



থেশ্পিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed Journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013

Editor

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Title: Rabindranath Tagore: The Prophet of Indian Theatre

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Yr. 1, Issue 1, 2013

Bengali New Year Edition
April-May



Rabindranath Tagore: The Prophet of Indian Theatre

C. Raveendran

At the outset, I must confess that I have read almost all the works of Rabindranath Tagore either available in English or in Tamil, my mother tongue. Above all, I have been fascinated by the new wave movement started by Ezra Pound with the Clarian call of Make it New. “One and only idea has imperceptibly taken passion of all my work up to the present appearing various guises. The idea that the finite is not limited by its boundaries, that it is possible to perceive and receive depthless depth in the smallest particle”. What Rabindranath Tagore said about his works still remains maxim for any amount of literary and artistic creation of an individual in any society. In an age of globalization and liberal capitalism, the production of literary and artistic works need space for dialogues in terms of multifaceted patterns of studies crossing the cultural boundaries in a pluralistic country like India. India is a land of multi lingual and multi cultural societies in which many sides of visionary like Rabindranath Tagore and his works are not confined with Bengali language and Bengali people.

Creative people like T. N. Kumaraswamy, T.N. Senapathi, V.R.M. Chettiar and host of other have done pioneering works by translating Tagore’s poetry novels, plays, essays directly from Bengali much earlier than the national institutions like Sahitya Akademi, Southern Languages Book Trust and National Book Trust, New Delhi started commissioning to translate Rabindranath Tagore’s works. Subramania Bharati, the national poet, has



translated essays of Rabindranath Tagore into Tamil. As a student of literature and stage light designing, I have been influenced by the theatrical productions of Rabindranath Tagore's plays in Indian languages directed by well known directors and produced by different language theatre groups in India. Works like Edward Thompson's "Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Playwright" (1926), Nihar ranjan Ray's "An Artist in Life" (1967), Krishna Kripalani's "Tagore: A Life" (1968), Sisir kumar Ghose's "Rabindranath Tagore" (1986), Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's "Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation" (2011) have shown better ways of understanding Rabindranath Tagore's Plays.

In 1888, Rabindranath Tagore came out with his first play Valmiki Pratibha and realized the power of the drama as a literary text as well as performing text. The plays written in between 1888 to 1901 were all based on the episodes from the two great Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore started his Santiniketan with a dedication to create a Centre for Art and Culture in view of providing space for experiments in the field of literature as well as performance and visual media. His inner most desire was so strong in establishing Santiniketan to get a prominent place in the cultural map of India. It is needless to say that the plays written in between 1888 – 1901 are in the form of interpreting the episodes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in a modern context. Apart from these plays, he has tried to do experiments in reducing the dialogue by way of incorporating the power of music. In short these plays marked the beginning of his endeavor in musical plays. In the beginning of 60's I have a chance to read "Visarjan" (1890) translated into English as 'Sacrifice'. It may not be wrong to say that Tagore himself



acted as Raghupathy, the priest of the Kali temple and it was the beginning of his active participation in his play production as an actor.

The second phase of Rabindranath Tagore's plays starts with Dakghar (1912) is still the most popular play, directed by eminent directors not only in India but all over the world even after its completion of one hundred years in 2012. It is well known fact that Rabindranath Tagore has opened a new vista in the field of children play not only in Bengali language but also in all Indian languages. It also marked the beginning of the Children Theatre in India. It was happy to note that the Dakghar was written and directed by Rabindranath Tagore in 1912 which coincided with the announcement of the prestigious award of Nobel Prize for the literature conferred on Rabindranath Tagore for his Gitanjali, collection of poems. Lots of hunes and cries raised in West regarding the validity of the English translation of Gitanjali with the collaboration of W.B. Yeats. It was East – West encounter. It is the paradox of our time.

In 1990s Dakghar was directed by Hanamika Kakshser and presented at Shri Ram Centre for Art and Culture as a part of the Theatre Festival in Delhi. The production is still greenish in my memory. Hanamika Kakhser was the student of National School of Drama, Delhi and after completion of her course she went to Moscow Art Theatre, Russia for specialization in Theatre Arts. Through her production she has also entered into the world of Amal created by Tagore. It is beyond my power to recollect each and every aspect of the performance. Post Office is the symbol of expansion of the Colonial Raj. Amal, bedridden by illness, enters into the world of nature through the window in his room and makes friendships with village folks who slowly realized the brunt of urbanization. The sound of hour bell tied



in the clock tower reminds ‘for whom the bell tolls’? The entire play is a journey of a bedridden boy in terms of understanding his inner-self in relation to society. In short, Dakghar is a ‘song of innocence’. It is also happy to note that all over the world, theatre activists and theatre lovers took pride in stringing Dakghar, ‘The Post Office’ in connection with the celebration of 150th Birth Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, former Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, in his “Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation” (2011) has listed out number of problems and questions cropped up not only in the Bengali text but also in English translation. Under the sub-heading ‘The Monstu Machine: Free Current’, he has taken up the play, Muktheadhara (1922) for deconstruction in providing space for ‘intellectual discourse in the future’? (pp.155 – 157). He has also listed out three central issues which are pivotal of the play to stand against the time in terms of visualizing social forces into binary opposition in retaining hegemonic structure of the power politics. The construction of the dam just like Bakhra Nangal dam, Hirakud dam which creates social ambience. On the one hand, it creates enormous disparity in terms of accumulation of wealth and peaceful living zones for its own people. On the other hand, there is a process of eliminations of the tribal community from their living places in the name of modernization through the process of globalization. In every epoch, young people like Abhijit gets himself sacrificed as a protest to support the ‘victims of a tragedy’.

It remains as prophetic text moving away from the time of its publication in 1922 and mediating as an agenda to the environmentalists and tribal activists in negotiating with centre – state for constructing dams and blocking the sources of the river water. The present day



cruelty of the reality is that the present head of the state government of Karnataka State categorically saying that he is not allowing single drop of Kavery water to save the Kuruvai paddy crops in Tamil Nadu inspite of repeated requests from Prime Minister and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu through river tribunals and Supreme Court of India. It is shame on our part that the play, Muktheadhara still remains untouched by the theatre activists all over India.

The last play of the second phase of Rabindranath Tagore's plays, Raktakarabi (1925) is still waiting for a director who is well versed with the multifaceted world of Tagore as well as the power of theatre. It is no wonder that Tagore himself translated this play into English under the title 'Red Oleander' because of its universal appeal for all time. It is better to know the fate of the play Raktakarabi through eminent Tagorean Scholar Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's own words: "In 1924 Tagore wrote a speech introducing the play; the speech was never delivered because the play could not be staged in Tagore's life time" (p.159).

The play centres around the king and his henchman, both are so cruel in extracting money and work from their subjects in terms of establishing the land Yakshapuri, the land of celestial beings with pomps and prosperity Nandini, the protagonist emerges as the victim of all types of exploitation and also represents a voice of protest. Raktakarabi is a symbolic play by its sheer presentation of the reality which evokes parallel in projecting the contemporary reality of one land. In the name of globalization and manufacturing consent of masses through media and dream industries, our day to day activities are monitored by poetic politics of India. The land we live now becomes the land of Refugees. I am proud to say that Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury of Bangladesh was my student in 2010 and he took a challenge to stage



Raktakarabi as student's production for thirty minutes. For him, Yakshapuri, the land of 'Red Oleander' symbolises Bangladesh. The entire cast and credit especially the lighting designed by Jenesh, the music by G. Gopi and Justin, the set designed by Harikrishnan were all my students and created wonders on stage by proving the maxim, the theatre is a collective art form.

As a lighting designer, I have always been fond of reading plays which are challenging to stage with all its paraphernalia of stage lightings in terms of creating modernity to the performances. Tagore's Raja is always challenging to me whenever I am reading the text again and again. To me, text is always pretext of context. I am simply baffled by the simplicity of Tagorean concept of light. That makes me to rate the play Raja, as the best creation of Rabindranath Tagore.

The play Raja has been translated into English by Tagore himself as 'The King of the Dark Chamber' (1914). When Raja was staged in Bengal, it created "evoking diverse reactions ranging from division to intense administration". The story is so simple. In the palace chamber Sudharsana, the queen is always in search of the King and she is fond of indulging in dialogues with him. In all her efforts, she could not meet him but to hear his voice only. The lady companion of the queen only knows that the King's presence is in omniscience of dark. Thematically the play Raja is a problematic text to feminist critics and feminist theatre activists providing no clue where to start their fight or discourse?

Subramania Bharathi, the national poet, puts the concept of the play Raja into a simple dictum. To him, "darkness is the minimum light".



In a concluding way, I am interested in saying that Rabindranath Tagore's plays, especially the second phase of his plays are embedded with the present day politics of the world. We are living in an age where everything is politics. Theatre is also politics in terms of micro narration of the upliftment of the 'wretched of the earth' or freedom of man.

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