unfortunately, however, this play does not leave any traces of optimism.

In the final act, Edmund captures Lear and Cordelia as his prisoners, and orders both to be killed. Lear escapes, but Cordelia, his loyal and loving daughter, dies. Lear finally realizes only Cordelia can give him “*a chance which redeem all sorrows that ever [he] have felt*” (V.iii.272-273). Her death breaks the last thread between Lear and happiness. He expresses his deepest sufferings and declares his sorrows when he sees Cordelia has “*gone forever – She’s dead as earth*” (V.iii.265-267). With nothing left, not even the future and possibility for redemption, Lear loses the only possession that remains – his life. King Lear is truly a tragic hero because he was so close to happiness after much torment, yet he is still unable to achieve salvation, and instead, he is subjected to complete deterioration, both mentally and physically.

“*Is this the promised end?*” Kent, Lear’s loyal servant, questions at the end of the play (V.iii.270). Indeed, this is the tragic end of King Lear, a play displaying a world of corruption. King Lear, due to his tragic flaw of insecurity and egotism, makes an initial mistake that soon snowballs into a series of losses, including the loss of authority, identity and sanity. Just as he is about to redeem himself, he is deprived of that chance as he loses the only one capable of restoring him – Cordelia. The play ends with the ultimate downfall of the tragic hero, as Lear dies in a state of grief. In this way, King Lear portrays not only the tragedy of a society, but more importantly, the tragedy of a man. Even though Lear has undergone much transformation and realized the meaning of humanity, the bleak society he lives in does not warrant him the opportunity for redemption. Through revealing his losses, King Lear illustrates the journey of the title character, an ultimate tragic hero.

1.5 From Denial to rage, to Isolation: Chequered emotions in *Raja Lear*

Soumitra Chatterjee identified so much with the character of *Raja Lear* that his director Suman Mukhopadhyay said candidly in an interview that Chatterjee had confessed to dreaming about King Lear in his sleep. His subconscious mind was rife with the turbulence faced by Lear which he gave life to during his acting moments. Fluidly, Chatterjee was able to portray the interplay of myriad emotions from the phases of denial, to rage to isolation gone through by Lear, a thoroughly disillusioned soul. This constant contradiction in the character of Lear seems to frustrate us as audience as well as enthuse. One single act (in Act 2) portrayed the range of Chatterjee’s acting abilities even at a frail age.

In Act 2, we find *Raja Lear* shocked to find his servants in the stocks. In Shakespearean parlance, a stock is a piece of wood to which a person is shackled to render him immobile. The fact that his dear daughter *Regan* who ordered it to be done begins his first phase of denial. He found it impossible to believe that the same daughter who had confessed to undying love for the King would now expose her sinister character. Thus, begins Lear’s first phase of denial. In the original book by Shakespeare, the character of Lear says- “*By Jupiter, I swear, no*”. (Shakespeare, 1986). The king’s continuous refusal to Kent’s assertions is a clear indicator of his denial of the truth.

Raja Lear brings out layer by layer all the facial expressions in Chatterjee, who seems to be possessed by the apparition of Lear in his real life. His dialogue when hell befalls him and he realizes that his daughter and son in law are not even ready to speak with him in spite of his

earnest request. The denial reaches its zenith, when Lear realises that his daughter has betrayed him. His words echo his inner struggle-, “*Deny to speak with me? They are sick? They are weary? They have travell'd all the night? Mere fetches; The images of revolt and flying off. Fetch me a better answer.*” (Shakespeare, 1986). Speaking of the dedication of Soumitra Chatterjee in enacting the play Suman Mukhopadhyay says- “*I think he was hankering to do Shakespeare for a long time. He could have been a great Hamlet in his youth but that didn't happen, but I think he was mentally prepared for Lear; he identified with the character. This was never spelt out, and these are subliminal things for an actor, but he was great as Lear*”.

In fact, the audience is intrigued to see how the face changes from denial to anger. The king's phase of denial turns to anger, however, when Regan comes to talk to him. She stresses Lear's impotence as a leader and father with her continuous repetition of his being old as seen in Regan's comment, “*O, sir, you are old. Nature in you stands on the very verge of her confine: you should be ruled and led.*” (Shakespeare, 1986) She also says he is weak and tries to convince him to return to Goneril and stay there. This reaction to the king's arrival as well as the earlier incident of finding his servant in the stocks fuels King Lear's rage. This is seen with his exclamation of curses on Goneril, who maltreated him during the first act of the play.

While negotiating with his rage, we see sheer brilliance in the acting prowess of Chatterjee, when he curses *Regan* and Goneril. We get to see glimpses of lunacy in his gestures, his abandonment, at times dwelling on the improbable. It is this improbability of incidents that haunt many plays written by Shakespeare, including *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Anger turns to isolation, however, when *Raja Lear* is confronted by both Regan and Goneril, who has just arrived. It is now clear to Lear that the two have betrayed him. They abuse their newfound power by requiring him to give up half of his knights, which was then lessened until it was required that he give up all of his knights. (Dominic, 1997) Unless he agreed, he would not be allowed to stay with them. This indicated Lear's complete loss of authority as king and also as father to both his daughters. He realised that they were united in their conceit, and was broken. He had lost the ability to fight as he was frail and old, and had bequeathed all his kingdom to his daughters. The centrality of Act 2 is the culmination of a man in power to one who is driven insane by the betrayal of his daughters. In a fit of rage, he runs out into the storm, uttering “*fool I shall go mad*”, a man half insane and totally broken. The storm outside as depicted by Shakespeare is recreated with the same pathos in Suman Mukhopadhyay's

direction, the storm symbolising the inner tempest going on in the mind of *Raja Lear*. Lear's isolation may be a result of not coming to terms with what he had done "*I am a man more sinned against than sinning*". *Raja Lear* reinforces his own isolation when he realises his own folly. He has lost his land, his daughters one by one, and he loses his fortune. His knights are taken away from him, until he comes to a point when he says "*why need one?*" Lear loses his sanity & in the mock trial, begins to imagine that even his own dogs are barking at him. Reconciliation scene with Cordelia marks the end of his isolation. Lear recognises his own faults "I am a very foolish fond old man". By the end, he just wants to be a father and spend time with his daughter. While doing this scene, director Suman Mukhopadhyay says of Soumitra Chatterjee, "*Lear had a multi-layered stage and he had to climb up climb down, move around, run, when the king turned mad. There was a scene in Lear when he is angry. The second daughter has thrown him out of the house and he would trip on the stage out of giddiness and frustration. He would do that with such authentic physicality that every time that scene would play out, the audience would gasp together—imagine a thousand people gasping together. And I think he enjoyed that moment. With every performance, he would make it look a little more precarious. He would say, 'Isn't it fun? People are huffing like I am going to die right now'*".

The storm scene is the moment of Enlightenment in *Raja Lear*. For this, director Suman Mukhopadhyay had constructed a multi-level stage, where the King needs to stretch his hands and act like a lunatic. It is revealed from an interview that in spite of his old age, Soumitra Chatterjee did not give himself respite. He exercised, so that he was able to move up and down the stage and make full use of it. The dedication with which Chatterjee enacted this role has been heralded as unprecedented. Although I could get hold of the recorded videos of the play provided by Minerva Repertory, what I saw was a scene to behold. Needless to say, Chatterjee provides a marvellous performance. He completely disappears into his role, riding the waves of Lear's emotions, careening between anger, fear, disgust, timidity, love, and vengeance. It is a masterful performance that will keep one riveted throughout the show, and despite Lear's cruelty gives him a tenderness that you can't help but want to protect.

1.6 *Raja Lear* depicting Human Fatality

At 78, Soumitra Chatterjee brings out such tender emotions of a man wronged by his daughters. He can be given full credit in portraying the tragic hero. While writing this, one is bound to envisage Chatterjee as the metaphor of a tragic hero, who possesses a '*fatal flaw*'

that initiates all the sufferings. The lack of judgement in *Raja Lear*, his reliance on flattery and focus on an improbable situation to gauge his daughters love shows how he was gradually losing his sanity. One loss builds on another, but moreover, his greatest loss, and what distinguishes this tragedy from all others, is his chance of redemption. Unlike other tragedies, there is no salvation for the tragic hero or any sign of optimism in the conclusion. This bleak portrayal of King Lear, through his losses, makes him the ultimate tragic hero, and the play an ultimate tragedy.

Act 1 of *Raja Lear* depicts his loss of authority. This flaw in character is brilliantly portrayed by Soumitra Chatterjee, where he is shown to happily abdicate his throne, believing the false conjuring's of his 2 daughters. Chatterjee easily negotiates between authority, desperation, revolt, and despair. He reflects with agility, the "immense insecurity and egotism" as he announces the largest share of kingdom to the daughter who professes the greatest love for him. This fatal flaw of insecurity and egotism induces Lear to make error in his judgment, resulting in the improper division of his kingdom and the loss of his two most loyal companions – Cordelia and Kent. The consequences of this error build up throughout the play, leading to Lear's ultimate tragic fall.

Raja Lear, in all senses is the story of a father's lost identity, troubled and confused. Chatterjee depicts the contradictions lurking in Lear's mind with ease. As reported in a noted English daily after Chatterjee's death, "*it was some kind of a star-show, where film stars would wear costumes, come on stage and say the dialogue. Soumitra da worked as a true stage director. Like an orchestra conductor, he brought all the elements of theatre in unison—scenography, lighting design, costumes, acting style, choreography. He brought a sense of 'total theatre' to the commercial stage. At the beginning, he wasn't part of the so-called 'group theatre', or the experimental and alternative theatre of Calcutta. But, through his innovative theatre work, he attracted the 'snooty and intellectual' theatre audience, confined to the domain of the Rabindra Sadan and Academy centric intellectual theatre ghetto, to the 'Haatibagan theatre para' in the North (in the way Usha Ganguly and Shyamalan Jalan did with Hindi theatre in the city)*".

In the original story written by Shakespeare, King Lear's banishment from his daughters undoubtedly has tremendous psychological effect on him. He not only loses youth as he "crawls toward death", but also loses sanity as his "heart }breaks into a hundred thousand flaws" and "hego mad" (I.i.41, II.iv.284-286). With so much suffering already thrown upon

Lear due to his tragic flaw, it seems that Shakespeare has now shown pity and decided to set the stage for a reversal of fate. Losing sanity has given King Lear the opportunity to discover the truth and the core of humanity. With disapproval of Regan and Goneril, Lear heads outside, where a wild storm takes place. In this time of chaos, Lear meets Edgar as Poor Tom and gains profound revelation of man and life. Seeing Poor Tom bare, at human's most natural state, Lear questions, "*Is man no more than this?*" and realizes that the "*unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art*" (III.iv.103-104, 107-109). He continues with disrobing himself, and at the same time, removing himself from any social constraints. It is at the extreme low point that Lear strips of his rationality and relies on his inner instincts to fully grasp his identity and regain his humanity. He now understands the deep love of Cordelia and the disguise employed by his other daughters. The real King Lear finally emerges.

Not only do these lines represent how Lear's daughters have contemptuously taken away his remaining power, but they also represent the loss of Lear's dignity by leaving him a shell of his former self, without a single conciliatory knight left to appease his sense of self-importance. Once this happens, Lear is left enraged and desperate, proudly stating that even "*our basest beggars / Are in the poorest superfluous*" and that he needs ". . . more than nature needs," else "*Man's life is cheap as beast's*". In other words, Lear feels that his daughters are treating him like an animal by depriving him of his royal train. Clearly, Lear still clings to the pompous supposition that his needs are above the needs of the "*basest beggar*" and he still feels like the innocent victim of his daughters' cruel behaviour. Even with all of Lear's continuing faults, however, the seeds of knowledge are beginning to grab hold; it has been painful, but he finally sees that Goneril and Regan's false tongues had blinded him from their true, unloving natures. That is, when he calls them "*unnatural hags*" and ". . . a disease that's in my flesh," he finally sees what love is not. In this way, Lear has had his idealized vision of the truth—one where he is flattered, pampered, and adored—painfully stripped away from him; even still, it will take a purgatorial storm and subsequent repentance before Lear learns what the true meaning of love is.

In the stage adaptation called *Raja Lear* and directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, Soumitra Chatterjee is said to have given a stellar performance. Recalling the first day first show, the director recalls- "*I remember the first performance. We had rehearsed for 3 months from 10 am to 6 pm almost every day. The make-up is done. He is wearing his golden crown, and*

sitting—he would always arrive 3 hours early, and before 15 minutes of the show, would go to the backstage and sit in the dark—and I went and held his hands, ‘All the best, Soumitra da.’ And he says that, ‘Suman, parbotoh? Hobe toh? (Can I do it, will it be okay?). I still get goosebumps thinking about that because here is an artist who has given house-full performances. He has gone international and has won accolades after accolades, and even after all that he has this sense of uncertainty. This creative vulnerability is what makes a true artist, shedding all vanity’. He also says “I never saw him being complacent. He was minutely involved in every step of the process. He used to draw sketches of Lear, work on how he should look. He would write poetry ruminating on the character”.

Initially, I was hesitant to call him for the post-rehearsal meetings (where I gave notes to the acting team on where they need to improve). What if he was offended? I told him, ‘Soumitra da, you don’t have to come for these meetings, I will give you separate notes’. But he wanted to be there. When he’d make mistakes, I’d tell him that This is not the way you should do it, this is how I am thinking and he would sit there with young people on the stage and take notes. We would go every day to the rehearsals together. Minerva is a governmental agency, and they provided us with a white, non-AC ambassador. The car would go to pick him up from his place in Golf Green and then pick me up from Beck Bagan. As soon as the car would reach Minto Park, he would call me, ‘Suman, I am here, come down’. Since we would travel during office hours, it would take us one-and-a-half hours to travel from Central Kolkata to Minerva, which is in North Kolkata. It would take us another hour-and-a-half in the evening on our way back from the rehearsals. Those three hours are a treasure for me. His memory was so sharp and he would tell me these personal stories from cinema and theatre, about his guru Shishir Bhaduri, his experiences with Ray, his experiences with Ritwik Ghatak (who he once got into a physical fight with), Uttam Kumar, and other co-actors”.

Coming back to *Raja Lear*, it is a story about fatality- Lear here is an iconoclast for all things fatal. Though hailed as a tragedy of all times, we cannot but contemplate how Lear begins during the first act, in almost a regal manner, only to plunge into darkness, the darkness of the soul penetrating the storm, an old man crying out in fury and despair, turning gradually into a lunatic. It is this fatality in Lear which the audience hates and feels tenderness for at the same time. As Mack explains, “the meaning of action in Lear lies rather in effects than in antecedents, and particularly in its capacity, as with Lear in the opening scene, to generate energies that will hurl themselves,, in reverberations of disorder”. Lear’s fatal flaw presents

itself early rather than later in the play- as in usual Shakespeare tragedies. When compared with Othello, for example, in Act 3 scene 3 when the seeds of jealousy implanted by Iago finally take root inside Othello's mind, that his fatal flaw emerges- when he decides to swallow Desdemona and Cassius. In essence, Othello learns how gullible he is, and dies in vain, humiliated and heartbroken. In Lear, the main action throughout is of suffering and his learning experience, all stemming from "*rash, ignorant behaviour*".

To sum up, in Kolkata, the shows were mainly hosted by the Minerva Repertory. But with the spread of word of mouth publicity of Soumitra's brilliant acting, the shows were booked in many other places. In the words of director Suman Mukhopadhyay, in his interview with Sankhayan Ghosh, "*I think there were some 50 shows of Lear and he grew with every performance. There was a gap, because it started in the CPI(M) era and then the Mamata Banerjee government came to power, so it stopped in between and was revived. It became so popular that we would be sold-out in no time. We had to take it out of Minerva, because it had a small capacity of 350-400, to bigger auditoriums like Rabindra Sadan, Girish Mancha and Madhusudan Mancha. Lear got a kind of iconic status as a production. I think we set a record for the ticket pricing in Bengal, which was Rs 500 in 2010-2011. We performed at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav in Delhi, and a lot of people had to go back because they didn't get seats. We were invited by a Bengali club in Bombay*".

We've come, finally, to the King's heart-wrenching final words. What do we find? A fractured, interrupted syntax comprised of questions, exclamations, and fragments. Unlike those that come before, this speech isn't leaning on any rhetorical tradition: it's not trying to be regal, or philosophical, or legal. Lear is beyond rhetoric here, so is Soumitra Chatterjee, beyond any learned forms of language. The only shape we find is a return to the "iambic rhythm of his early speeches"—lines 313 and 314 are nearly perfect—but then look what happens. Those two rhythmically reassuring lines are only there to set us up for what has to be the most brutal ten syllables in the English language: *Never, never, never, never, never*. It's a perfect inversion of the natural order, an unrelenting line of trochaic pentameter coupled with an abdication of any attempt at syntax. This line looks like it is comprised of words; it is not. The language breaks here, revealing something older, darker, mere sound, rage, pain, loss, brute confusion beyond the power of any words to heal.

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