

*khurram siddiqi*

*Red Oleander and Tapati: Royalty Scrutinized*

Red Oleander and Tapati are only two of Tagore's works, but several of his significant issues are represented very well in these plays. I find his works very critical of ascendancy, distaining of women's rights and human insolence towards nature to name a few. Under the motif of ascendancy, I am fascinated by, and will consider henceforth, the issue of 'untouchability' (social and religious class-relegation) of the local leaders in Red Oleander as well as Tapati.

As discussed in class previously, 'untouchability' is an interesting concept to me; one which (to the best of my personal judgment and research) is seen in differing views by Hindus themselves: "The tragedy is that millions of Hindus believe in this (untouchability) institution as if it was enjoined by the Hindu religion." <sup>1</sup>

Whatever the truthful Hindu ideology may be resolved into, it is the extremes of class-difference I wish to discuss. I find the leaders in both plays showing a reversal of roles. with slight modifications of course. In both plays, the Rajas of the concerned locales are highly inaccessible. They are behind protective layers that keep the ordinary man from reaching them, effectively portraying *them (the leaders)* in fact, as the untouchable people in society. After much reading and pondering, I believe I can now classify how Tagore has developed and portrayed royalty in the two plays:

- i. Enormity in physical size (Red Oleander) or opulence of lifestyle (Tapati)
- ii. Inapproachability (both plays)
- iii. Excessive narcissism and jealousy

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*i. Enormity in physical size (Red Oleander) or opulence of lifestyle (Tapati)*

In *Red Oleander*, the Raja is depicted as a burly brute of a man by Tagore. More so, is that this Raja only sees physical attributes as the chief representative of a person's strength. In fact, he is constantly impressed by his own might in Nandini's earlier encounters with him: "I am like the summit of a mountain. Bareness itself is my splendour" (140), and "Nandini, one day in a distant country I saw a weary mountain just like myself." (142). He likens himself more often to inanimate objects of mass than things humane.

However, despite his self-portrayal as an almost immortal, permanent part of the world he is sadly cognizant of the lack of all things soft and fine in life, and perhaps unwillingly hints his resentment towards his state in his words to Nandini: "Only beauty can hear the answer of beauty. When anti-beauty wants to snatch the answer away, the strings of the vina do not sound, they snap. No more, go, go away- otherwise trouble with arise." (144). As we can tell from this excerpt, not only is the Raja aware of his inadvertent, self-inflicted depravation, but he expects swift and clear decisions upon such matters. There is no room for discourse, simply because that is what society has come to expect of people in power.

In *Tapati*, Bikram the Raja of Jalandhar takes on a less physically imposing presence. In this case, his might is matched by his opulence and strong self-centeredness, apparently always being in the right concerning *all* matters of state, justice, love and marriage. In this case, Tagore has ingrained oversize into Bikram's ego: "I've given you a place on the highest peak of the heart- no glory in that either?" (200). These are the recurring sort of words he has for Sumitra. He thinks he is elevating his wife by providing her the luxuries of royal life, but each time Sumitra replies by shunning 'small talk' like his, as it is more belittling than uplifting: actions speak louder than words.

*ii. Inapproachability*

In *Red Oleander*, it seems that the Raja has very little time for anybody: "Go, go, don't talk any more, there is no time." (140) he tells Nandini when she visits him initially. This kind of attitude is customary of people who may be in authority in their own niche, but answer eventually to higher authorities. This was probably the case with our dear Raja in

this play. And this air of isolation is reinforced physically in this play by the mysterious but all-important screen separating the royalty from the commonality of Yakshapuri. I am fascinated as a reader by this article, and I particularly enjoy however Tagore must have imagined the screen when composing the play. He shares his vision with us in his brief introduction to the play: “It would be impossible to very clearly describe what kind of window it is. Only those who are its artisans truly understand its artifice.” “We get to know very little indeed of what happens inside” (132).

This is absolutely fantastic for me to read; such a nebulous yet true description by Tagore of what he wants us to think of the screen. It plays a very central role, as it constantly intrigues Nandini to speculate what the Raja looks like, and what ‘his world’ is like. Truly only Tagore will know what it looks like physically, but there is little need left for us to explore its appearance further. It is its pervasive effect of a mysterious, unwelcoming ambience that is important.

In Tapati however, the seclusion of Bikram from his common disciples is through the mores of excessive protocol. When Ratneshwar comes with his exigency for the second time, he encounters great resistance to an audience with Bikram from Debdatta. Debdatta is not just the Raja’s confidant; he is his sieve, filtering out all matters that are ‘not important’ for royal ears to listen to, royal eyes to look at: “Getting the Raja in court is getting; in the improper place it’s anarchy to him. Wait a bit, tomorrow I’ll go and take you along myself.” (210). Notice the inherently condescending tone in Debdatta’s voice towards Ratneshwar. I myself cannot place too much faith in his words, as they seem very delusive and a temporary fix; almost asking “what business does this commoner have in this palace?!” Ratneshwar himself has already explained his ardent need to meet with some form of authority, but is denied due to formality. Even when Sumitra comes along, Debdatta intervenes in his then-servile manner: “Now stop there. Don’t become impertinent by groaning to her.”(210). How can one expect justice, or a lucid and reliable mode of communication of vital issues as Ratneshwar’s, with such inaccessible gentry for leadership? It is also interesting to see how this sense of self-appointed importance runs hierarchically: the colonists placed themselves at the top, the Rajas below them, the ‘Debdattas’ came next, and so on.

iii. *Excessive narcissism and jealousy*

In both plays, the ruling characters are highly egocentric. Despite their self obsession however, they are extremely jealous of that which comes naturally to 'lesser people': happiness in simple things. Perhaps the reason for their lack of grip on any sort of true happiness is their lack of humility. Both are 'spoilt' in the sense that they do not take lightly to things not going 'their way': "Nandini, do you know that God has kept even you behind an illusion of beauty, apparently wonderful? I want to snatch you away from here and keep you within my fist, but I can never catch you. I want to see you from all aspects, and I cannot I want to break you into pieces." (141). This hardly makes for a romantic comment from someone in admiration or want of another, but spells out the Raja's black-and-white views on his subjects. In the end his jealousy and insecurities are enough to murder Ranjan before the audience is ever introduced to his voice itself...a sad but true manifestation the Raja's jealousy.

In *Tapati*, we face a most insensate leader in Bikram, who eventually turns criticism against him into revenge. His corruption and partisan views towards certain subjects of his also work against him, as Dentate informs the Maharani: "Maharani, the leftovers of many sinners accumulate in the royal treasury." (213). He insists that it is *his* love that is constantly left unreciprocated, and that Sumitra is cold towards all that he offers. Such vainglory is impermeable to common logic, and when confronted over his lack of concern for Ratneshwar's issues by the Maharani, he issues another rebuttal: "Your sense of judgment is turbid with forgiveness, kindness, tears- you dare to make judgments!" All are below such people in their eyes. And when things begin to unravel in his kingdom, he begins to blame Naresh: "You! You have made my administration loose. You alone have united with the Maharani in indulging the citizens; no one has dared to express so clearly as you an envy of the foreigners..." (229). Such ramblings under stress are the mark of selfish and immature men. It is also more than evident throughout the rest of the text, that it has been predominantly the leadership's wrongdoing that has led to the revolt both at home (as Sumitra has taken off) and kingdom-wide (for the citizens are revolting too.)

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In conclusion, I am only able to analyze characters this way because of the eloquent manner with which Tagore has portrayed their insecurities and superciliousness. I also addressed these issues here as I find them the biggest hurdles in the path of peoples' emancipation from tyranny and one-sided justice. It is truly inspirational to read Tagore's work, for he writes with the view of the common man, despite his extremely comfortable financial background. The ability to relate to different kinds of people in different modes of life is an admirable one, which I believe requires the 'prerequisite' of humility within oneself to have. The lack of it, is the boorish temperament of our Rajas in the plays.

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*References:*

1. Online document "Untouchability". Retrieved on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003 from <http://www.mkgandhi.org/journalist/untouchability.htm>
2. Numbered quotes are from "Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays", Ananda Lal. Oxford India Paperbacks. Noida, UP India. 2001