

## ***Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders): from Text to Stage***

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### **Abstract**

The paper attempts to show how Shambhu Mitra adapted Rabindranath Tagore's play *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)* on stage. Though Tagore gave no detailed stage direction in the original text, Shambhu Mitra, along with Khaled Chowdhury, prepared a 'meaningful' stagecraft. Tapas sen's lighting not only brought visual satisfaction to the audience but also gave a semiotic dimension to the play. Costumes, floor plan, use of language, gesture and speech delivery- all these major devices have been discussed, though in a nutshell. Moreover, an attempt has been taken to draw a parallelism between the socio-political and personal situation through which Tagore wrote the play and the socio-political milieu of 1950s which Mitra experienced.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Stagecraft, Special Effects, Social Context, Politics, Political History, Contemporaneity, Representation

The 1954 stage adaptation of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* by *Bahurupi* marks its potential to stage a highly 'poetic' and ideological play in quotidian format. In his essay "*Raktakarabi, Chrysanthemum*", Sankha Ghose (2002) points out:

The staging of *Bahurupi's Raktakarabi* is an event of historical eminence. This representation shows its dramatic potential, its stage worthiness in one hand and the construction, *Bahurupi's* success paves the path of its selection for staging in an office party; even the commoners can feel the connection between the actors and the audience in its performance. (pp. 132-133)

What are, then, the factors behind the huge success of Shambhu Mitra's direction? In what socio-political circumstances did Tagore write and Mitra has conceptualized the play? What are the changes that Mitra brings in and what are their subsequent effects? How does Mitra approach the 'original' text from aesthetic and philosophical points of view? In spite of being a more or less faithful representation, what additional effects have been produced by the intonation and modulation of speech, gestures, the lighting, stage arrangement etc.? The answers to all such questions would lead us to find out how Mitra's production of

*Raktakarabi* has made a play of ‘ideas’ tangible ; how does it enable the ‘poetry’ and ‘life’ to go hand in hand.

Tenth May, 1954 *Bahurupi* staged *Raktakarabi* at Railway Mansion Institute, Kolkata for the first time. Prior to this performance, the Bengali version of the play was staged only once in the poet’s life time by his family members at their Jorasanko residence. The first English version of the play *Red Oleanders* was done by Tagore himself and published by Macmillan, London in 1925. The reviews that followed were less than enthusiastic with criticism of obscurantism. The charge of obscurantism which is at the core of foreign and indigenous criticism emanates from thinking of the play only in terms of abstraction. The Governor is an agent of Repressive State Apparatus, while *Gnosai* manufactures consent. Both of them recognise the working class people not by their individual names but by assigned numbers. Again *Gnosai* cannot preach the agitated mass unless *Sardar* forcefully restores stability; ISAs (Ideological State Apparatus) and RSAs (Repressive State Apparatus) have to work hand in hand. Nandini, the central character of the play is the embodiment of liberation and life force. Bishu, Kishore, Fagulal etc. belong to the working class who are gradually drawn to the free spirit of Nandini. Even the deputy Governor starts appealing Nandini. Finally the king, who has so far devoured the commoners, responds to the call of Nandini and starts warring against himself. At this point, it is pertinent to recall Tagore who in the preface to *Raktakarabi* declares that the king is the condensed figure of both Rama and Ravana and that is why the king says Nandini that he himself is going to break the pole while she should tear apart the flag. Now, how to stage such an ideological play and make it accessible to the audience? Mitra, however, does not get baffled with the abstractions and symbolic dimension of the play; rather he discovers the trend of ancient Indian drama which Tagore conforms to. In his essay “Building from Tagore” Mitra (1971) writes:

...We realised that *Raktakarabi* was a distinctive form of Indian theatrical expression. For example it uses multiple actions within a single dramatic area and presents inner and outer life, and the individual and the symbol simultaneously. (para. 4)

In the same essay Mitra points out the fundamental difference between Indian theatrical tradition and the European tradition. While European Theatre is basically action-based, ancient Indian drama is character-based. Tagore himself declares that *Raktakarabi* is a ‘Pala’ and it tells the story of a woman. Thus the approach of the play is character oriented and subjective. Contrasted to this is the European insistence on objectivity and realistic and

naturalistic approach. In “Building from Tagore”, Mitra (1971) expresses himself clearly, disavowing the modes of naturalism as the only form of theatrical expression:

Acting should attune itself to express naturally the poetry of passions- the language of poetry. It cannot be accomplished through a naturalistic style alone. We must find a way to pass easily from the naturalistic plane to the subjective. Exterior and interior life should rub shoulders with each other and remain organically related. (para. 11)

In this respect it would be pertinent to see how Pramathanath Bishi, a former resident pupil at the *Ashram* of Shantiniketan during Tagore’s time and subsequently an eminent Tagore scholar, has categorised Tagore’s plays and how he has placed *Raktakarabi* among them. According to Bishi (1988), Tagore’s plays may be classified into the following eight categories: 1. Musical drama, 2. Verse drama, 3. Romantic tragedy, 4. Play of Ideas / Symbolic drama, 5. Social plays, 6. Comedy, 7. Seasonal plays, 8. Dance drama. Bishi places *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*) in the fourth category. *Red Oleanders* is a play more oriented to ideas than action. It belongs to the group of Tagore’s plays which elaborately draw upon myths, allegories, signs and symbols while dealing with some major problems of human life and situation. The dominance of ideas distinguishes this group from his other plays, in which the strong element of action takes priority; even when a story is there it is the idea which informs and rules the story. *Raktakarabi*, thinks Shambhu Mitra (1971), is “a play about modern industrial civilization, showing the internal contradictions that this civilization gives rise to” (para. 10). This observation becomes important if we think in what social and political circumstances Tagore composed the play. The play first appeared in 1924 in a magazine called *Prabasi*. Rama kundu (2012) in the “Introduction” to *Rabindranath Tagore’s Red Oleanders* traces the psychological condition of Tagore at the time of the composition of the play:

In course of Tagore’s trip to Europe in 1912, and return after a long spell abroad, his initial fascination with modern Europe was got over; the disillusionment was further reinforced by a deep anxiety about an impending ‘crisis of civilization’, which he thought would overcome mankind as consequence of its blind mechanical pursuit of material wealth and power. (p. 4)

Besides the upheaval of a blind materialistic war-torn world, Tagore had to face many a problem at his personal level even in his homeland:

In the meantime Shantiniketan which had been started in December 1901, had already expanded considerably, thereby, thrusting more and more wearying responsibilities upon the poet; lack of money had become chronic botheration, along with various effort taken to tide over the crisis. Alongside the demands made upon him by the institution, there were demands of the country and the world-and all these piled upon one another had been disturbing and eating into his leisure, time, energy. All the time the urge to write was pressing him inside. There was also no end to hostility within the country and abroad...It was around this time that a little girl drifted into his life. Her name was Ranu. She came like a fresh wind amidst the suffocating climate around...These various events of personal life were entering the crucible of imagination, and getting metamorphosed there under the wonderful chemistry of creativity which ultimately took shape in the play *Raktakarabi*. (Kundu, 2012, pp. 4-5)

The socio-political situation in 1950s that Shambhu Mitra underwent was not without complexities. India won its freedom at the cost of partition. The country got inflicted with random riots, Hindu-Muslim conflict, refugee problems. In 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1948 Gandhiji was assassinated and this shameful event gave birth to further violence throughout the country. In order to create pressure on the government regarding Telengana issue, communist party started rail strike which the government subdued harshly. Government of India banned the communist party. In such a situation communist party decided to continue violent movement which proved antithetical to the party itself. Communist party faced many internal conflicts and finally decided to participate in the election. In the first half of 1950s, Saoli Mitra (2015) records, Utpal Dutt, Salil Chowdhury and Ritwik Ghatak snapped their association with IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). Ghatak left IPTA in 1953. In 1954 he wrote a treatise: "Political Thesis: a Historical Document on the Cultural Front" where he wrote: "...Not a single art work of high value has come from us in the past four years. We are reviving our past work, rehearsing it and giving it a new name or else creating third rate work..." in 1955, party rejected him (p. 65). In such a political turmoil, away from IPTA, Shambhu Mitra felt the urge to perform *Raktakarabi* on stage.

The stage production of *Raktakarabi* was a challenging task. First, the play has a universal dimension and deals with the problem of the whole human civilization. Second, the characters, though not altogether abstract, we seldom come across in our daily life. Third, the language of the play is extremely troublesome to handle in a stage performance. To convey

the inner meaning and attitude of the play through such a layered language was not an easy task. Finally, the characters belong to different societal strata. If there is the worker community, there is also Bishu, the madman- who can see and who has a highly philosophic intent. Again there are Professor, Physician, Governor and Headsman. There is a Pundit (*Gnosai*) who hides his dominating intent under the grab of religious preaching. There is Nandini, the embodiment of life, who suddenly enters the town of *Yaksha*. Finally, there is the King who hides himself behind a strange cobweb. He is immensely powerful and yet he craves for love.

Shambhu Mitra took the challenge with the help of Khaled Chowdhury's stage arrangement and Tapas Sen's lighting. In the source text, there is no particular setting of the play. The whole play is located in an imaginary place called *Yakshapuri* where the King keeps himself confined within a cobwebbed closure. There is no mention of particular time of action either. Within a single scene we find a rush of events. We hear the heavy footsteps of Sardar (Governor); we find the sly appearance of Gnosai (the preacher); we are troubled by the confused Adhyapak (Professor) and Sejo Sardar (the Deputy Governor); we feel the innocence of Kishore who wishes to fetch flowers for Nandini and we are moved by the fleeting appearance of the mad singer Bishu. We also find naive Chandra and Fagulal. We wonder at the profound and yet agonised voice of the King behind the opaque net. So many events, so many different characters, so many layers! Does the stage director run after finding out a sequence? Should he construct a collage of settings on the stage? Mitra finds that Tagore draws a slice of society which is omnipresent all over the world, a society which is hierarchical. So, instead of any uniform floor plan, Mitra receives Khaled Chowdhury's stratified stage plan where on a higher plank the Governor, the Pundit and the Headman reside while the commoners like Chandra, Fagulal, Bishu, Kishore etc. are placed at a lower level. This hierarchy in society is almost universal and therefore Chowdhury's stratified floor plan becomes relevant and purposeful at the same time. In his essay "Manchasajyar Bhumika" ("An introduction to Stagecraft"), Mitra (1958) points out how this stratification in the floor plan creates a wonderful composition which is at once meaningful and visually appealing (pp. 156-160). "*Raktakarabi* Prosonge" ("About *Raktakarabi*"), another essay by Mitra (2016) records Mitra's indebtedness to Gaganendranath Tagore's painting from which he got the idea of staircase which has been used in the stage plan (p. 100). Mitra, in this essay, interestingly observes that Chowdhury's stagecraft facilitates a strange dynamicity to

the performance; if anybody stands anywhere, a composition gets automatically produced. (p. 100)

The organization of stage apart, there is the use of sound and light. The sound of the iron chain, use of drum, whipping sound at the moment of crisis not only add a dynamic pace to the production but also makes it vividly conceivable to the audience. Tapas Sen's lighting produces a precise effect. Saoli Mitra (2015) recalls:

The plan of lighting was of Tapas Sen. We still recall the condensed web in the scene of Bishu and Nandini...We are reminded of the reddish sky with the tinge of vermilion cloud. Against the blue backdrop the shadowy figures of Bishu and Nandini exist hand in hand. (p. 69)

Sankha Ghosh (2002), in his essay "*Raktakarabi, Chrysanthemum*" observes the profound darkness under which the king is covered even after unveiling of the net is not appropriate to the theatre (p. 138).

Speech delivery and voice modulation are equally important for the theatre. Contrasted to the mechanical background sound is Tripti Mitra's extensive call: "-Anup-Shklu-." The music which Tagore has retained within this brief hyphenated phrase becomes expressive in Mitra's wide sorrowful voice. This unique projection of voice carries the audience into the open field of rural Bengal- almost like that of *Ishanipara*. Similar technique has been used in her call to 'Pagol Bhai' and in her final war call against the Governor.

Gesture, too, is an intrinsic part to the performance. Chandra's coveted approach towards the pleasure journey of the wives of the governors and her subsequent retreat with punctuated with humiliation; Nandini's fleeting appearance on stage and her recurrent striking on the door of the castle; the Professor's childish clapping with the joy of emancipation at the fag end of the play: all these gestures, however nuanced, are theatrically important as much as important to aesthetically convey the manifold politics of the play. Chandra's humiliating retreat suggests the gap between the governor-wives and the commoners like her. Nandini's recurrent knocking at the closed door is expressive of her conviction to bring out the captivated 'man' from the intimidating cage of a mysterious 'king'. The Professor's childish gesture is conducive of his freedom from the invisible trapping of pedantic pretension.

Costume is another significant aspect of theatre. While preparing for the stage presentation of *Raktakarabi* Shambhu Mitra felt a bit intrigued about the appropriate costume of the King,

because the old sign of ‘thunder’ which used to be in currency in ancient India as the royal insignia might not be understood by the present-day theatregoers. Then Nandalal Basu suggested the idea of using ‘toothed wheel’ as a fabrication on the tunic worn by the King, which he held to be an international item in today’s world. The idea of a formidable king could be immediately identified by the audience with the use of a long sword, a grand headgear, and other such gorgeous equipage. But Nandalal Basu instantly dismissed this idea, as he thought of a subliminal connection between the representation of the King and the complexity and predicament of a modern man with a scientific mind. Mitra’s troupe *Bahurupi* took special care in simultaneous disclosing and concealing the King towards the end when he would break through the mysterious iron net. Shambhu Mitra (1992) recalls in his book *Natak Raktakarabi*:

Even when the King came out towards the end of the play, no light was cast upon him. Only the gleam of a faint reflection of all the surrounding lights cast on other people and items fell on the King. Only once a very faint light fell in a slant upon his back; it showed up distinctly the toothed wheel on his shirt back. The King’s face was never seen; even his body was seen indistinctly as a shadow. (as cited in Kundu, 2012, p. 75)

On the other hand the diggers, including Bishu, were given the costume of labourers; they were shown drinking liquor on stage. Gnosai-in his white dhoti, scarf, and sandal paste smeared on forehead-cannot be mistaken for anyone else other than his identity of a trader- a trader of religion. Nandini’s special costume is of course defined by the text itself: in her golden paddy-coloured sari and floral ornaments embellished with red oleanders whenever she appears on the stage she is readily distinguishable from the rest. It is interesting to note that even there are distinct class differences; Mitra does not compromise with the totality of the society the play projects. In his essay “Raktakarabi” Mitra (1956) clearly discloses his opinion:

Alternatively, the stage could be arranged in a compartmentalized fashion: the iron door of the King at one corner, the slum of Fagulal at the other, the office of the Headman and the Physician at another part of the stage, some other solitary recess for

the meeting place of Bishu and Nandini. But, *Bahurupi* did not do that. It would have been a strange import of foreign style which would certainly miss the harmony of the total scene; instead it would only address the social divide and discrimination. Tagore wanted to portray an organic picture of the society, a society, despite its numerous contraries, complete in itself. (p. 117)

Mitra's stage adaptation of Tagore's *Raktakarabi* can be held as an instance of faithful representation. Mitra had a deep respect for Tagore's use of language. He, therefore, seldom altered the source text. Nevertheless, in certain places he excluded some dialogues and songs. For example, in line number 420 of the source text, Bishu sings a song: "*Tor praner rasa to' shukiye galo o're / Tobe moron rase ne peyala vore...*" (Your life force gets wilted, soak yourself in the vitality of death). Mitra has left this song outside his adaptation. Perhaps the philosophic depth of this song was difficult to posit in the immediate theatrical situation produced on the stage. Mitra, again, has incorporated some exclamatory, interrogative, affirmative, aggressive phrases and some mechanical sounds of metal chain or a whip in order to accentuate the stage effect. Towards the end he puts much emphasis on the impending war than the harvest song. These changes, however, are contingent upon the contemporary socio-political condition and Mitra's conceptualization of the text. Prior to discuss these changes we should briefly look at how Deborah Cartmell has categorised various kinds of adaptation.

Cartmell (1999) argues for three broad categories of adaptation: 1. Transposition, 2. Commentary and 3. Analogue. Transposition is the simplest kind of adaptation which is basically a transdisciplinary shift from a literary text to the performative. Commentary is a bit complex since the adapted version does 'comment' on the source text and also critically studies the contemporary society by using the values and vision contained in the source text. Analogue is the third kind of adaptation where the adaptor does acknowledge or cite the source text. The connection between the source text and the adapted version remains deeply embedded. When one watches the ending of Satyajit Ray's film *Hirok Rajar Deshe (Kingdom of Diamonds)* where the King himself pulls down his own statue with thousand and one poor countrymen, one instantly recalls the ending of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* where the King himself wrestles with his own prejudices and insularity. The ending of Ray's film, therefore, can be regarded as an instance of analogue.



Manifestly, Mitra's stage adaptation of *Red Oleanders* is an instance of faithful transposition from text to the stage. The stage production seldom goes outside the language which Tagore has used. Nevertheless some excision of certain dialogues of the original text has been done. For instance the metaphoric conversation between Adhyapak and Puranbagish about the spell that Nandini has churned out in the town of *Yaksha* has been cut short. Some songs have been omitted partly or entirely. For example, Nandini and Bishu jointly sing only the first two lines of the song "*Valobasi, Valobasi*" ("love you, love you") and leave the rest of it unsung. When Bishu and Nandini engage in conversation, Nandini asks Bishu to sing a song of waiting (*Path Chawar gaan*). At this, in the source text, Bishu sings *yugr yuge bujhi amay cheyechhilo se* ['he wished me to have decades after decades']. This song (line number 941-952 of the source text) has been entirely omitted in the stage adaptation.

Sankha Ghose observes that Mitra did not attach due emphasis on the final harvest song. According to Ghosh the two levels – revolution against materialism and the homage to the nature by the peasant folk– are not at a variance with each other. Referring to Strinburg's play "Dream" Ghosh (2002) argues:

As we find the chrysanthemum through the frame of fire, we do not find the synthesis of the war call with the harvest song [in Mitra's adaptation of *Raktakarabi*]. If this synthesis would occur, the two levels of the narrative, getting mixed with each other could create a new dimension in the performance. (p. 142)

But Mitra has shortened the length of dialogues, omitted certain songs partly or entirely, stressed on the call of impending revolution in order to create dynamicity in the performance. He intends to project pithy and pointed speeches instead of elaborate ones. Through such minor alterations he relocates Tagore's play in the 1950s social, political and cultural environment. Through costume, floor plan, stagecraft, lighting, sound and such other devices he has pointed out the hierarchical condition of the society and through dismantling the smoky cobweb he has showed the anticipation for subversion. *Bahurupi's* presentation of *Raktakarabi*, thus has underscored the fact that materialism along with industrialism reduced the commoners into numbers: but the commoners have the potential to go against this imposed objectification simply by disavowing the authority's imposition and assert their own identity. Nandini's *Pagolbhai* is therefore not just 69Ng, he has his own identity, a name by which Nandini cordially calls him in a sustained voice: he is *Bishubhai*.

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