SITES (SIGHTS) OF VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY IN THE PLAYS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS) AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

BY

ISHAN CHAKRABORTY

SUPERVISOR

PROF. ANANDA LAL

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FACULTY OF ARTS
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
KOLKATA 700032
INDIA

2023

Certified that the thesis entitled

Sites (Sights) of Visibility and Invisibility in the Plays of Rabindranath Tagore submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of **Prof. Ananda Lal of the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata**; and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor: Ananda Lal

Dated: 10/11/2023

Candidate: Ishan Chakraborty

Dated: 10/11/2023

To

Ma

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to express in words the gratitude I feel for all those who have encouraged and helped me in this journey of more than seven years. This work would have been absolutely impossible without their love, care, motivation, assistance, support and cooperation. Hence this will only be a feeble attempt to express my endless gratitude to everyone who has made this research possible.

First of all, I acknowledge my indebtedness to my supervisor, Prof. Ananda Lal, for helping me zone in and focus on my research topic and for encouraging me to pursue my study of Rabindranath Tagore and his theatre. His guidance and constant motivation have led me to identify important axes along which to think and write about the various aspects of sight and their representation in the plays of Rabindranath. I remember Prof. Lal's deeply engaging and thought-provoking lectures on Modern Theatre, Tragedy, Postcolonial Drama, and *Rakta-karavi*, which I attended during my postgraduate days at Jadavpur University; and I assert that these lectures have had a crucial role in inspiring me to work on Tagore, and particularly his plays. Without his constant encouragement and invaluable guidance, I would not have been able to embark on this project or complete it. Over the last seven years he painstakingly took me through this journey, guiding me and correcting my approach to research, always making me reach for my best despite difficult circumstances in my life. I am extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity of learning from him and completing my thesis under his supervision. In the most challenging of circumstances, he has reviewed my writings with utmost care, without regard to his own difficulties.

Besides my supervisor, I sincerely and heartily thank my parents, Poly Chakraborty and Pranab Chakraborty, without whose precious support and motivation, completing this research would have been impossible. Their selfless love and care have made it possible for me to cope with my physical and mental health challenges, and to continue my research in the face of all odds. Here I must separately mention that my mother, my primary care-giver, is my friend, philosopher and guide. She, by her own life, has taught me love, compassion, commitment, resilience and care. At all the junctures when I wavered and lost faith in myself, succumbing to fears, despair and anxiety, she stood by me, propelling me to live a life of purpose every day. I am most blessed to have her presence in my life. She has taught me to always hold on to hope, trust and positivity.

In addition, I acknowledge my indebtedness to my maternal grandmother, Anjali Bhattacharjee (whom I endearingly call Panka), for being a source of constant comfort, strength and support. She has helped me not only by creating audiobooks of texts and research material which were not available in the accessible formats, but also by boosting my morale, faith and confidence in myself.

I am grateful to the eminent elocutionist Bratati Bandyopadhyay for her incessant support, affection, care and inspiration. Besides exposing me to a number of poems of Tagore which have enabled me to substantiate my arguments in the thesis, she, by her own life, has taught me the value of discipline and diligence. I am very blessed to have her as one of my teachers and well-wishers.

I am deeply grateful to Late Prof. Samantak Das, for he was an immense source of inspiration in my life. He always encouraged me to pursue research on

Tagore, and regularly helped me with rare books and research material from his personal collection.

I am sincerely grateful to all the faculty members, my colleagues at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, for without their cooperation and support it would have never been possible for me to complete this research. They have immensely helped me by impressing on me the importance of passionate research and by constantly inspiring me to complete my thesis. I am also indebted to the office staff of the department for always offering their support in settling various logistical and administrative matters.

I sincerely thank the librarian, the teachers, and other non-teaching staff of the Department of Bengali, Jadavpur University, for providing constant support and resources which have aided my research. I am grateful to Prof. Abhra Bose, Dr. Shreela Basu, and other academics and other volunteers associated with Tagore Research Institute, Kolkata, for helping me with rare books and insightful inputs. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the office staff at the Central Library and the Accessible Library for Persons with Disabilities, Jadavpur University, for helping me with books, audiobooks and other accessible research material.

I wish to express my sincerest thanks to Dr. Arjundeb Sensarma, who currently teaches at the Department of Indian Comparative Literature, Assam University, Silchar, for his insightful comments on Bengali poetry and for exposing me to the remarkably rich tradition(s) of Indian literary theory and criticism. I must also mention Dr. Nandini Bhowmik and Dr. Soumyajit Sen, who have helped me understand the linguistic intricacies of the Sanskrit texts that I have used in my dissertation. Without their support, my lack of proficiency in Sanskrit would have

emerged as a severe hindrance in the path of my research work. During the period of my research, I have often conversed with Dr. Sensarma, Dr. Bhowmik, and Dr. Sen, and made great demands on their time, to which they have responded promptly, willingly and patiently. I cannot thank them enough for that.

I am eternally indebted to Dipanjan Das for helping me by creating audiobooks and for being an unwavering source of tremendous energy and enthusiasm. Being a person with profound visual disability, it was always very difficult for me to do library work. Dipanjan always assisted me generously in navigating through the various inaccessible libraries.

I am also deeply thankful to Arjun Motwani and Madhubanti Talukdar for helping me in the final formatting of my thesis. I am deeply grateful to my friend Dr. Abhijit Majumder, Professor at IIT Bombay, for his sincere support and for constantly egging me to finish writing the thesis. I owe gratitude to my friends and well-wishers Pritha Banerjee, Sk Sagir Ali and Vedatrayee Banerjee for helping me with their useful suggestions and also for creating a meaningful space for exchange of ideas.

There are countless others whom I met at various lectures, conferences, symposiums and seminars, who have assisted me in so many ways through the course of the last seven years, and I am indeed thankful to all of them. Finally, I acknowledge my indebtedness to my students at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, and my well-wisher Md. Shahnawaz for without their patience, love and sincere cooperation it would not have been possible for me to concentrate on my study and research.

C O N T E N T S

Introduction

"I have loved everything that I have seen with these eyes ..."[1]

With his sensuous aesthetics, spiritual insight and political perspicacity, Rabindranath Tagore was particularly preoccupied with the experiences of seeing (and not seeing), and the various aspects of visibility and invisibility which were manifested in all the literary forms/genres he dealt with. However, since plays are inherently audio-visual in nature (unlike the primarily read texts of other literary forms) his engagements/experimentations with vision and visuality in this field demand special interest and attention. Although (given the exalted spiritual overtones that most of his works are usually received and associated with) it may be somewhat conventional and even convenient to interpret his negotiations with sight and in/visibility primarily in meta-sensory and metaphysical terms, one ought to be mindful of the fact that Tagore (also being an astute theatrician) himself on several occasions emphatically expressed the intense potency of the physicality of seeing. For instance, in an essay titled "*Dekhā*" ("Seeing", 1908) he writes:

> Every morning light removes our curtain of sleep ... It brings us a hope, the fulfilment of which, like a bud or flowerspike, is nascent within us; and it is yet to grow towards the unbound sky. Every morning it repeats to us the same message – "See, just see"! We open our eyes, we see; but this seeing is merely the bud of

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, in conversation with Rani Chanda, 9 March 1939. Quoted in Rani Chanda, *Ālāpchāri Rabindranāth* (Kolkata: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 1942), 55. Translation mine.

seeing. It is still immature and blind ... We have not yet experienced the flowering and fulfilment of seeing.

Do not think that these words of mine are a mere figurative usage of language. Do not think that I am speaking in metaphors. I am not talking about any divine contemplation or wisdom; I am simply talking about the physical experience of seeing.

What light shows us is nothing trivial. It does not show us only our beds and rooms. The gift of the eternal azure firmament that it presents before us is so wonderful and marvellous! It far exceeds our daily inconsequential needs ...

Can the value of our everyday act of waking up, the experience of our eyes being consecrated and bathed by light ever be measured in terms of wealth, fame and sensual pleasure? No, never. And therefore, I assert that the way in which light sends a message of maturation and fulfilment to the nascent, blind bud, it also brings hope to our experience of seeing – a seeing that is ultimate and transcendental, and is inherently present within us ...

Do you think that I am speaking of shutting the eyes and envisioning in meditation? I am speaking precisely of seeing with these physical eyes ... I strongly hold that these physical eyes are capable of showing scenes which have transcendental possibilities in them ...

We have not yet been able to realise the full potential of these eyes. We have not yet seen what surrounds us, what stands before us ... Our mind conceals and covers our eyes. It is crammed with inconsequential thoughts, and with these worldly

> thoughts it obfuscates our vision ... It is due to the preconceived notions and conditionings that our free and clear vision remains obscured and detached from this world.[2]

The emphatically worded, unconventional nature of these thoughts about seeing and vision serve to expose and challenge the limitations of conceiving tentative categories like the physical and the metaphysical. In addition, it attacks and even subverts the notional hierarchy structured in such binaries. Tagore believed that the unconditioned/"unadulterated"[3] experience of physical vision is pregnant with faculties of imagination and possibilities of metaphysical realisation. What is more, the ideas of physical and metaphysical visual experiences are reciprocally related and complementary to each other. Such avant-garde ideas and adventures of Tagore in the field of vision and visibility particularly in his playwriting career have not only produced watershed instances of exquisite philosophical insight, but have also heralded new phases in the field of modern Indian theatre and drama.

It has to be admitted that despite the substantial amount of scholarly attention that has been devoted to the works of Tagore, curiously, his plays have remained comparatively less explored. The early scholarly works, particularly those written in Bengali,[4] that have taken into account the entire corpus of his plays, have more often than not ended up presenting gross generalizations and simplistic overviews; and they have, at times, gone to

---

[2] Tagore, *Ravindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 7 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1987), 543-545. Translation mine.
[3] Tagore, *Ravindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 7, 545. In the original Bengali text, the word '*nirmal*' has been used.
[4] Expectedly enough, the major part of the critical works done on Tagore are in Bengali.

the extent of unnecessarily deploying Western theories[5] of drama and theatre. For instance, although the books of distinguished critics like Pramathanath Bishi[6], Upendranath Bhattacharya[7], Ashok Sen[8] and Sadhan Kumar Bhattacharya,[9] which contain play-by-play analyses of plots, themes and characters, are important as a basic set of introductory discussions, in terms of their critical approach most of them appear quite dated to a researcher in the twenty-first century. Also, they are by no means adequate in capturing the multi-layered thematic intricacies and subtleties of the mammoth corpus of Tagore's drama. Their engagements with his preoccupation with (and understandings of) sight, and (in)visibility are sparse, arbitrary and at times even founded upon fallacious notions. Although Sankha Ghosh, in his *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra Nātak*, has fleetingly dealt with the aspects of darkness and invisibility in *Rājā* and *Rakta-karavi*,[10] his observations (albeit quite provoking) are too brief and do not crystallize into any sustained argument. Saraj Bandyopadhyay's *Ālo-Āndhārer Setu: Rabindra-Chitrakalpa*,[11] which offers a close chronological understanding of Tagore's usage of imagery, does touch upon certain aspects of visuality. But his work is primarily based on Tagore's poetry, and largely evades his plays. A recent book titled (rather interestingly) *Rabindranātye Rup: Arup* by Ashok Kumar Mishra[12] begins by promising to discuss in his drama the concepts of form and

[5] A point proved by Ananda Lal in Rabindranath Tagore, *Three Plays*, translated and with an introduction by Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51.
[6] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Nātya-Prabāha* (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 1949).
[7] Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Nātya-Parikramā* (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 1954).
[8] Ashoke Sen, *Rabindra Nātya-Parikramā* (Kolkata: Mukherjee and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1958).
[9] Although the Dey's edition of the book (which is the only one that I have been able to access) first appeared in 2006, in all probability it was originally published much earlier. Sadhan Kumar Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Nātya-Sāhityer Bhumikā* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2006).

[10] Sankha Ghosh, *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra Nātak* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1969).
[11] Saroj Bandyopadhyay, *Ālo-Āndhārer Setu: Rabindra-Chitrakalpa* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1984).
[12] Ashok Kumar Mishra, *Rabindranātye Rup: Arup* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011).

formlessness, the two crucial facets of Tagore's understanding of visuality. But much like most of its precedents, it ends up being a play-by-play summary of plots and sketchy discussions of characters and a few themes. In other words, Tagore's dynamic engagements with the theme of vision and visibility in his plays have hitherto remained unexplored, and it is to address this research gap in the field of Tagore studies that I embark on the following journey.

Here it is essential to define the scope of the present dissertation. My discussion will deal specifically with thematic textual analyses of the authorised printed versions of the plays through the lens of sight and visibility. However, although the performance-related aspects of seeing and sight (which are naturally intrinsic to the medium of theatre) would be kept beyond the immediate concern of this work, I admit that in the case of an artist like Tagore, who "combined in himself the roles of author, actor and director", it is in fact "impossible to keep drama and theatre segregated from each other."[13] As a result, by way of establishing my arguments, I shall substantiate the textual citations with occasional references to Tagore's unique dramaturgical innovations and his negotiations with the idioms of stage. I also seek to clarify that given my profound level of visual disability, the visual texts like photographs or even films/videos which form a significant part of the foundation of any archival research on performances in the audio-visual media, are completely inaccessible to me, and this has been one of the reasons for keeping performance beyond the purview of my main discussion.

[13] Abhijit Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage* (London: Routledge, 2022), 4.

In the context of the performance of Tagore's plays and his theatrical negotiations with the audio-visual elements, two rigorous and robust research works done by Ananda Lal and Abhijit Sen need to be acknowledged with much appreciation. While Lal's book, besides offering the English translations of three important plays of Tagore, deals in detail with his thematics, theorization and development of a new theatre, and its reception and stage history in Calcutta and abroad, Sen conducts primary research into Tagore's playwriting and theatrical practices and engages in the interfaces between the printed text of the plays and the text produced on the stage. These works appeared at a distance of over thirty years from each other, Sen's book arriving at such a late stage of my research (2022) that unfortunately I was not able to use it adequately in the present dissertation.

To return to the methodology of thematic textual analysis, my work, which consists of four chapters, focuses on four distinct yet interlinked aspects of 'seeing', which are disguise/transformation, sight (and its lack), invisible/unseen characters, and light (and its absence). The first chapter, focusing on the evolution of Tagore's dealings with disguise and physical transformation, would seek to understand the extent to which he could further the potentiality of this conventional or even cliched dramatic tool.[14] Starting with plays where the treatment of this form of visual concealment has been comparatively traditional, the discussion, following a chronological track, moves to the plays where it has been used with particularly innovative freshness. Here we naturally have occasions to comment on aspects of metatheatricality, for theatre is inherently associated with disguise (of actors). From the discussion of concealment (from sight), I proceed in the second chapter into Tagore's exploration of sightlessness/ blindness, the onstage representation of which is

[14] Playwrights like Shakespeare and Moliere have used the tool of disguise quite often.

again a tried and conventional visual dramatic tool.[15] Although the chapter centres primarily around the physically blind characters he created, the concept of sight/lessness is also explored from metaphorical, spiritual and even moral angles. In addition, the discussion attempts to locate Tagore's understanding of the experience of sightlessness in the broader socio-cultural context of viewing disability in general. The third chapter directly addresses the issue of invisibility and analyses Tagore's avant-garde experimentations with invisible characters (Rajas to be precise), all of whom, interestingly enough, appear in plays composed in the twentieth century. This also gives us scope to probe deeply into Tagore's new ideas and idioms of theatre and dramaturgy that he conceived, theorised and practised in the "alternative space"[16] of his ashram-school and also the profound realisation of spirituality and God which he expressed in most of his dramatic and poetic compositions of the first two decades of the century. Here it is interesting to mark that while instances of 'characters absent-present' (characters who are never to be seen or heard in the play, but are repeatedly referred to by other onstage characters, and who have significant influence on the onstage action) can be found in ancient Greek plays like Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (Laius) or Euripides' *Medea* (Jason's new bride), important 'unseen characters' (who are never to be seen onstage although their offstage voice can be heard) find precedents in classical Sanskrit plays. A convention called '*ākāse*' ('in the air') is used in Sanskrit drama where characters offstage (who remain as such throughout the play) speak or sing. In Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, a classic that Tagore particularly adored, we have three such major

[15] Tagore's usage of blind characters on stage finds eminent precedents in Sophocles' Oedipus and Tiresias, Shakespeare's Gloucester, Milton's Samson, among others
[16] Sen, 87.

occurrences: Durvasa cursing Shakuntala in the fourth act, the forest trees and cuckoo blessing her when she leaves them, and Rani Hamsapadika singing a full song in the fifth Act.[17] These may have acted as subconscious influences on Tagore when he conceived the idea of the offstage voice of the eponymous protagonist in his *Raja*. As a natural continuation of this discussion on in/visibility, I step in the fourth chapter into the 'play' of light which is a prerequisite for sight; and obviously, discussion of light automatically entails a thorough consideration of its lack, or darkness. Here we delve into some of the most crucial moments in Tagore's career as a dramatist and theatrician, which give us opportunities to reflect on the various ways in which his negotiations with the imagery and concept of light and darkness pushed the limits of the pre-existing notions about the audio-visual medium to the extent of outright iconoclasm. In other words, my aim would be to trace the evolution of Tagore's iridescent journey on the form of drama through the prism of sight and visibility. Although my research takes into account the entire body of Tagore's plays spanning a period of about sixty years, only those plays which have significant and distinct contributions in the trajectory of Tagore's negotiations with vision and (in)visibility come within the purview of my detailed discussion.

Finally, since my dissertation deals mainly with texts, primary and secondary, originally written in Bengali, it involves a significant amount of translation. All English translations of the passages in the Bengali texts used in this dissertation are done by me, unless otherwise indicated. While translating, my sole aim has been to be as faithful as possible to the original language and its cultural and figurative nuances, and I do not lay

[17] Kalidasa, *Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, in *Theater of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 85-176.

any claim to literary value. Despite the enormous scale of scholarly attention that Tagore has garnered over years, most of the texts cited by me have not been translated into English, and the ones which are available, including those done by Tagore himself, are either inaccurate or insufficient to suit my purpose. However, it needs to be separately acknowledged that for *Karna-Kunti Samvād* I have used Ketaki Kushari Dyson's translation, and for *Arup-ratan*, *Rakta-karavi*, and *Tapati*, I have resorted to Ananda Lal, for these translations are not only faithful to the linguistic intricacies of the Bengali texts, but are also largely successful in capturing their aesthetic essence.

Chapter One

Disguise: "One Who Goes Around in Various Forms and Guises"[1]

Disguise, in the sense of concealing one's own identity and assuming another, or appearing something on the outside to 'mask' what is beneath, is an inherently intrinsic aspect of theatre. This age-old conventional engagement of drama with the ploy of disguise at the levels of both content and form has been frequently commented on in the field of academics. However, Rabindranath's treatment of this dramatic tool, particularly in the context of the visual culture of his plays, has hitherto not received sufficient scholarly attention. This chapter will deal with Tagore's usage of disguise and visual transformation in the plays; and here our main aim would be to seek to understand how and to what extent he negotiates with this overused visual convention and practice to explore its untried potential and discover novel possibilities. The chapter is arranged in four sections, each focusing on one or more plays, with the basic principle of tracing a chronological evolution of the visual politics of this exploration.

Section 1.1

I begin with a discussion on *Chitrāngadā*. Tagore's *Chitrāngadā*, the verse drama, was written between June 1890 and September 1891. He had started composing it under the title '*Ananga āshram*', but later changed it to *Chitrāngadā*. As a literary work it was highly controversial during his own time, and drew mixed opinions from its contemporary commentators and critics. The playwright paid little heed to the negative

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitabitān* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 2002), 173. Translation mine.

remarks which were founded on the dreary and parochial ideas of morality, decency and sexuality; and more than forty years after the composition of the poetic play, in early 1936, he recast it into the form of a dance drama.[2] Although the basic "idea," the narrative outline and even the 'message' of the two texts are all the same, in the present section I shall refer to both the texts as and when needed to build and support my arguments.

Here I focus mainly on the issue of the "physical/visual transformation" of Chitrangada and the idea of 'love' and 'truth' and its associations with the visual constructs of 'unattractiveness' and 'beauty' as explored by Rabindranath in his works. In terms of its explicit presentation of "an idea",[3] *Chitrāngadā* in many ways anticipates Tagore's twentieth-century allegorical plays, wherein ideas and their elaborations through ocular metaphors are predominant. However, before coming to the idea of *Chitrāngadā* and its ocular dimensions and implications, I wish to consider the narrative of the play and its engagement with the visual politics. As pointed out in the preface to *Chitra* (1913),[4] the English translation done by Tagore himself, the narrative of the play is loosely based on the Chitrangada-Arjuna episode found in Section 217 of the Adi Parva of the *Mahābhārata*.

---

[2] Abhijit Sen points out, "The verse-play *Chitrangada*, despite being a major achievement – both in its depiction of an empowered female protagonist and its use of the erotic to an extent hardly again attempted by him in drama – was never produced by Rabindranath. It was performed under his supervision only after he transformed it into the dance drama Chitrangada (as late as in 1936) – where much of the erotic was subsumed in the melody of the songs if not totally abandoned, and the protagonist also lost some of her original verve." Abhijit Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage* (London: Routledge, 2022), 39.

[3] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), 327.

[4] In a letter to William Rothenstein, dated 7 November 1913, Tagore explains the reasons behind changing the name of *Chitrāngadā* into *Chitra*: "The name of the heroine in *Mahābhārata* is Chitrangada but as you have no soft dental d in your alphabet and as your readers are sure to put accent in the wrong place making it sound very unmusical I have ventured to cut it short, retaining the first portion of it which I am sure was the only portion used by her parents if she ever did have any name and parents to boot." Mary M Lago, ed., *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1972), 129.

Once, Arjuna had entered a room in which Yudhisthira and Draupadi were engaged in amorous talk. Arjuna, as per a previous agreement, was consequently compelled to go on a pilgrimage for twelve years and observe celibacy during this period. However, it is during this sojourn that he married Ulupi. After which, he proceeded again on his pilgrimage and reached Manipur. This kingdom was then ruled by King Chitravahana (Chitrabhanu in Kashiram Das's *Mahābhārat*)[5]. Since the episode of Arjuna and Chitrangada as it appears in Vyasa's *Mahābhārata* is brief, for the sake of convenience, I cite the entire section here at length.

> ... Beholding all the sacred waters and other holy places in that province, the strong armed son of Pandu at last went, O king, to the virtuous Chitravahana, the ruler of Manipura. The king of Manipura had a daughter of great beauty named Chitrangada. And it so happened that Arjuna beheld her in her father's palace roving at pleasure. Beholding the handsome daughter of Chitravahana, Arjuna desired to possess her. Going unto the king (her father), he represented unto him what he sought. He said, "Give away unto me thy daughter, O king! I am an illustrious Kshatriya's son." Hearing this, the king asked him "Whose son art thou?" Arjuna replied, "I am Dhananjaya, the son of Pandu and Kunti." The king, hearing this, spoke unto him these words in sweet accents, "There was in our race a king of the name of Prabhanjana, who was childless. To obtain a child, he underwent severe ascetic penances. By his severe asceticism, O Partha, he gratified the god of gods, Mahadeva, the husband of Uma, that supreme Lord holding (the mighty bow called) Pinaka. The illustrious Lord granted him the boon that each successive descendant of his race should have

[5] Kashiram Das, *Mahābhārata* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1983), 235.

> one child only.[6] In consequence of that boon only one child is born unto every successive descendant of this race. All my ancestors (one after another) had each a male child. I, however, have only a daughter to perpetuate my race. But, o bull amongst men, I ever look upon this daughter of mine as my son. O bull of Bharata's race, I have duly made her a Putrika. Therefore, one amongst the sons that may be begotten upon her by thee, O Bharata, shall be the perpetuator of my race. That son is the dower for which I may give away my daughter. O son of Pandu, if then choosest, thou canst take her upon this understanding." Hearing these words of the king, Arjuna accepted them all, saying, "So be it." Taking Chitravahana's daughter (as his wife), the son of Kunti resided in that city for three years. When Chitrangada at last gave birth to a son, Arjuna embraced that handsome princess affectionately. And taking leave of the king (her father), he set out on his wanderings again.[7]

Here it would be useful to take a cursory glance at the narrative outline of Tagore's play to have a better understanding of the extent to which Tagore reworked his source in order to suit his "idea":

Chitrangada, the daughter of the king of Manipur, was brought up as a prince as her father had no male heir. One day, while she (in man's attire) was hunting for game in the forests by the bank of river Purna, she accidentally met Arjun who was then in exile observing a vow of celibacy. Instantly she fell in love with him. But, the next day, when she, abandoning her male attire and putting on the conventional dress of a princess, tried to approach him (with much hesitation) and plead her case, Arjun

---

[6] In Kashiram Das's *Mahābhārata* and Kaliprasanna Sinha's translation, Shiva granted Prabhanjana the boon that he and his successive descendants should have one *son* each.
[7] Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, "Adi Parva," *Mahābhārata*, trans. K M Ganguli (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008), 421.

promptly declined her proposal on the ground of his vow. Chitrangada, succumbing to the "fire of her unfulfilled desires", was unable to wait patiently to untie "the knots of her beloved's heart" through the glory of her love. Instead, she prayed to the two gods, Madana and Vasanta[8], to give her a day of "unprecedented" beauty so that she could win over Arjun. Pleased with her, the god(s) transformed her from an "ugly"[9], "masculine" Chitrangada into one with "the marvelling beauty of vernal vibrance"[10] not just for one day, but an entire year. Subsequently, Chitrangada in her new form succeeded in mesmerizing Arjun with her physical beauty and feminine charms, and winning him over. However, Chitrangada in her heart felt that Arjun was not in love with her true self, but he had offered his love to "an illusion"[11] or even a "delusion"[12]. After much time had lapsed, Arjun grew restless and tired of the continuous enjoyment of sensual pleasure, and longed to go out hunting once again. Incidentally, around the same time he heard tales of the brave and valiant warrior-princess, Chitrangada, and began to wonder what she might be like. Meanwhile, Chitrangada too was tired of the burden of the "illusion," her physical beauty. Finally, the play ends with Chitrangada coming out of her delusive "disguise"[13] and assertively revealing her true self to Arjun.

Thus, it is conspicuous that there is only a faint similarity between the episode of Chitrangada in the *Mahābhārata* and the narrative of the play. As phrased by Kalyani Shankar Ghatak, "The seed of the narrative is from the *Mahābhārata*, but its branches, leaves, flowers and fruits are the creation of Rabindranath."[14] The element of physical transformation, the binary of ugliness and beauty, and the transience of the illusive

[8] In the text of the dance drama, only Madana appears.
[9] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 334. Translations mine.
[10] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 334.
[11] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 339. Translation mine.
[12] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 725. Translation mine.
[13] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 338. Translation mine.
[14] Kalyanishankar Ghatak, *Rabindranāth o Sanskrit Sāhitya*, (Bardhaman: Bardhaman Viswavidyalaya, 1980), 134. Translation mine.

disguise of sensual attractiveness, all of which are overtly visual in their manifestations, and which form the crux of the main "idea" of the play, are entirely the playwright's own creation. In the texts of the play we find an unattractive and masculine Chitrangada being transformed into a "beautiful" one. However, in the *Mahābhārata*, Chitrangada is always described as a "handsome" princess, one of "great beauty", and there is not any mention of her "masculinity." Interestingly, in Tagore the phrase "ugly and unattractive" is used only by the transformed Chitrangada to refer to her previous avatar. In the text of the verse drama, Chitrangada, by way of responding to the restless Arjun's curiosity to know the identity of the masculine princess, says: "She is unattractive and ugly. She doesn't have such curved eyebrows nor such deep black eyes. Her hard and strong arms have learnt to hit targets. But they do not know how to bind the body of the valiant one with such tender serpentine cords."[15] Almost the same words have been echoed in the text of the dance drama as well:

> *Chhi chhi*! She is unattractive and ugly. She doesn't have such curved eyebrows, or such bright, black eyes. Her hardened arms can pierce targets, but her sidelong glances are unable to win over the heart of the valiant one. She has no shame, no fear, nor any trace of merciless charming humour. She doesn't have music in her silent gestures and demeanour or sweet rhythm in her hints.[16]

While in Tagore, Chitrangada was trained in archery, warfare, politics, or activities which were conventionally associated with male warriors and kings in particular, this overt visual performance of a non-normative gender role does not find any parallel in the source. In the *Mahābhārata* the only utterance of Chitravahana which obliquely suggests Chitrangada's somewhat unconventional upbringing is, "I ever look

[15] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 350. Translation mine.
[16] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 728. Translation mine.

upon this daughter of mine as my son ... O bull of Bharata's race, I have duly made her a Putrika." Kaliprasanna Sinha explains that "*putrikā*" refers to a daughter who has been duly received like an adopted son. "If this is done, then the son begotten upon her would perpetuate her father's family line."[17]

This brings us to perhaps the most poignant difference between the visual politics of Tagore's play and that of its source(s). While in the *Mahābhārata* it is Arjuna who, beholding the "Handsome" princess, "desired to possess her", in Tagore it is Chitrangada who, having seen the valiant Arjun, was struck by a hitherto "unknown light" of desire and love. In the verse drama Chitrangada herself relates in details the first moment of her encounter with Arjun to the gods:

> Suddenly I saw a man clothed in unclean and tattered rags, lying on the ground, across my path. I, quite loftily and roughly, asked him to get up and move aside. But he paid no heed to my command. Then, angrily and impatiently, I pricked him with the sharp end of my bow. Instantly he with his straight, agile and tall body leapt up before me like a sudden tongue of flame from a heap of ashes. He took a glance at me, and at once his anger disappeared. Instead, a gentle smile of amusement flickered round the corners of his mouth, perhaps at the sight of my boyish countenance and form. I had always practised masculine arts, worn male attires and kept company with men. But then, seeing that unwavering image of assertion, for the first time in my life I realised that I was a woman and that a man was before me.[18]

[17] Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, *Mahābhārata*, Vol. 1, trans. Kaliprasanna Sinha, (Kolkata: Sahitya Tirtha, 1989), 265. Translation mine.
[18] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 330-331. Translation mine.

In the dance drama this has been rendered more lyrical and effective. There, a companion of Chitrangada, witnessing her overwhelmed and bewildered condition, says: "Friend, what *sight have you seen*? Has the strike of a momentary glance blown away all your past identities? At the touch of the sunray has the bud's cover disappeared and the *mādhavi* recognised herself for the very first time?"[19] This reversal of the conventional "male gaze" and change in perspective in the play is befitting the proto-feminist temperament of the late nineteenth century, and makes Chitrangada, who had only a peripheral and voiceless existence in the epic, a character with agency and self-assertion.

Finally, we come to the discussion on the "idea" of which, as would become evident from the subsequent arguments, Tagore's *Chitrāngadā* is a vehicle. In fact, the playwright himself in quite unequivocal terms states in a preface to the verse drama (added in 1940): "It is then that I wished to express this idea in the form of drama. At the same time the story of Chitrangada from the *Mahābhārata* came to my mind. For long this story, with some variations, was concealed in my mind."[20] Clearly, the "expression of the idea" was the motive behind the deployment of the form of drama and the reworking of the *Chitrāngadā* story. Thus, in order to understand the play's engagement with the politics of "seeing" and visuals in general, we ought to consider carefully the "idea", which the playwright emphatically explains on multiple occasions. In the foreword to the dance drama, Tagore articulates the "idea" in the following words:

> The first indistinct presence of dawn is covered by the scarlet hue of the morning sun. Its initial touch excites the half-asleep eyes. Finally, it casts off its scarlet

[19] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 717. Translation mine.
[20] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 327. Translation mine.

> veil and reveals its immaculate brightness to the awakened world. Similarly, the initial efforts in realising the Truth lie in its external adornments of multiple hues. Its attractiveness overwhelms the unrefined mind. Once the external veil is removed, the Truth reveals itself to the enlightened mind. This idea is at the core of the play *Chitrāngadā*.[21]

In the opening song this is further elaborated:

> The infatuating maya has come; it has come in the sylvan arbour of youth. It has come in secret steps to hunt the heart. It has come in the darkness veiled by golden hues.
>
> By playing its flute it has laid its magical noose in the air, in the shades. It tests the courage of the brave, and staves the sage's vows and meditation. It lays the net of disaster on all four sides.
>
> Come unadorned, O beautiful one! Come, O modest truth! Smash the fortress of delusive dreams and bring freedom. Shredding the shackles of deception, come to retrieve manhood.[22]

This movement/journey from the allurements of "illusion" or even "delusion" (which appeals only to the physical senses) to the realisation of Truth and Beauty (the perception of which is metaphysical in nature) is an idea repeated and explored through various metaphors in many of his plays, some of which will be discussed at length in the subsequent chapters as well. Tagore was deeply influenced by the spiritual thoughts of the Upanishads, and a consideration of the following extracts from the *Ishopānishad* would make the primary inspiration for "the idea" evident:

---

[21] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 713. Translation mine.
[22] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 715. Translation mine.

> The face of Truth is covered by golden glitters. O sungod, the care-taker of the universe, please remove the cover, so that I can realise the Truth. (Mantra 15)
>
> O care-taker of the universe, the only seer, the controlling power, son of Prajāpati, the sungod—withdraw your magnificent rays, your splendour, so that I can witness your beauty with your help. (Mantra 16) [23]

In the 1940 preface to the verse drama the idea is explained in a somewhat different tone: "If a beautiful young woman realises that she has enchanted her lover's heart by the illusion of her youth, then she can consider her own beauty as her rival who lays claim to a major part of her fortune. It is a superficial thing; it is like a boon received from Vasanta, the king of seasons, for the accomplishment of biological purposes by means of creating transient illusions. If she has the brilliance of character and uprightness within her, then the gift of that disillusioned self is her lover's greatest profit—the aid in the successful journey of the couple. The permanent identity of the eternal self lies in this gift. At its culmination, there is no tiredness, no weariness; its brilliance is not shrouded by the dirt of habits. This uprightness of character is the eternal asset of life. It is not dependent on the immediate needs of relentless nature. In other words, it is of human value; and it is not biological."[24]

The overt spiritual connotation of the idea, as was expressed in the foreword of the dance drama, is to some extent replaced, in the afore-cited preface, by Tagore's thoughts about "ideal" conjugal bonding. In other words, the thrust of the idea is shifted from Upanishadic spiritualism to aspects of human love. Of course, in the Tagorean worldview ideas relating to spiritualism and devotion cannot be particularly extricated

---

[23] Swami Gambhirananda, *Upanishad Granthavali*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1987), 13. Translation mine.
[24] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 327. Translation mine.

from those of love. We can remember the oft-quoted phrase from his '*Vaishnava Kavitā'* anthologised in *Sonār Tari*: "God is made lover and lover god."[25]

Our discussion of transformation in *Chitrāngadā* would remain grossly incomplete if we do not consider Tagore's conception of beauty. In his essay *Saundaryabodh* he writes:

> When the feeling of beauty is dependent solely on the perception of senses, our understanding of the "beautiful" becomes overtly vivid; the moment we see it, it immediately captures our sight. Here the distinction and conflict between the conceptions of "ugly" and "beautiful" are well defined and conspicuous. But when the feeling of beauty also seeks the help of intellect, the distinction between ugly and beautiful becomes largely insignificant. Then, what attracts our mind might not immediately appeal to our eyes and senses. When we are pleased by the intricate pattern of symmetry that binds the beginning with the end, the significant with the insignificant and the fragments with the whole, we refuse to accept the servitude of the misleading form of beauty that deludes our vision. Finally, when the sense of goodness and welfare joins the intellect, the priority of our mental faculties becomes even more prominent; the conflict between beauty and ugliness gets more faded. There the sanctitude of welfare appears as beautiful, and not alluring. When the light of perseverance, courage, mercy and love shines brightly, we do not feel any need of the display of colourful ostentation ... If the friction between what pleases our senses and what does not, what is good for our life and what is not ultimately succeeds in lighting up the feeling of beauty in its true and full glory, all senses of finesse and restless

[25] Rabindranath Tagore, *Ravindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 2014), 34. Translation mine.

> perturbation get abated ... Then all conflicts are allayed and everything becomes beautiful; and truth and beauty become synonymous.[26]

This clearly explains Chitrangada's own perception of her ugliness, her transformation into one with alluring physical form and her final emergence as a graceful character who has successfully torn all "webs of falsehood"[27]. Also explained, the transformation of Arjun from one who sought sensual appeasement in the delusive charms of Chitrangada's "pilfered wealth of physical beauty"[28] to one who, having perceived and realised the true graceful beauty of Chitrangada's love and her character, considers himself to be "blessed". The last song in the dance drama invokes "the beauteous and graceful light"[29] of Truth and Beauty which would illuminate love and transcend the parochial binary of ugliness and physical attractiveness.

Thus, in this section, by analysing *Chitrāngadā* through the lens of visual politics in general and her transformations in particular, I have attempted to probe into Tagore's approach towards an unheard, voiceless character from one of the most ancient texts of India, and his unusual treatment of the conventional notions about love, femininity, desire, beauty and un/attractiveness. We have also noted that the philosophical and idealistic tone is more overt in the text of the dance drama as compared to that of the verse drama. The preface to the verse drama where Tagore explains his "idea" was also written in 1940, thereby revealing a rigorous attempt on his part to project an idea (on a text that was composed at a considerably young age) which must have taken its concrete philosophical shape only in the latter part of his intellectual life. The unconventional treatment of optics that we see in *Chitrāngadā* (the

---

[26] Tagore, *Ravindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 4 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1987), 637-38. Translation mine.
[27] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 730. Translation mine.
[28] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 730. Translation mine.
[29] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 732. Translation mine.

verse drama) will be furthered by Tagore in his later plays where visuality would transcend the limits of imagery and attain symbolic profoundness.

Section 1.2

Next I discuss Tagore's usage of the conventional theatrical tool of disguise in his comedies and farces where the playwright's treatment of the plot has been somewhat less innovative than the other plays dealt with in this chapter. Although our primary attention in this section will be occupied by his much celebrated twentieth-century five-act play *Chirakumār Sabhā*, I would like to begin with a few brief comments on his first full-length comedy *Gorāy Galad* (1892) or 'Error at the Start', which was revised thirty-five years later for the commercial stage as *Shesh Rakshā* (1927).

Generally speaking, disguise is not only a conventional plot element in comedies; rather, it is an overused tactic, strategically deployed by writers to create plot complications, produce dramatic irony and tension, and even serve to bring about convenient denouements. In *Gorāy Galad* there is a brief and even insignificant episode (Act I Scene IV)[30] where we see Indumati, one of the female protagonists, by way of instructing Khantamani how to be a wily wife and to woo her husband Chandrakanta Babu, attempting to dress up like him. She picks up his *chāpkān* and *shāmlā*[31] and wears them, thereby creating a moment of humour. Although in the twenty-first century this rather ludicrous act might not appear to be the best instance of refined humour, in the late nineteenth century, this must have had its share of 'tasteful' comic effects. For instance, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay holds that "*Gorāy Galad* was composed with

[30] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 378-79.
[31] A kind of head-dress worn on formal occasions.

the aim of producing tasteful humour ... It was created keeping in mind the refined taste and sensibility of a certain class of audience."[32] Here it is to be clarified that although Indumati's attempt to dress up like Chandra Babu can neither be considered to be an instance of disguise per se, nor to play any significant part in the visual politics of the play, I have nevertheless touched upon it for it is this attempt of hers which would later on, in *Chirakumār Sabhā*, develop into the concrete shape of Shailabala's disguise. In fact, Pramathanath Bishi goes to the extent of stating that "Indumati evolves into the character of Shailabala in *Chirakumār Sabhā*."[33] I shall come to a detailed analysis of Shailabala's disguise in the subsequent part of the section, but before that another episode of *Gorāy Galad* needs some attention; this is a part of the Vinod-Kamalmukhi subplot of the play. Vinod as a character is full of quirky, unrealistic ideas about romance in general and marriage in particular. He, immediately after listening to Kamalmukhi's song, decides to marry her, without even having seen or known her.

> Vinod Behari: Chandra, weren't we just now wondering what could we do today? Here I have an idea!
>
> Chandrakanta: What is it?
>
> Vinod Behari: Come, let us go at once, and get my marriage fixed with that woman who is singing.
>
> Chandrakanta: What are you saying!

[32] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani o Rabindra Sāhitya Prabeshak,* Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1960), 319. Translation mine.
[33] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Nātya Prabaha*, (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 2014), 293. Translation mine.

> Vinod Behari: We ought to do something. This life of idleness is quite boring, and irritating too. Let us go and get my marriage arranged. Such melodies are enough to make men perform all sorts of fearful feats.
>
> Chandrakanta: But you need to see her, know her ...
>
> Vinod Behari: No, I do not want to see her. Let's say that I am marrying that melodious song; and, you see, songs are not perceptible to the eyes.
>
> Chandrakanta: Binu, this plan of yours appears to me a little too much. If you want to marry only melodies and songs, then please get an organ for yourself. Human beings are not simple creatures. They can sing, but also quarrel. The same voice is capable of producing two very different kinds of sound. If you want to get the song, you will have to also take the responsibility of the entire woman; and in that case it is perhaps more advisable to see and know her a little.
>
> Vinod Behari: No, *bhāi*[34], a gem has been discovered; and now it is time to jump into the sea without paying heed to anything or anyone.[35]

Obviously, such exceedingly fantastical ideas about love, marriage and life are bound to crash; and Vinod is made to face the harsh blow of reality soon after his marriage. In Act III Scene II[36] we find Vinod in the middle of a rather confused state of affairs. From his lengthy and verbose dialogue with Chandrakanta and Nimai, we get to know that Vinod's fanciful effusions of romance have been thoroughly marred by his present financial condition which is far from comfortable. In addition, we learn that in order to evade the situation he has (quiet conveniently) made his newly-married wife, Kamalmukhi, return to the house of her foster father, Nibaran Babu. In the very next

[34] Literally means younger brother, but can also be used to address someone close and dear.
[35] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*,. Vol. 1, 369-70. Translation mine.
[36] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 393-95. Translation mine.

scene the playwright, by way of making hasty preparations for a conventional (and somewhat weak) denouement of this complication, all of a sudden makes Kamalmukhi come to know from Nibaran that she is actually an heiress to a huge fortune left behind by her father. She confides a plan to Indumati, and decides to take up the 'disguise' of a wealthy woman to rescue her husband and win him back. In Act IV Scene I we find Vinod is appointed the attorney of Rani Basantakumari (Kamalmukhi in disguise) who appears before him, concealing her face with a veil. Expectedly enough, for the sake of the plot, Vinod is conveniently duped, which transpires as the most unconvincing moment of the entire play. The readers and spectators are left wondering how could he not recognise and be sure of his own wife's voice, especially keeping in mind the fact that he took the rash decision of marrying Kamalmukhi after hearing her sing. Perhaps the playwright was also aware of the extent of incredulity that this act is capable of producing. Vinod is made to say, "The voice resembles hers. It seems that all women have a similar voice. However, this is sweeter than hers'',[37] thereby converting the character into a weak, unconvincing plot element. The Rani's final revelation (Act V Scene III) where Kamalmukhi 'unveils' herself before her husband also fails to produce any significant theatrical and/or dramatic effect; rather, this moment makes the play decline to the level of an ordinary farce:

> Vinod: And then, despite my earnest requests, why is she not showing herself?
>
> Kamalmukhi: If she gets to know that you want to see her so earnestly, she won't be able to remain concealed for a moment longer. Alright, since you are so eager to see that damned countenance, here it is—
>
> (She unveils her face)

[37] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 399. Translation mine.

Vinod Behari: Madam, I mean you! Kamal, have you forgiven me?[38]

Thus, evidently Tagore's treatment of the visual tool of disguise/concealment in his first full-length comedy is quite simplistic, immature and weak, and is even lacking in depth. However, it cannot be altogether discarded as insignificant, for it contains the seeds of certain ideas and motifs that the playwright would explore with deft dexterity in many of his subsequent plays.

I come now to *Chirakumār Sabhā*, where our focus will be on the ploy of transvestism. As mentioned earlier, we shall see a woman taking up the disguise of a man with the primary intent of duping and manipulating a group of young educated bachelors. Immediately we are reminded of Shakespearean romantic comedies like *The Merchant of Venice* (Portia's disguise)[39], *Twelfth Night* (Viola's disguise) and *As You Like It* (Rosalind's disguise), texts that Tagore was thoroughly acquainted with. However, we shall try to understand Tagore's intention behind his creation of Shailabala and her disguise in the play. We shall endeavour to ascertain whether he merely participates in an age-old trend and remains confined within the limits of the clichéd conventions, or attempts to put forward a new statement about the genre he was dealing with and the social reality portrayed in the text.

Chirakumār Sabhā, unlike *Gorāy Galad*, is not really a comedy of errors propelled by the force of the conventional tools of comic plot complications, but a comedy of intrigues driven by the sheer adroitness of its witty repartees and nimble and subtle humour. It was first cast in the form of a novella and serialised in the journal

[38] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha.* Vol. 1, 410-11. Translation mine.

[39] Satyendranath Ghoshal in his *Rabindranāther Nātyapratibhā* notes, "Rabindranath had probably got this idea of presenting a woman in a play in the disguise of a man from Portia's disguise in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice." [Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan*, Vol. 11, 48]. This observation is rather unfounded, incomplete and misleadingly limiting. Tagore had read many other plays of Shakespeare and other dramatists before him who had used the same tactic quite astutely, *The Merchant of Venice* being just one of them.

Bhārati (then edited by Sarala Devi) in thirteen instalments between April 1900 and May 1901. The same text appeared in 1904 as a component in *Rangachitra* (literally 'Mirthful Sketches'), and was, interestingly enough, classified under the section 'Story'. It was published as an independent book in 1908 under the title *Prajāpatir Nirbandha*, literally 'The Fiat of the God of Procreation'. This novella, written in a form quite akin to that of drama, was given the shape of a full-length five-act play in April-May 1925 for the purpose of staging in the commercial theatre, and was first published as such in April 1926.

Before entering directly into the intricate discourse on the play's engagement with the tool of disguise, let us for the sake of convenience take a quick glance at the basic plot. This enables us to place the character of Shailabala and her disguise in context.

Set in Calcutta of the late nineteenth century, the narrative of *Chirakumār Sabhā*, bearing certain basic similarities with the plot of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*,[40] revolves around a group of young, hardened bachelors, Shrish, Bipin and Purna, who following the example of their leader Chandramadhav Babu, an elderly person obsessed with scholarly pursuits, have vowed to remain celibate and dedicate themselves to social causes. They do not, however, have any concrete plans; and in the name of serving their country, they (somewhat like the men in the first scene of *Gorāy Galad*) merely while away their time bandying lofty rhetoric and discussing unrealistic, farcical theories of eradicating poverty from India by manufacturing matchboxes. In the meantime, we find Akshay Mukhopadhyay, an erstwhile member of the association who was ousted from it for breaking the vow of celibacy, at the instance of his wife,

[40] Subodh Chandra Sengupta, in his *Rabindranāth*, has quite aptly drawn our attention to this similarity. [Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan*, Vol. 11, 36.]

Purabala, and his rather conservative mother-in-law, Jagattarini, is planning to make matrimonial alliances between his unmarried, accomplished sisters-in-law, Nripabala and Nirabala, and Shrish and Bipin respectively. Helped by his jocose, elderly, bachelor granduncle-in-law, Rasik Chakravarti, and his young widowed sister-in-law Shailabala (who, in the guise of a young bachelor, Abalakanta, joins the men's association), he achieves his goal after a series of funny incidents, including that of driving away two unwanted, ineligible suitors. In addition, Purna Babu, the most confused bachelor of the play who constantly vacillates between extreme opinions about marriage, falls in love with Nirmala, the niece of Chandramadhav, thereby giving the play an ending that befits a typical romantic comedy, where multiple marriages are promised.

Let us begin by ascertaining the role and significance of disguise in the plot. Subodh Chandra Sengupta complains, "Shailabala has no role in the play. The reasons behind her casting off her usual clothes of a widow and taking up the disguise of Abalakanta remain incomprehensible."[41] Ashutosh Bhattacharya goes to the extent of stating that "Shaila is one of the redundant characters in the play. Her work has been accomplished mainly by Rasik. There was no point in making her repeat the actions already performed by him."[42] If seen exclusively from the point of view of plot construction, these observations cannot be altogether discounted. Right from the beginning of the play, a significant level of expectation, curiosity and even suspense in the mind of the readers is built around Shaila and her plans of disguise. For instance, Shaila herself (Act I Scene I) quite boastfully tells Akshay, "I, in the guise of a man, shall become a member of their association. Then let me see how long their association

[41] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan*, Vol. 11, 36.
[42] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bānglā Nātyasāhityer Itihās*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: A Mukherjee and Co. Pvt. Ltd, 1960), 137. Translation mine.

sustains."[43] Again, Rasik Dada, by way of encouraging her, says (albeit jocularly), "Lord Hari, in the disguise of a woman, had duped and manipulated men. Now, Shaila, if you in the disguise of a man can manipulate other men, then I, abandoning all my devotion for Hari, shall spend the rest of my life worshipping you."[44] Indeed, expectations are built, but the plot does not meet them. As the narrative unfolds, we find that the role of Shaila's elaborate disguise (particularly in terms of contriving the matrimonial alliances and manipulating the three bachelors) is almost negligible. Rather it may be said with little hesitation that it is Rasik Dada who, with his subtle wiles and romantic quotations from Sanskrit classics, almost outgrows the disguised avatar of Shailabala and plays the most significant and active part in developing the plot and creating moments of witty humour. As reported by him to Shaila, "... the bachelors of the association are not at all as fearfully steadfast as we thought them to be. None of Menaka, Rambha, Madan or Vasanta[45] is needed to break their vow of celibacy. This elderly Rasik alone is enough to achieve the goal."[46] In fact, a few hairpins, a lady's handkerchief with the letter '*n*' embroidered on it and a notebook of songs, scattered here and there in the new meeting room of the club, are more than enough to woo the bachelors. The emptiness of their vow has been pointed out quite early in the play, when Akshay, in response to Purabala's apprehension "... but they [the members of the Bachelor's Association] are in a war against Prajapati [the god of procreation and marriage]," assuringly says, "How would they succeed in a war against the god! It merely enrages him. It is for this particular reason that Prajapati pays special attention to this association. Just like meat simmering in a covered vessel, the members

[43] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha.* Vol. 1, 113. Translation mine.
[44] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 122. Translation mine.
[45] Menaka and Rambha are the beautiful celestial dancers in the court of Indra. Madan is the god of love and desire while Vasanta is Spring incarnate.
[46] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 161. Translation mine.

of the club, being under the pressure of their own vow, have softened to their bones. They are quite ready to be served as eligible suitors."[47] Though it goes without saying that exaggeration and unnatural/inordinate behaviour of characters constitute a major element of comedy, which explains the outlandish actions of the bachelors of the club, the reason behind the elaborate arrangement of Shailabala's disguise as a man still remains quite unexplained. Moreover, it is extremely curious to note that when she in Act II Scene IV[48] appears for the first time before the members of the club as Abalakanta Babu, she is seen to serve refreshments and take care of their comfort. In other words, despite her appearance as a man, Shaila is made to remain within the limits of society's conventionally assigned gender role of a hostess, a woman.

Next, it is noteworthy that Tagore does not make the convenient use of Abalakanta to produce plot complications by creating a sense of competitiveness and jealousy in the mind of the bachelors. Certain moments of insecurity/jealousy appear in the text only to be summarily discarded from the fantastical atmosphere of the romantic narrative. To establish this point I cite a few sections from the text:

> (a) Akshay: A wealthy friend of mine, who lives in the suburban area, has expressed his wish to make his descendant[49] a member of this association.
>
> Chandra Babu (in an amazed tone): You mean the father does not want to get his son married?
>
> Akshay: You may rest assured that s/he[50] is never going to marry. I can vouch for it ...[51]

---

[47] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 112. Translation mine
[48] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 151-53.
[49] The Bengali word used here is *santān*, and it does not indicate any specific gender.
[50] In the original, the pronoun '*se*' has been used which is again gender non-specific.
[51] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 135. Translation mine.

(b) Rasik: Be comfortable, Bipin Babu. Please relax. Kindly do not be jealous of us. I am an old man, and do not deserve to be the cause of a young man's jealousy. Also, no woman considers our Abalakanta Babu to be a man. If any woman, like a scared deer, has ever fled away seeing you, then you must feel pleased thinking that she has shown you great favour by considering you a real man.[52]

(c) Bipin: The other day the woman [Nirabala] I saw, she ...

Rasik: She is indeed worth discussing. Please do not hesitate, Bipin Babu. If you happen to think of her quite often, then that does not prove your extraordinariness. We also do the same thing.

Bipin: Is Abalakanta Babu ...?

Rasik: Oh, do not speak of him! That is his only subject of discussion.

Bipin: Is he ...?

Rasik: Yes, that is correct. But you see, he loves both Nirabala and Nripabala very dearly, and knows not whom he loves more. He is always oscillating between them.

Bipin: But does any of them ... for him ...?

Rasik: No, none of them has any intention or possibility of marrying him. Otherwise there would have been no trouble at all.

Bipin: That is why Abalakanta Babu looks a little ...

[52] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 162. Translation mine.

Rasik: Yes, a little worried.[53]

(d) Rasik: Purna Babu, you look a little pale. Are you unwell?

Purna: No, not at all. Rasik Babu, is the name of this person who went away just now, Abalakanta?

Rasik: Yes.

Purna: I don't find his behaviour and manners quite proper.

Rasik: He is a little too young.

Purna: He needs to be taught how to behave properly with women.

Rasik: Yes, I have noted it. He knows not how to behave with women in a manly way ...[54]

Surprisingly enough, in a lengthy text like *Chirakumār Sabhā*, these are the only moments where we find faint possibilities of narrative complication surrounding the element of disguise and the identity of Abalakanta Babu. Although the above extracts are steeped in comic irony, they serve only to dismiss the importance of the contribution of Shailabala's disguise to the construction of the plot, its climax, or even its denouement.

But this does not mean that "Shailabala has no role in the play", in Sengupta's criticism. She might not contribute directly to the development of the plot in its narrow sense, but the significance of her character and disguise is far more deep and complex than that of a mere cog in the plot. In fact, although for Niharranjan Ray *Chirakumār*

[53] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 169. Translation mine.
[54] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 176. Translation mine.

Sabhā is a "true farce"[55], I shall argue that it is the presence of Shailabala that compels us to rethink the very genre of the play itself. Throughout the text we find many subtle references to Shaila's widowhood, her loneliness, and her marginalised position in society, which are carefully juxtaposed against the general atmosphere of fantastic, heteronormative pairings and romantic wish-fulfilment. An element of doleful tenderness is so inherent to the image of Shailabala that even her (supposedly comical) disguise of Abalakanta Chattapadhyay has not been able to conceal it. In Act III Scene I, Bipin Babu in an aside says: "It feels that there is a deep sadness in his [Abalakanta's] heart. At such a young age he has a delicate mark of pathos on his countenance. "[56]

It is particularly noteworthy that *Chokher Bāli*, Tagore's much celebrated novel that centres around the character of a young widow, Vinodini, the perils of her life and the disruptive potential of her sexuality, was being serialised in the journal *Bangadarshan* between April 1901 and November 1903. In other words, two texts of extremely different mood and tone, but both dealing with the image of the Hindu widow, were conceived and written by Tagore almost simultaneously. Priyanath Sen in a letter dated 19 September 1900 writes, "The language and images of Vinodini are replete with a sense of burning intoxication and lustful crudity, and in *Chirakumār Sabhā* everything is so sweet and soothing ..."[57]. Apparently this distinction may seem quite convincing, but when exposed to close analysis, the failure of such a reductive and even misleading binaristic view in marking a significant subtext (of a bleak social reality) in *Chirakumār Sabhā*, becomes visible. For instance, at the very beginning of the play we hear Jagattarini, the conservative mother of the four sisters, voicing the

[55] Niharranjan Ray, *Rabindra Sāhityer Bhumika,* Vol. 2 (Calcutta: The Book Emporium Limited, 1944), 102. Translation mine.
[56] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 162. Translation mine.
[57] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 11, 9. Translation mine.

contemporary, dominant patriarchal opinion, "Akshay dear, Shaila is a widow. What is the use of educating her, and making her pass exams? Why does she need so much education ...?"[58] Although Akshay, in his habitual jocular tone promptly dismisses the comment of his mother-in-law, here Tagore with a single, swooping stroke of his brush paints the grim social backdrop against which Shaila and her 'comical' endeavours are to be read. Again, when she reveals her plan to take up the disguise of a man and says, "These days women are also becoming civilised.[59] Therefore, I have decided to get rid of this sari, and wear *chāpkān* instead ..."[60], Purabala immediately remarks, "Yes, I get it! You are going to take up a disguise and become a member of the association. You have already cut your hair short, and this was the only thing that remained undone."[61] The cruel irony embedded in this rather insensitive comment does not evade our attention. Traditionally, Hindu widows were supposed to keep their hair short, but when this gets conflated with (or contrasted against) Shaila's almost childishly funny attempts to forge matrimonial alliances between her unmarried sisters and a couple of eligible bachelors, a shadow of sombreness is cast on the frivolity of the situation. In Act II Scene IV, the discomfort that the presence of a widow is capable of producing in a romantic comedy (which is expected to end with multiple marriages) becomes most obvious.

> Nripabala: Well Niru, tell me how could we go leaving behind our Mejdidi [Shailabala]? If both of us go away, who would remain here with her?

[58] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 113. Translation mine.
[59] In the original Bengali text, a pun has been made on the word '*sabhya*', which means both member of an association or club as well as civilised.
[60] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 123. Translation mine.
[61] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 123. Translation mine.

> Nirabala: I have thought a great deal about it. Why should we go if we are allowed to stay back? Well, dear, she is without a husband; let us also not have any. Where is the need of us being any happier than her?[62]

The plaintive tone is too overt and heavy to be allowed to remain in a comedy for a long time, and is therefore summarily undercut by the flurry of subsequent humorous actions and dialogues. However, the contrast is etched quite deeply in the mind of the readers and is brought back again at the end. While the play makes preparations for a 'happy ending', Shailabala, casting off her disguise, appears in her usual dress of a widow, and we hear:

> Nirmala: Injustice, a grave injustice! Abalakanta Babu ...
>
> Akshay: Nirmala Devi is right! It is indeed a great injustice done by the Almighty. She should have truly been Abalakanta. God knows what good is there in her being the widow Shailabala![63]

Thus, when the plot of the romantic comedy reaches its conclusion with the promise of three marriages, the subtext of solemn reality that undercuts the reverie of unrealistic vows and fantastic romance also attains its dramatic culmination. The narrative, quite consciously, does not make any room for the possibility of any fourth, widow, marriage[64], and it seems that it is to avoid the angle of any such complication that she is almost safely introduced as a man in a heteronormative club of young bachelors and brought out of its conservative set-up as a Hindu widow, without any possibility of conjugal pairing. I would like to cite a few relevant comments of Ashutosh Bhattacharya: "Perhaps it would have been better if this doleful identity of Shailabala

---

[62] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 148. Translation mine.
[63] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 203-204. Translation mine.
[64] The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act had already been passed, on 16 July 1856.

as a young widow were kept concealed in a play which is otherwise packed with images of frolic and light-hearted humour. How melancholic is her image at the ending of the play! She in her usual dress of a widow appears in the middle of the scene of happiness, celebration and fulfilment. She offers her *pranām* to Chandra Babu and says 'Kindly forgive me!' Everyone, seeing her, is surprised, and Akshay reveals her true identity—at this moment the curtain drops. The playwright overlooks the dark blot smeared on the picture of union, merriment and celebration."[65] Clearly, Bhattacharya misses the whole point of presenting the young widow Shailabala in the narrative. Tagore in *Chirakumār Sabhā* was in fact experimenting with the generic conventions of comedy itself. At the end of the play, we are made to realise that this is not a mere romantic comedy,[66] but a tragicomedy where certain conventional elements of romantic comedy are invoked only to be punctured and what is finally exposed is the contemporary social reality. What remained unexplored/untold in *Chirakumār Sabhā,* particularly vis-a-vis the life and condition of a young Hindu widow, took up the shape of a probing study in his subsequent work, *Chokher Bāli*. Also, Bhattacharya's claim that the playwright had "overlooked the dark blot" does not hold good, for a conscious writer like Tagore who revised *Chirakumār Sabhā* multiple times (like many of his other works) could not have remained oblivious to the discomforting potential of the unconventional ending. I would rather argue that Tagore had intentionally portrayed the contrast in the last scene

[65] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bānglā Nātyasāhityer Itihās,* Vol. 2, 138. Translation mine.
[66] Rabindranath in Act I Scene I of *Gorāy Galad* takes a dig at (in a rather caustic tone), the tradition of English romantic novels and their '... then they lived happily ever after' endings. Chandrakanta mockingly says, "It would have been great if I could get rid of this human life of mine, and somehow enter into the head of some English novelist. I would have been printed in fresh books with golden lettering on their covers. I could have engaged myself in sweet talk (in polished English) with belles like Edith, Helen and Leonara. The father of the heroine would not want to get his daughter married off, and the daughter would attempt to drown herself in the sea. Finally, on the last page of the novel the two of us would live a happily married life. Copies after copies would be sold, each for five shillings."
Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 366. Translation mine.

to put forward his subtle but poignant critique of the unjust, exclusionary mechanisms of Hindu society.

To conclude, in this section we see that Tagore deals with a conventional theatrical tool in a conventional dramatic genre, but his treatment does not fail to push the limits of conventionality. Although in his nineteenth-century *Gorāy Galad*, which by any standards is not a refined and mature piece of work, disguise as a dramatic element fails to make any noteworthy impact, his deployment of the tool in the twentieth-century *Chirakumār Sabhā* marks a significant development. In the latter play, he deftly unearths such a potential of disguise that it ceases to remain a mere overused plot element and evolves into a poignant, critical probe into the contemporary socio-cultural status quo and even power structures; and it is in this regard that Tagore succeeds in claiming an unprecedented space for himself in the visual politics of Bengali drama in general. In subsequent sections we shall see how he repeatedly experiments with the tool of disguise and recasts it, thereby giving it a shape unique and altogether novel.

Section 1.3

Next, we come to *Shāradotsav* (1908). I shall discuss the treatment of the elements of disguise by Tagore in this play to cultivate certain ideas which had their roots in some of his nineteenth-century thoughts and works, and found flourishing and repeated expressions in his literary output of the twentieth century. Right at the outset I need to mention that the texts of both *Shāradotsav* (literally ‘autumn festival’) and its revised version *Rinshodh* (‘repayment of debt’) shall be used in this discussion. Although the basic narrative outline of both are obviously similar, there are certain significant

differences between these versions which will have bearings on my arguments, and shall be commented on as and when needed.

Shāradotsav was composed on August 23, 1908, at the request of the boys of the Santiniketan school (named Bolpur Brahmachāryashram), with the primary purpose of being performed by them immediately before their Puja vacation. This play, in more ways than one, occupies a unique place in the dramatic output of Tagore. This is not only the first of his "season plays", but also the first full-length play he wrote after the publication of his essay "*Rangamancha*" (1902),[67] in which he propounded his new and radical thoughts about theatre. Moreover, this is the first play in the *Gitānjali* period and in many ways anticipates the spiritual ideas which would permeate the subsequent plays and lyrics of this phase. Although certain critics like Niharranjan Ray and Ashutosh Bhattacharya are averse to the idea of categorising *Shāradotsav* as a symbolic or allegorical play, its mystical quality is impossible to deny. While for Bhattacharya the play is "an ordinary one without any metaphor or symbol"[68], Ray goes to the extent of stating that "The mysteries of symbolism and allegory of the later plays are not present in *Shāradotsav*."[69] Contrary to these claims, as will be evident from the following discussion, *Shāradotsav* exhibits (albeit in a cursory manner) certain propensities of exploring the potential of symbolism which would continue to evolve and permeate his later plays, including *Rājā* (1910), *Achalāyatan* (1912), *Dākghar* (1912), *Phālguni* (1916), *Muktadhārā* (1922) and *Rakta-karavi* (1924).

Shāradotsav was revised and given the shape of *Rinshodh* in 1921. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay observes, by way of commenting on the transformation of

---

[67] Abhijit Sen holds that "The date is important, coming between the setting up of the *asram*-school at Santiniketan in 1901 and the Bengal Partition movement in 1905 …" Sen, 47.
[68] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bānglā Nātyasāhityer Itihās*, Vol. 2, 150-53. Translation mine.
[69] NiharranjanRay, *Rabindra Sāhityer Bhumika*, (Calcutta: New Age Publisher Ltd, 1944), 317. Translation mine.

Shāradotsav into *Rinshodh*, "Since some time, particularly the time of *Phālguni*, the poet had been showing a new tendency—a weakness towards attempting to explain things to others."[70] Pramathanath Bishi is more direct in saying, "Tagore's main purpose behind the revision of *Shāradotsav* into *Rinshodh* is to explain himself."[71] Although the reworking of *Shāradotsav* into *Rinshodh* can, to some extent, be seen as the result of such an attempt to "explain" and elaborate on ideas that were implied and dealt with subtly in the former version, it must be admitted that in addition to this mere desire of a poet to explain himself, there are other angles which need to be explored in order to understand the multifaceted significance of the drastic change in the treatment of disguise in the two texts. But before the specific discussion on disguise, let us briefly consider the basic theme and narrative outline of *Shāradotsav* in the playwright's own words.

In a letter to Ranu Adhikari dated 10 September 1922, Tagore captures the crux of the play in a few words:

> It is a play of holiday and freedom. Holiday is both the time and subject of the play. The Raja has taken leave from his royal duties; the boys have taken leave from their school. They have no great intent as such. Their only desire is to 'spend the whole day playing the flute, without doing any work.' There is only an Upananda working in it: but it is only to be freed from his debts that he works.[72]

---

[70] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani o Rabindra Sāhitya Prabeshak,* Vol. 3 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhag, 1933), 120. Translation mine.
[71] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Nātya Prabaha*, Vol 2 (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 2014), 207. Translation mine.
[72] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1031. Translation mine.

Again, while commenting on the 'internal refrain' of *Shāradotsav*, Tagore explains in his essay "*Amār Dharma*":

> When I closely consider the plays that I have written from *Shāradotsav* to *Phālguni*, I notice that the same internal refrain runs through all of them. The Raja is out to celebrate the festival of autumn by being united with everyone. He is in search of his companion. On his way he meets a group of boys who have come out to celebrate the festivity of autumnal nature by actively participating in its delight. But amidst the gaiety of holiday-making there was a solitary boy, Upananda, who having abandoned all games, was immersed in the self-imposed task of repaying the debts of his master. The Raja said that he had found his true companion in that boy, for in him is manifest the true bliss of the nature of autumn. That boy, through his pursuits of sorrow and suffering, is paying off the debt of bliss. Most beautiful is the image of this sorrow. The entire world is engaged in this pursuit of sorrow. Through its tireless endeavours of sorrow it is repaying the bounteous meed that it has received from the Eternal. Every single blade of grass through its diligent efforts is expressing itself; and by way of doing so it is repaying the debt of its internal truth. Its beauty, its rejoicing lie in its ceaseless sorrow of constant giving away of itself. It is through this that it has made the nature of autumn beautiful and blissful. From outside it seems like a mere game; but actually it is not so. There isn't a moment of pause in it ... The expression of the soul is always blissful. That is why it can afford to accept sorrow and death. One who out of fear, languor and hesitation avoids this path of sorrow, remains for ever deprived of the bliss. This is the

> main idea of *Shāradotsav*. It is not about listening to the tune of the flute, sitting idly under the shade of trees.[73]

On the nature of the festival and its participants, Tagore writes in a 1919 essay:

> When with the advent of a new season the entire world draped in the scarves of new colours begins to respond from all directions, it also gives a call to the human heart. If the heart is not touched by the hues and tunes, then man remains isolated and alienated from the rest of the world. In order to do away with this sense of isolation, we, in our ashram, have made arrangements to celebrate the festivities of nature. *Shāradotsav* is a play meant to celebrate one such festival. Who amongst the dramatis personae manifests the spirit of hindrance in this festival? It is Laksheshwar, the moneylender. With his greed, selfishness, jealousy, fears, suspicion and desire of possession, he is obsessively attempting to hide all his wealth from others. Who is the priest of this festival? It is the Raja who, rejecting his royal identity, has come out to be united with everyone. He desires Lakshmi's golden lotus of beauty. One who desires this lotus can afford to treat all gold with impunity. Because he sacrifices greed, easily and quite spontaneously he gains the profit of beauty.[74]

Thus, Maharaja Vijayaditya (also referred to as "Raja" by the playwright himself) is the protagonist of the play and the festival; and what interests us the most is that throughout the play he appears in the disguise of a sanyasi. In fact, the potential of the play's symbolism is most effectively expressed in the context of this disguise. The Raja deliberately hides/ invisibilizes his royal identity and other kingly paraphernalia in order to get united with the common people. Although quite expectedly this appearance

[73] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1030. Translation mine.
[74] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1029. Translation mine.

of the Maharaja incognito produces suspense, surprise, dramatic irony and even moments of humour befitting a play primarily meant to be performed by young boys, the deeper significance of this disguise is idealistic, spiritual and even political. However, to start, let us first consider the aspects of suspense, surprise and dramatic irony.

In *Shāradotsav* the real identity of the sanyasi is revealed only towards the end of the text. Therefore, the audience, along with the characters of the play, are kept in the same state of ignorance regarding the identity of the sanyasi, which of course assists in building up the suspense or the dramatic tension. The omniscient playwright presents the surprise to the audience and the characters at the same time, thereby making the ending intense and impactful. In *Rinshodh*, on the other hand, the playwright in the prologue reveals to the audience the identity of Vijayaditya, and his plan to participate incognito in the festivities even before the beginning of the play proper.

> Vijayaditya: Poet—
>
> Shekhar: Yes, Maharaja!
>
> Vijayaditya: It has been only a year that I have ascended the throne of my father; but it seems that the cumulative age of all the kings of my dynasty like a heavy burden has already bowed down my shoulders. Tell me how to make a Raja young.
>
> Shekhar: For once come down from that throne and keep your feet on the earth. It is this earth that contains the magic mantra of life and youth.
>
> Vijayaditya: I want to keep the doors of the cage of my throne open forever, so that I can maintain my free exchange with the earth—

> Shekhar: So that you can exchange your necklace of pearls with the garland of *shiuli* flowers! In that case, for once get rid of that royal dress of yours. Nobody would make mistakes in recognizing you as their own kinsman.
>
> Vijayaditya: I have my garb of sanyasi. Its tune harmonises well with that of the dust and the earth ...[75]

Srikumar Bandyopadhyay quite aptly states that "the idealistic intention of the play [*Rinshodh*] is explicitly announced" right at the outset in the prologue, and "has not shown the patience of getting unravelled gradually and spontaneously in the due course of the play." Further to this he observes that "in *Shāradotsav* the sense of suspense and curiosity that Vijayaditya's concealment of his own identity behind the disguise of sanyasi had aroused in the audience and readers, and the effect of dramatic surprise produced by the sudden revealment are missing in *Rinshodh*."[76] But strangely enough, what evades Bandyopadhyay's and others' critical attention is that these dramatic elements of suspense, curiosity, surprise have (in *Rinshodh*) been successfully replaced by the impactful tool of dramatic irony. The gap between the knowledge of the audience and that of the characters vis-a-vis the real identity of the sanyasi which pervades the entire text of *Rinshodh*, betrays a deft exploitation of this dramatic device. To illustrate the extent of the effectiveness of this tool and its engagement with the visual politics of the play, let us consider a couple of sections from the text:

> (a) Sanyasi: Why, what happened, Baba, what are you suspecting?
>
> Laksheshwar: What am I suspecting? As if you know nothing of it! As if you are very innocent and honest! A false sanyasi!

---

[75] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 990. Translation mine.
[76] Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindra Sristi Samiksha*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 1960), 246-54. Translation mine.

Thakurdada: What are you saying, Lakha? You are insulting my *thākur*[77]!

Upananda: I shall smash your mouth with this pestle. You are too arrogant just because you have made some money! ... You know not what you are saying and to whom!

(Laksheshwar hides himself behind the sanyasi)

Sanyasi: Oh, what are you doing, Thakurda? What are you doing, Baba? Laksheshwar knows human nature far better than any of you. The moment he set his eyes upon me, I was caught. *False sanyasi* indeed! Baba Laksheshwar, I have passed through so many countries, and have been able to deceive so many people, but I could not deceive you!

Laksheshwar: No, I can't really understand. Probably I haven't done the right thing. Maybe you'll curse me or something! Three ships of mine are still on the sea. (Taking dust from the sanyasi's feet) *Pranām thākur*! I haven't been able to recognise you. There is a sanyasi called Vikatananda in our temple of Virupaksha. I thought that you are that fake one ..."[78]

(b) First villager: Oh, where is the sanyasi?

Second villager: Baba, where is the sanyasi?

Thakurdada: Here is our sanyasi.

First villager: But he looks like a *false sanyasi*. Where is the real sanyasi?

Sanyasi: It is not easy to find a real sanyasi. I am only *playing at sanyasi* to amuse a group of boys.

---

[77] A word used in Bengali to refer to someone very respectable.
[78] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1003. Translation mine.

First villager: What kind of a game is that?

Second villager: That is sinful.

Third villager: Cut off your matted hair. Throw it away.

Fourth villager: Look, he is wearing saffron clothes. Oh, but this is costly.

First villager: Baba, why have you taken up this garb of sanyasi?

Sanyasi: I have been initiated by the poet."[79] (emphases mine)

The cited sections are significant for more reasons than one and they need to be explored from multiple angles. First of all, these are among those moments in the play where the effect of dramatic/verbal irony is most pronounced and impactful. When Laksheshwar or the villagers call the sanyasi 'a false sanyasi', they think that the phrase is a mere abuse hurled at a fraud. But the audience, owing to their prior knowledge which they have gained from the prologue, know that the sanyasi is indeed fake, in the sense that he is none other than Maharaja Vijayaditya himself in disguise. Thus, the word uttered by Laksheshwar or the villagers anticipates the outcome of the play and would turn out to be true at the end, but in a way not at all expected or intended by them. It may be useful to point out that the phrase italicised in the first excerpt[80] was somewhat amplified in the English translation "Autumn Festival" by Tagore himself as "A sanyasi false from his matted hair to his bare foot."[81] In the second excerpt we find an emphasis on the matted hair and saffron clothes. It would perhaps not be unfounded to surmise that Tagore is repeatedly making his audience conscious of the disguise

[79] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1011. Translation mine.
[80] In the original Bengali text, the phrase is *'bhanda sanyāsi'*.
[81] Rabindranath Tagore, "Autumn Festival".
https://tagoreweb.in/plays/autumn-festival-209/autumn-festival-4070
Accessed on 31.10.2022

behind which Vijayaditya has hidden/invisibilized his regal attire and identity. What is more, the playwright is doing this by guiding our attention verbally and visually. In addition, we must not be oblivious to the metatheatrical undertone of these moments which have the potential of making the audience visually conscious of the idea of disguise from a general thespian perspective.

Having discussed the contribution of the Raja's disguise to the play's narrative and form, I move on to explore the idealistic and political significance of this disguise. First, let us understand why the Raja takes up this disguise. Though this has already been fleetingly touched upon, it deserves to be treated separately with greater attention. In the prologue of *Rinshodh*, when the Raja asks the poet in a somewhat light and jocular tone, "Tell me how to make a raja young?", Shekhar promptly advises, "For once come down from that throne and keep your feet on the earth ... For once get rid of that royal dress of yours." Clearly, Tagore through (his alter ego) Shekhar suggests that the royal dress, tailored in the "political laboratory"[82] of the power of wealth, much like the throne, is a visible symbol of the apparatus that keeps the ruler, the personification of power, at "a disdainful distance"[83] from the common people. Vijayaditya himself says that his throne is like 'a cage'. This metaphor of the cage would of course remind us of the wire screen and self-confined condition of the Raja in *Rakta-karavi*. We can also recall the words of Abhijit (the prince of Uttarkut) in *Muktadhārā*: "The throne of Uttarkut is the dam hindering the flow of my life. Today I have come out on the streets to remove all barriers from the path of this flow."[84] It is particularly interesting to note that a glimpse of the symbolic representation of Tagore's political ideas about kingship

[82] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in the West", in *The Atlantic*, March 1917. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1917/03/nationalism-in-the-west/645914/ Accessed on 31.10.2022
[83] Tagore, "Nationalism in the West".
[84] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 21. Translation mine.

and governance which he would explore so elaborately and rigorously in his overtly political plays is already seen in his 1921 reworking of a play originally composed in 1908, primarily to be performed by his schoolboys. Satanjib Raha goes to the extent of suggesting that the idea and image of kingship which we find in *Shāradotsav* can be traced back to the characterisation of Govinda Manikya in the novel *Rājarshi*[85] that was first published as early as 1887. Significantly enough, the word '*rājarshi*' literally means 'ascetic king'.

Shāradotsav is a play where the Raja (or Maharaja, to be specific) is in search of his true identity which is beyond the facade of the Maharaja. That is to say, he wants to realise his real identity as a common man close to nature, who is systemically invisibilized behind the exhibition of royal attire, throne and other regal paraphernalia. It would be useful to mention that during one of the performances of *Shāradotsav*, Abanindranath Tagore wanted to use a dazzling "mica-sprinkled royal parasol" as a part of the stage decor. But, significantly enough, this did not get Rabindranath's approval. He summarily rejected the idea of a royal parasol onstage; rather, he wanted the setting to be "simple and without any extravagance."[86] This is one of many such occasions where the visions of the playwright and the theatrician merge to form an organic unity of ideas.

Now I come to the political meaning of the disguise. Let us first briefly consider Tagore's mindset and his reformist activities during the period of *Shāradotsav*. Around this time, he was giving shape to his idea of rural reconstruction. In a letter to Abala Devi written in 1908 he says:

---

[85] Satanjib Raha, *Rabindra Bhāvnaye Raja* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2012), 119.
[86] Abanindranath Tagore, *Gharoya* (Calcutta: Visvabharati Granthan Vibhag, 1941), 115-17.

> Presently I am engaged in the development of the rural community. I have decided to set an example of rural reconstruction in our zamindari. I have already started working on it. A few boys from East Bengal have joined me. They, by staying in the villages with the common people, are trying to give them basic training in the areas of health, hygiene and education, and are also attempting to make them self-reliant ... I am no longer interested in responding to invitations to join meetings and conferences.[87]

In another letter to Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, written in January 1908, Tagore quite assertively states, "I want to establish *swarāj* in the villages—a model for the country to follow."[88] To Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, his son-in-law, he writes in February 1910, "At the moment our primary work is to ameliorate the condition of the lower-class people of our country."[89]

Thus a strong desire to come close to the lives of the common people of rural Bengal and to work for and with them pervades his thoughts and actions during this time. Keeping this in view, I wish to present the following excerpt from *Rinshodh*:

> King [Sompal]: *Thākur*, I see that you know Vijayaditya personally. Tell me, is he really as great as people make him out to be?
>
> Sanyasi: Not at all! People think that he is a great king. But in reality he is very much like an ordinary man. People are deluded by his dress and attire.
>
> King: What are you saying, *thākur*? Ha ha ha ha! Just what I thought ... an ordinary man!

---

[87] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 179. Translation mine.
[88] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 179. Translation mine.
[89] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 179. Translation mine.

> Sanyasi: It is my desire to make him understand it thoroughly that he is very much so. Just because he is clad in royal attire, he thinks that he is someone very great and important, distinct from other people—I want to rid his mind of this false notion.
>
> King: Please do so, *thākur*! Please do!
>
> Sanyasi: His conceits are all known to me. In summer after the first spell of showers, just before the sowing season begins, there occurs a great festival in his kingdom. On that occasion everyone, including farmers and householders, goes to the forest to offer their worship to Sita. Together they also have a picnic. Vijayaditya yearns to sit beside them and take meals with those farmers. No matter if he is a maharaja, there is a farmer in him. Once he became mad to get rid of his royal attire and take food with them. But his servants and courtiers are more kingly than him. They somehow managed to dissuade him. They are well aware of the fact that if the disguise is removed, the real man in him would get revealed. This is why they are always quite anxious about his farings. They are worried about Vijayaditya getting exposed.
>
> Raja: *Thākur*, you expose it all. That he is a false raja should not remain concealed.[90]

It is important that from ‘a false sanyasi’ we now come to ‘a false raja’. What is more, the royal attire which Vijayaditya himself replaces with the clothes of a sanyasi is ironically described by him as a ‘disguise’. It should be pointed out that there are two kings in this play: Vijayaditya, and Sompal, the feudal king. They function as each other’s foil. Sompal is everything that Vijayaditya, Tagore’s ideal king, is not. Sompal

[90] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 651-52. Translation mine.

is greedy, territorialist, dominating and obsessed with his power and its exhibition. To borrow Tagore's own metaphor, he is "a human automaton"[91] led by the pride of power and the greed of possession. In the excerpt I have deliberately translated the word "raja" as King when it is used to refer to Sompal, in order to distinguish him from Vijayaditya, Tagore's ideal raja, who in more ways than one anticipates the Raja of the subsequent plays. This brings us to the question—what constitutes the image of Tagore's ideal king? Raha puts it quite succinctly: "Tagore's ideal king is one who is beyond all narrow desires, and is dutiful and adheres to the true dharma of a king."[92] Most importantly, first he is a human (who "has his responsibilities to the higher faculties of his nature"[93]) and then a ruler. When Sompal expresses his desire to be "the ruler of a kingdom that is supreme," the sanyasi says, "Then begin by giving up your fragmented kingdom."[94] Though this advice is apparently antithetical, it reveals the truth that sacrifice of personal gains and selfish desires is the essence of Tagore's ideal raja. This explains the final statement of the sanyasi, "In order to be a raja, one must be a sanyasi."[95]

Finally, I wish to briefly comment on the image of a Raja under the disguise of a sanyasi in the context of autumn, which, as the title of the original play suggests, forms its principal foundation. For Tagore, autumn is associated with a sense of fulfilment, purity, peace and sacrifice. In a poem called *"Lagna"* anthologised in *Mahuyā*, the poet states that his union with "the one whom his heart wants, and who is unknown to the eyes"[96] can happen only in the season of autumn. He actually describes the white

[91] Tagore, "Nationalism in the West".
[92] Raha, 124. Translation mine.
[93] Tagore, "Nationalism in the West".
[94] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1006. Translation mine.
[95] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 661. Translation mine.
[96] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Mahuyā*" in *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 8 (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalaya, 1990), 37-38. Translation mine.

autumnal clouds as "sanyasis, devoid of wealth and aloof from all worldly affairs."[97] Clearly, in this image, the Tagorean concepts of autumn and sanyasi get conflated. Also, it is of no less significance that throughout the play, even after the revelation of Vijayaditya's true identity, he continues to be referred to by the playwright as "sanyasi". This is to suggest that within the scope of the play, Vijayaditya always remains a sanyasi, clad in saffron clothes, the tune of which "harmonises well with that of dust."[98]

Thus, in *Shāradotsav*, disguise is not a merely convenient tool often used by the dramatist to create comic moments or conventional plot complications. The image of the ascetic king or the Raj-sanyasi evokes certain spiritual and political ideas which, on the one hand, have their roots in the early literary output of the poet and, on the other hand, would find elaborate expressions in his subsequent works.

Section 1.4

In this final section I take up the various characters of the Thakurda (grandfather, or elderly man), their disguise, the different forms they assume, and their interactions with the overall visual politics of the plays in which they appear. I use the term 'disguise' here not without some hesitation for, lexically speaking, it contains a connotation of concealment. The various appearances of the Thakurdas are in no way meant to 'conceal' their identities; on the contrary, they serve to 'reveal' the multifarious aspects of the 'concept' of Thakurda and what it represents in the world of Tagore's plays. However, I do not wish to altogether discount the term either, for it will have certain important implications for my analysis of the portrayal of the characters, and will also

[97] Tagore, "*Mahuyā*".
[98] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1029. Translation mine.

contribute to consolidating the overall arguments of the section. And although the focus of this section would obviously be on the Thakurdas, there will be occasions to refer to the disguises of a few other relevant characters as well.

The Thakurda characters are not only recurrent, but they also follow certain set trajectories, thereby showing tendencies of getting moulded into types. For instance, according to Asrukumar Sikdar, the 'type' of 'men who are physically old but young at heart'[99] has a repetitive pattern in the corpus of Tagore's literary output. For him, the precursor of the Thakurdas can be traced back as early as the characters of Raja Basanta Ray in the novel *Bauthākurānir Hāt* (1883), the priest Vilwan (pronounced as Billan in Bengali) Thakur of the novel *Rājarshi* (1887), and even Rasik in *Prajāpatir Nirbandha* (1901), who are elderly people full of youthful vivacity, enthusiasm and mature wisdom. "Everybody's on smiling terms"[100] with them. Here it may be useful to recall that according to Kshiti Mohan Sen, Thakurda was founded on a real-life character, Srikantha Sinha of Bolpur,[101] who had such a deep and long-lasting impact on the mind of Tagore that he devoted an entire chapter to him in his *My Reminiscences*. Certain relevant sections of this chapter may be cited to illustrate this observation of Sen:

> He had so inordinate a capacity for being pleased as to have utterly disqualified him for the post of critic on any of our monthly reviews … His tender clean-shaven face was rounded off by an all-pervading baldness; there was not the vestige of a tooth to worry the inside of his mouth; and his big smiling eyes gleamed with constant delight. When he spoke in his soft deep voice, his mouth and eyes and hands all spoke likewise ... His inseparable companions were a

[99] The phrase "*bayaska shishu*" has been used by Asrukumar Sikdar, *Rabindra-nātye Rupāntar o Aikya* (Kolkata: Premamay Majumdar, 1937), 233.
[100] In Ananda Lal's translation. Rabindranath Tagore, *Three Plays*, translated and with an introduction by Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 309. Lal translated *Arup Ratan*.
[101] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan*, Vol. 9, 557.

> hubble-bubble at his left, and a sitar on his lap; and from his throat flowed unceasing song ... He would enliven the gathering as no one else could ... His transparent simplicity pleased all and drew them in to join his gaiety … This old man was a friend of both my father and my elder brothers and us younger ones alike. He adjusted his age to suit each and every one of us. Just as any piece of stone is good enough for a freshet to dance and gambol around so the least little stimulus would be enough to make Srikantha Babu beside himself with joy.[102]

However, music,[103] frolic and zest of living are not the only aspects of the Thakurdas. Through an enigmatic language which is so intrinsic to their the nature,[104] they also quite often function as the playwright's mouthpiece, giving expressions to his spiritual thoughts and even rebellious ideas. In this respect, characters like Dhananjay Bairagi in *Prāyaschitta* (1909) and *Muktadhārā* (1922), the blind Baul in *Phālguni* (1916), Bishu Pagal in *Rakta-karavi* (1924) and Kavi in *Kāler Jātrā* (1932) can be put within the same set of parentheses alongside the Thakurdas. The present section deals primarily with the four plays in which the specific character of Thakurda appears: *Shāradotsav* (1908), *Rājā* (1910), *Achalāyatan* (1911) and *Dākghar* 1912). However, the texts of the revised, "stageworthy"[105] versions of the first three plays, namely *Rinshodh* (1921), *Arūp Ratan* (1920) and *Guru* (1918), will also be referred to as and when needed to substantiate my arguments.

---

[102] Rabindranath Tagore, "My Reminiscences", in *Tagore Omnibus*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Rupa, 2003), 453-54.

[103] Songs form an intrinsic part of the conception of the Thakurdada characters, so much so that, as pointed out by Abhijit Sen, "For the 1908 Sarodotsav performance, he first cast Kshitimohan Sen as Thakurdada. However, because he lacked a singing voice, the role passed on to Ajitkumar Chakraborty." Sen, 119.

[104] In the fifth scene of *Raja*, the fake king says about Thakurda, "His words sound like gibberish. They are incomprehensible." Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 771. Translation mine.

[105] Tagore used the Bengali word *abhinay-yogya* to define these new editions. Lal 269.

Let us begin with the Thakurda of *Shāradotsav*. The visual, symbolic and political potential of the element of disguise in this play, as discussed in the preceding section, has been explored almost exhaustively through the depiction of the Sanyasi-Raja. Although Thakurda and his disguise in it do not have anything significant to contribute, I begin the discussion with *Shāradotsav* for it is the first play to feature the character of Thakurda, and it will also enable me to create the premise of my analyses of the subsequent plays.[106] Here the primary function of Thakurdada is to complement and/or compliment the spiritual presence of the Sanyasi, and to create contexts for the playwright to give expression to his Romantic lyrical thoughts about Man, Nature and the deeply spiritual and philosophical idea of the repayment of debt. He is also the playmate of the young boys and participates with them in their revelry. It would not be an overestimation to see him as a bridge between the play's world of abstract ideas and its mood of festivity and celebration. However, in *Rinshodh*, the revised version, Thakurdada's role, and even "dignity"[107], are significantly curtailed or even diminished by the presence of the poet, Shekhar.[108] Srikumar Bandyopadhyay holds strongly, "His [the poet's] appearance has lessened the importance of the Sanyasi Raja and Thakurda; he has captured the central position in the play ... He has taken the leading role in explaining the philosophical significance of the play and in creating its ambience of celebration and festivity ... Both the Raja and Thakurda emerge almost as mere shadows of Shekhar. They echo his feelings, ideas and words ...".[109]

---

[106] *Shāradotsav* was first staged on September 24, 1908. As reported by Kshiti Mohan Sen (also known as Thakurda himself), Tagore initially wanted him to play the role of Thakurdada, though finally the part was given to Ajit Kumar Chakravarti.

[107] Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindra-Srishti-Samiksha*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1969), 267. Translation mine.

[108] From a letter (dated 10 September 1921) of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis written to Rani Maitra we come to know that Tagore had introduced the character of the poet Shekhar to cast himself in that role. Indeed, during its first performance (October 2, 1921) Tagore himself played the role. Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan*, Vol. 10, 384-85, 393.

[109] Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, 267-68. Translation mine.

The playwright, being quite conscious of this decline in the importance of the Raja, and particularly Thakurdada, rather deftly makes the latter tell Shekhar, "O brother, I leave my place to you."[110] Although Shekhar, in a rather generous tone promptly says, "Why do you have to leave? There can be space for both of us ...", Srikumar Bandyopadhyay opines that "just as in the case of the political structure of a State, equal space for two monarchs is unnatural in the world of children's minds as well."[111] The real point is that the idea of omnipotent monarchy has no place in modern times, which children should learn as well, so Tagore seems to be making the case for a polyvalent view of truth through the poet and the respected elder. Despite this marginalisation of the character of Thakurdada in *Rinshodh* I bring this text into the discussion because it is here that we get a fleeting mention of his '*disguise*':

> Boys: Here comes the stranger,[112] our stranger!
>
> (Enter Shekhar)
>
> Sanyasi: What is this? You are a stranger, is it?
>
> Shekhar: Well, stranger is merely my *disguise*. Actually I belong to all the countries of the world.[113]
>
> Sanyasi: What was the need of this *disguise*?
>
> Shekhar: A raja has to take up the *disguise* of a sanyasi in order to realise the true meaning of being a raja. Similarly, one who wants to see his own land in all the countries of the world must take up the garb of a stranger. Here we have

[110] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha, Vol. 1,* 997. Translation mine.
[111] Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, 267-68. Translation mine.
[112] In the original Bengali text, the word "*paradeshi"* has been used.
[113] In order to rhyme with "*paradeshi*," the word "*sabdeshi*" has been used in the original text.

> our Thakurda who has grown old; but this old age is only his *disguise*. It is through this old age that he is thoroughly realising his youth.
>
> Thakurdada: Brother, how have you come to know about this?
>
> Shekhar: It is my work to find out the true person from behind the *disguise*.[114] (Emphases mine)

However insignificant it might seem, the comment on Thakurda's 'disguise' speaks volumes about his nature, and most importantly anticipates the important theme of youth and 'eternal newness' that Tagore would later explore intensely in his play *Phālguni*. Since I shall discuss its relevant aspects in the second chapter, I refrain from entering the discourse here. However, I wish to point out that the comment on Thakurdada's supposed disguise reminds us of Tagore's poem "*Kavir Bayas*" (literally 'The Poet's Age'), collected in the anthology *Kshanikā* (1900). The following lines from the poem neatly capture the crux of Thakurdada, as far as the apparent contrast between his external senescence and internal youth is concerned: "Indeed my hair has become grey/ but why do you pay so much attention to it?/ Do remember that my age is the same/ As that of all the young boys and old men of the neighbourhood." [115]

Apparently, this fleeting reference to Thakurda's disguise in *Rinshodh* has nothing significant to contribute to the visual politics of the play but if considered closely, we realise that the optics of an old man (with his "bald head and grey moustache")[116] being constantly visible with a band of young boys (or children) creates a visual impact, the effectiveness of which Tagore as a successful theatrician was surely

---

[114] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 1000.
[115] Tagore, *Ravindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 4, 188. Translation mine.
[116] Tagore in a letter to Santoshchandra Majumdar (dated 22 September 1908) writes, "Among the people you know, Ajit [Ajit Kumar Chakravarti] is taking up the part of Thakurdada. I have procured a bald cap and a grey moustache for him. It is impossible to recognise him in this disguise." Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 9, 570.

conscious. In the conversation between Shekhar and Sanyasi cited before, we also find a mention of the former's 'disguise' of a stranger, which is comparatively more literal than that of Thakurdada. Somewhat like Raja Vijayaditya, Shekhar appears in disguise throughout the play. The significance of introducing this layer of disguise into the revision can be realised if we keep in mind that just a few years before the composition of *Rinshodh*, Rabindranath visited Japan and America (in 1916) where he, through his series of lectures, was engaged in attacking "the fierce self-idolatry of nation worship."[117] In his lecture titled "Nationalism in India" he asserts:

> I have no hesitation in saying that those who are gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity, who have the least feeling of enmity against *aliens*, and the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others will be the fittest to take their permanent place in the age that is lying before us, and those who are constantly developing their instinct of fight and intolerance of *aliens* will be eliminated. For this is the problem before us, and we have to prove our humanity by solving it through the help of our higher nature.[118] (emphases mine)

Tagore, through his paradoxical portrayal of Shekhar as *paradeshi* (of another country) and *sabdeshi* (of all countries) attempts to convey that in order to be a citizen of the world, one must strive to transcend the narrow geographical and political boundaries of the nation. By taking up the guise of a stranger/outsider/alien, one who is not restricted by the limits of any one particular country, Shekhar establishes his identity as one who belongs to all countries of the world.

---

[117] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in the West," *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), 15.
[118] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in India," *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), 121.

I shall briefly comment on the “welcome song of autumn”, which, significantly enough, is initiated by Thakurdada in *Shāradotsav* and Shekhar in *Rinshodh*:

> You, the one who has enchanted my eyes, have come.
>
> What did I witness on opening my heart?
>
> Beneath the *shiuli* trees,
>
> In the heap of blossoms,
>
> Over the dew-wet grass,
>
> With your red painted feet,
>
> You, the one who has enchanted my heart, have come.
>
> The *ānchal* of light and shade
>
> Is spread out over the forests.
>
> What do the blossoms imagine,
>
> On seeing that face of yours?
>
> We want to welcome you.
>
> Remove that veil from your face.
>
> Put aside with both hands
>
> That tiny cover of clouds.
>
> You, the one who has enchanted my eyes, have come.
>
> I hear the deep sound of the conch shells
>
> Of the forest goddesses.

Your advent resounds

On the strings of the vina of the firmament.

Where do the golden anklets jingle? I think it is in my heart.

In all my thoughts and works,

Pouring the stone-melting nectar,

You, the one who has enchanted my eyes, have come.[119]

In this song Tagore, through a celebration of the beauty of the physical world that appeals to the senses, actually gives expression to a metaphysical experience, a spiritual realisation that transcends the limits of sensory perception. The dialectic between *rūp* and *arūp*[120] (forms and the Formless) that we find in this song is developed and extensively explored in his succeeding works of this period, including *Rājā* and *Gitānjali.* Despite the sketched portrayal of Thakurdada in *Shāradotsav*, it can be asserted without hesitation that the claims of critics like Shanti Kumar Dasgupta that he "lacks insight ... and has not realised the truth about the Eternal, the Formless"[121] are unfounded and without depth. We should not overlook the Upanishadic echoes in phrases like "enchanted my eyes", and "remove the veil from your face" used in the song. In the *Ishopanishad*, Mantra 15, we hear: "The face of Truth is covered by golden glitters. O Sungod, the care-taker of the universe, remove the cover, so that I can realize the Truth."[122]

---

[119] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 659, 1013. Translation mine.
[120] The concepts have been discussed in detail in the third chapter of the present dissertation.
[121] Shantikumar Dasgupta, *Rabindranather Rupak-Nātya* (Calcutta: Bookland Private Limited), 64. Translation mine.
[122] Swami Gambhirananda, *Upanishad Granthavali,* Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1987), 13.

This (apparent) duality of *rūp* and *arūp* brings us to the next play, *Rājā*, composed in 1910. Although our attention will obviously be focused on Thakurda's disguise/transformation, we must not overlook the fact that there is another character in the play who appears in disguise, and that too in the literal sense: it is Subarna, the impostor king. There will be occasions in the present section to touch upon this disguise as well. Furthermore, alongside Thakurda's transformation, his engagement with the overall visual politics of the play, which is novel and uniquely profound, will also be taken up. Much like the invisible Raja, the portrayal of Thakurda has also baffled the critics enormously. While for commentators like Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, Thakurda is Tagore's version of the Greek chorus[123], scholars including Subandhu Bhattacharya see him straightaway as "the messenger of God"[124]. These interpretations, although not invalid, are somewhat incomplete and simplistic; and they lack the multi-dimensional approach needed to explore a creation as complex as Thakurda. It may be useful to begin this discussion with a section from Sita Devi's account of seeing the second performance[125] of *Rājā* which took place in Santiniketan on 7 May 1911, on the occasion of Tagore's fiftieth birthday. In her *Punyasmriti* she recalls, "Rabindranath as Thakurda[126] presented himself in his usual saffron robe, wearing a garland of flowers. Again, when Thakurda appeared in the form of the Raja's commander-in-chief, he wore a white silk dress and a gorgeous belt."[127] These contrasting costumes, containing multiple layers of significance, are particularly evocative. The two images together capture the very crux of the concept of Thakurda. In this play, which in the playwright's

[123] Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, *Kavyaparikrama* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalaya, 1933), 21.
[124] Subandhu Bhattacharya, *Rabindranather Achalayatan* (Kolkata: Bama Pustakalaya, 2004), 42. Translation mine.
[125] *Raja* was first performed on March 15, 1911.
[126] Tagore played the roles of both Thakurda and the invisible Raja.
[127] Sita Devi, *Punyasmriti* (Calcutta: Maitri, 1964), 19. Translation mine.

own words is his '*Vasantosav*' or spring festival[128], Thakurda embodies the core of the Tagorean idea of spring: "Here arrives Spring, the king of seasons. His external appearance is bright and gorgeous, though there is a *bairāgi*[129] within...".[130]

By way of describing the nature of their Thakurda, a citizen (in the words of Kavi Keshari) sings, "Where the luminous beauty of forms entices the eyes, who is as *bholā* as you are, Thakurdada?" The word *bholā* perfectly describes Thakurda, although it is impossible to render it into English. Literally it means innocent, forgetful. However, in Bengali folk and Baul songs it has a strong spiritual connotation. In the present context it refers to one who is oblivious to the conventional ways and regulations of samsara, our life in the material world. The paradox evoked through the phrases "the luminous beauty of forms" and "*bholā*" most succinctly reflects Thakurda's engagement with the play's visual politics. With his band of young boys, a group of Bauls[131], a troupe of dancers[132], a gang of paupers and even a madman[133], Thakurda participates in the celebration of colour, music, dance and gaiety. But this zestful exuberance of revelry is but one aspect of his engagement with the festivities of spring. He knows that it is "a festival of varied tunes, together creating a unique harmony".[134] He sings: "Is spring merely an exhibition of blooming flowers?/ Don't you see the play of withered leaves and dropping flowers ..."; and connects it with the dualistic nature of Supreme

---

[128] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan, Vol. 10*, 53-54.
[129] A renunciant, one who is dispassionate towards all worldly pleasures and attraction.
[130] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 762. Translation mine.
[131] According to Subandhu Bhattacharya, Thakurda of *Raja* is "a covert Baul character". Subandhu Bhattacharya, *Rabindranāther Raja* (Kolkata: Sahitya Prakash, 1988), 64. Translation mine.
[132] One of the dancers refers to Thakurda as their *Nataraj* (Raja of dance). See Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 762.
[133] (a) "*Pagal"* literally means a madman. However, in this context, it has an overt spiritual and philosophical connotation, and refers to one who has rejected the conventional understandings of this world and life, and their mundane rules and regulations. Rabindranath Tagore, "*Bichitra Prabandha*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, *Vol. 3* (Kolkata: Visva Bharati Granthan Vibhag, 1987), 677.
(b) In a poem titled "*Pagal,"* collected in *Chhabi o Gan,* Rabindranath describes his idea of *Pagal* as "One who roams around seeing the world", and also perceives him as "Spring personified". Rabindranath Tagore, "*Chhabi o Gan*," *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 1, 105-6.
[134] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 764. Translation mine.

Godhead: “Is it only dazzling jewels that adorn my Lord’s feet?/ Millions of pebbles lie beneath them, weeping .../ The king of the festival gazes at the play of dropping flowers.[135]

In a play which is visually dominated by darkness on the one hand, and the delusion of dazzling exhibitionism on the other, Thakurda is the seer. He, in Tagore’s own words, has “completed” his “sadhana of darkness”.[136] He has learnt to be in love with “the intense dark depth.” It is through his absolute submission that he has gained his insight:

> I sit here with all that I own,
>
> Destruction as my hope.
>
> I look toward the path for him
>
> Who sets people adrift.
>
> The one who does not show himself
>
> But looks and loves concealed,
>
> My mind’s drowned in the secret love
>
> Of that intense, dark depth.[137]

His love for his “friend”,[138] he asserts, is reciprocal in nature, and the language/images through which he gives expression to this love are particularly significant in the context of the play’s visuality: “Will you alone just redden me/ Like this and run away?/ Lord, let yourself be caught and take/ My colour on your chest— / Red pollen from this lotus-

[135] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 764. Translation mine.
[136] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 10, 65. Translation mine
[137] Translation by Lal, 312.
[138] Lal, 309.

heart/ Will redden that fine robe."[139] His understanding of his Raja, the Transcendent Immanent God, that he has attained through "happiness and sorrow"[140], is obviously spiritual but also laced with political connotations: "…[T]he entire kingdom has become absolutely stuffed with the Raja only because the Raja doesn't show up in one place in this country of ours ...".[141] The phrase "show up in one place" contains meanings on which I shall comment while discussing the disguise of Subarna, the impostor king.

Towards the end of *Rājā*, in Scene 15, Thakurda appears as a warrior. To the rebels, the feudatory kings, he describes himself as a commander-in-chief of the Raja, and conveys his "call" to them:

> (Enter Thakurda in the guise of a warrior)
>
> Kalinga: What's that? Who is he?
>
> Panchal: How dare he enter without being summoned? Who's he?
>
> Virat: He is so audacious! Kalinga-raj, stop him!
>
> Kalinga: It would be improper on my part to step forward in the presence of elders like you.
>
> Vidarbha: Let us listen to what he has to say.
>
> Thakurda: The Raja has arrived.
>
> Vidarbha (startled): Raja!
>
> Panchal: What Raja?

[139] Lal, 298.
[140] Lal, 310.
[141] Lal, 284.

Kalinga: Which Raja?

Thakurda: My Raja.

Virat: Your Raja!

Kalinga: Who?

Koshal: Who is he?

Thakurda: You all know who He is. He has come.

Vidarbha: Come!

Koshal: What is his intention?

Thakurda: He has given you his call.

Kanchi: What! Call! What sort of a call is this?

Thakurda: Everybody is free to interpret His call in their own ways. He is prepared with all kinds of salutations.

Virat: Who are you?

Thakurda: I am one of his commanders-in-chief.

Kanchi: Commander-in-chief? That's a lie! Have you come to scare us? Do you think I haven't been able to see through your disguise? I know you very well. Of all people you are his commander-in-chief, are you?

Thakurda: You have rightly recognised me. Who is more feeble and frail than me! Even then today he has dressed me up as his commander-in-chief, and has sent me here. He has made his valiant warriors stay back at home.

Kanchi: Well, his invitation will be attended to with a fitting display of grandeur. But at present we have another important work. He'll have to wait till it gets over.

Thakurda: When He gives His call, He doesn't wait any longer!

Koshal: I accept His invitation, His call. I shall go immediately.

Vidarbha: Kanchi-raj, the matter regarding waiting is not sounding good. I am leaving!

Kalinga: You are the eldest among us; we shall follow you.

Panchal: O Kanchi-raj, look behind! Your royal parasol is lying on the dust; your parasol-bearer has fled, and you have no clue about it.

Kanchi: Oh, royal messenger, I shall also go, but to the battlefield and not the court.

Thakurda: Well, then you shall meet my Lord on the battlefield. That too is an excellent place.[142]

It needs to be pointed out that this episode along with Thakurda's appearance in the garb of a warrior is not present in the revised edition, *Arūp Ratan*. We might well conjecture that the protracted war scenes digress from the main plot and distract attention, and that is why the playwright has dropped them. But we should be mindful of the fact that in *Arūp Ratan,* the reference to war anyway is far less than what we see in *Rājā*. What is more, Tagore revisited and revised *Rājā* several times in different forms. *Arūp Ratan* was given its first shape in 1920, *Rājā* had its enlarged second edition in 1921 (the definitive one printed in the Complete Works), *Shāpmochan*, a

[142] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 786-87. Translation mine.

dance drama loosely based on the basic idea of *Rājā*, appeared in 1931 and was revised for its definitive text in 1933, and *Arūp Ratan* got its completely reworked final edition in 1935 (included in the Complete Works).

The presentation of a gay, jovial, wise old man, who is "on smiling terms" with everyone, as a warrior, creates a contrast uniquely effective and in tune with the image of "a lotus with a bolt of lightning in its middle"[143] which is painted on the Raja's flag. Tagore sees his God as one who is both the Creator and the Destroyer: "In his one hand he has a sword, in the other a garland."[144] Almost this very same image of dualism is embodied by Thakurda, the visible friend of the invisible Raja.

This reference to dualism brings us to Subarna and his disguise, on which I shall briefly comment before moving on to the next play. Unlike the transformation of Thakurda, this is an actual (and conventional) disguise, in the sense that it involves concealment, pretence and deception. In fact, it is an important plot point. The visual temptation evoked by the external beauty of the impostor/false king in the mind of Sudarshana sets the play in motion. But the import of this disguise is of course not restricted merely to the external actions. Rather, its contribution to the inner drama and its engagement with optics are remarkably deep and profound. If the true Raja is invisible, black[145] and concealed in darkness, Subarna[146] is overtly visible and out on

[143] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 758. Translation mine.
[144] Quoted in Lal, 57.
[145] The multi-layered significance of "black" and "invisible" in the context of the Raja has been analysed in detail in the third chapter of the present dissertation.
[146] The name Subarna (Suvarna) itself is quite suggestive. It literally means "good-coloured" and is applied to gold; and it is conventionally associated with enchantment, illusion, hoarding, worldly attachments and even a pompous and gorgeous display of wealth and power. This is also true in the world of Tagorean literature. Works like "*Guptadhan"*, "*Svarnamriga"* and *Raktakaravi* contain enough evidence of this association.

the streets (with his flag on which is painted a flame-of-the-forest flower, "glistering all over"[147]) pompously exhibiting his physical beauty and grandeur.

Significantly enough, the deception of the disguise is smashed during a conflagration. Fire exposes the true identity of the false Raja to Sudarshana, after which begins her sādhanā of sorrow:

> Sudarshana: Raja, save me. Fire surrounds me.
>
> Subarna: Where's the Raja? I'm not the Raja.
>
> Sudarshana: You're not the Raja?
>
> Subarna: I'm an impostor, I'm a scoundrel! (Throwing his crown to the ground) Let my deception become dust.[148]

This reference to the destruction of falsehood brings us to *Achalāyatan*,[149] in which Dadathakur[150] in the form of the Guru ushers a storm of demolition into the static world of the institution of inertness and untruth. Despite all similarities with his predecessors, it can be asserted with little hesitation that *Achalāyatan*'s Dadathakur is far more evolved. Here I would like to observe that when *Shāradotsav* and *Rājā* were revised and truncated into *Rinshodh* and *Arūp Ratan* respectively, the importance and complexities of their Thakurdas got notably diminished. However, while recasting *Achalāyatan*, Tagore was particularly careful in preserving the multi-layered effectiveness of Dadathakur. What is more, by way of condensing the play's somewhat

---

[147] Lal, 287.
[148] Lal, 299.
[149] *Achalayatan* was composed between 31 May 31 and 29 June 1911. It was first published in the journal *Pravasi* in October 1911. As a book it was published in August 1912, but not staged before April 1914.
[150] During the first performance of *Achalayatan*, as we get to know from the accounts of Sita Devi, Tagore played the role of the Acharya, and Kshiti Mohan Sen that of Dadathakur. Sita Devi, 71.

diffuse structure, he succeeded in heightening the importance of the character.[151] Among all the plays in which Thakurda/ Dadathakur appears, it is in *Achalāyatan* that he occupies a central position in the narrative. Right from its beginning and throughout, the characters and audience alike await his arrival. The play can be understood virtually as a 'Waiting for Guru', who finally arrives at the beginning of the monsoon. We would definitely be reminded of the festivals of autumn and spring, as seen in the previous plays, of which the respective Thakurdas embodied the very spirit. The significance of the monsoon, and its association with the arrival of the Guru, is best captured in the words of Panchak: "Ah! the sky is overcast with clouds! Acharyadev, can you hear the incessant peals of thunder burning the sky from end to end? ... Finally, the thirst of this earth has been quenched—this black earth—the earth under the feet of all."[152] Again, we notice the same play of dualism that I have commented on in the preceding discussions, being expanded through the portrayal of Dadathakur: he, on the one hand showers joy, love, wisdom and truth on "the dreary desert sand of dead habit"[153], and on the other, smashes the high walls of rigidity, divisiveness and exclusion.

In the context of the various forms of Dadathakur in *Achalāyatan*, it would be useful to consider a song from the play which precisely summarises his features:

He is one and he is also a thousand men.

Our Dadathakur!

He is fun—

---

[151] From the accounts of Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay we get to know that Tagore initially wanted his *Achalayatan* to be named "Guru", which he brings back as a title for the revised version.
Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay, *Rabi-Rashmi*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: A Mukherjee and Co. Ltd.,1953), 122.
[152] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 833. Translation mine.
[153] https://allpoetry.com/where-the-mind-is-without-fear
Accessed on 14.03.2023

Our Dadathakur.

In all kinds of work,

In many forms,

He is our playmate—

Dadathakur.

In the union of all men,

With those who weep,

With those who laugh,

The man for all moments,

Dadathakur. He is in the home,

He brings us outside,

He is the man in our corner—

Our Dadathakur.

He is the man of our heart,

Our Dadathakur.[154]

Indeed, Dadathakur appears in many forms. He is a blend of action, devotion and knowledge—he is the Dadathakur of the Shonpanshus, the non-Hindu, non-Aryan race[155]; the Goshai of the Darbhaks, a marginalised community of outcasts; and the Guru of the dwellers of Achalayatan, who consider themselves to be the upper-caste,

[154] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 817. Translation mine.
[155] In the original Bengali text, they have been described as *mlechchha*, which means barbarian, alien, savage, untouchable, and also non-Aryan, non-Hindu. Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 810.

educated class. Through the depiction of these varied races, and the figure of Dadathakur, who binds all of them together, Tagore projects a dramatic embodiment of the race and the caste problems of India, and his 'solution' (albeit an idealistic one) for them, that he expresses in his 1917 lecture "Nationalism in India":

> ... [F]rom the earliest beginnings of history, India has had her own problem constantly before her—it is the race problem. Each nation must be conscious of its mission and we, in India, must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political, simply because we have not yet been finally able to accomplish what was set before us by our providence ... In spite of our great difficulty, however, India has done something. She has tried to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others, preaching one God to all races of India ...[156]

From the perspective of visual politics, perhaps the most remarkable form that Dadathakur assumes is that of a warrior. In the fifth scene we see him revealing himself as the Guru of the Sthabiraks of Achalayatan. He, with his group of Shonpanshus, comes to execute the ordain of his "friend", his "Raja": "When their sins taking the shape of lofty walls, will rise to obfuscate the light of the sky, we must smash them into dust."[157] Obviously we are reminded of the commander-in-chief of the previous play. Dadathakur of *Achalāyatan* is almost an extension of the dualism of the lotus and the bolt of lightning on that Raja's flag.

---

[156] Tagore, "Nationalism in India", 119.
[157] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 824. Translation mine.

Mahapanchak: Are you our Guru?

Dadathakur: Yes, I am your Guru, though you may not know me.

Mahapanchak: You are the Guru! Then why have you come like this, shattering all our rules? Who is going to obey you?

Dadathakur: I know you won't obey me, but I am your Guru.

Mahapanchak: You are the Guru! Then, why are you dressed like our enemy?

Dadathakur: This is the dress of the Guru ...[158]

The Guru himself explains that he had to take up the form of destruction, for the immovable walls of Achalayatan had risen so high that all the easy, simple and peaceful paths of meeting and union were rendered inaccessible. He had to break the doors in order to enter. However, the play does not end with the image of demolition, but a call for reconstruction given by the Guru himself; and to the young boys of the institution he reveals himself as their playmate—harbinger of light, joy, life and freedom, a figure that we are already familiar with.

Finally, we come to *Dākghar*.[159] This play has a folklorish and fairytale-like texture, and the presence of Thakurda (in the guise of a fakir)[160] with all his fantastical stories packed with visual images adds significantly to its lyricism and overall picturesque quality. *Dākghar*, somewhat like *Achalāyatan*, is again a play about waiting

[158] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 837. Translation mine.
[159] It was written in September 1911 and first published in January 1912. However, its world premiere occurred in its English translation as *The Post Office* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland, in May 1913. The Bengali original was first staged on 3 May 1917 by the Brahmo Balya Samaj in Calcutta, and then under the direction of Tagore at Bichitra, Jorasanko, Calcutta, on 10 October 1917.
[160] Abhijit Sen, while commenting on the 1917 production of the play, points out that "There was an English synopsis made of the play, which includes a stage direction: 'Enter GAFFER in the road disguised as a beggar. He signs to the boy and passes on, followed by the curd-seller.' Evidently, by the time this English synopsis was prepared, his entry as a beggar/ wandering minstrel (*baul*) had become an established stage practice, though not marked as such in the early written versions of the play." Sen, 141.

and also seeing. We hear Amal, the ailing child, who according to the playwright himself represents "the man whose soul has received the call of the open road"[161] saying "I want to see everything that is there. I just want to go around seeing."[162] But people like Madhav Datta, "the worldly-wise", and the physician, "the custodian of conventional platitude",[163] strive to keep him confined within the limits of the four walls; they attempt to shut all the doors and windows of his room. It is in this context that Thakurda comes in with his vision of freedom and the "light and wind of autumn".[164] He is not only the "master of making the young boys restless"[165] and "drawing them outdoors", but also knows "games that would hold them indoors".[166]

In the third part of the play we see him appearing in the disguise of a fakir, and it is remarkable to note that to Amal he always remains a fakir, or literally one who is without worldly possessions and beyond such attachments. However, it must be remembered that this guise of Thakurda does not have any angle of concealment or deception to it. In fact, *Dākghar* does not have any concrete narrative in the conventional sense; it is a prose lyric, and the appearance of Thakurda as fakir has figurative significance. It can best be understood as a visual performance on his part in tune with the stories that he narrates to Amal. He not only creates an alternate world/reality of colour, music, life and freedom for the child, but also complements the mental visuals that he produces with his own faculty of imagination.[167] A slice of their

[161] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1042.
[162] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 851.
[163] C. F. Andrews, *Letters to a Friend* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926), 172.
[164] The obvious similarity with the Thakurda of *Sharadotsav* is impossible to overlook. Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha, Vol. 1*, 850. Translation mine.
[165] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 849. Translation mine.
[166] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 850. Translation mine.
[167] Amal's 'seeing' has been discussed in detail later in the dissertation.

dialogue may enable us to better understand how this ocular politics gets played out in the text:

> Amal: Tell me, Fakir, what the cranes' island is like.
>
> Thakurda: It is an amazing place! It is a land of birds. No men are there; and they neither speak nor walk, they just sing and fly.
>
> Amal: Oh, how wonderful! Is it on some shore?
>
> Thakurda: Yes, of course, it is by the sea.
>
> Amal: And are there blue mountains?
>
> Thakurda: Yes, indeed, their nests are among the blue mountains; and at the time of sunset, twilight glimmers on those mountains; and all the green birds come flocking to their nests. The colours of the sky, the birds and the mountains together produce a spectacular effect.
>
> Amal: Are there streams in the mountains?
>
> Thakurda: Of course! How can there be mountains, and no streams! Oh, they are like molten diamonds; and, what dances they have! They make the pebbles produce melodious sound[168] as they rush over them and jump into the sea!
>
> No physician would ever dare to stop them even for a moment. The birds looked down upon me as nothing but a man, merely an insignificant being without wings—and they would have nothing to do with me. Were it not so I would have built a small house for myself among the crowd of nests by the brook, and pass my days seeing the sea waves.[169]

[168] The series of onomatopoeic phrases used in the Bengali text could not be replicated in English.
[169] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 859-60. Translation mine.

We note with particular interest that Amal and Thakurda together create this montage of word-pictures. To be precise, Thakurda confirms to Amal exactly what he imagines and visualizes. He brings the world of images into the small room of Amal—this is his "game of holding the boys indoors". But these form only one aspect of Thakurda's presentation of himself as fakir and his engagement with the visual politics. He is the seer in the play, the one with true spiritual insight. When the Headman attempts to mock Amal and hurt his innocent sentiments and beliefs by giving him a blank piece of paper, declaring it to be the Raja's letter, Thakurda says, "I have indeed gone mad, and that is why today I can see letters scripted on this blank paper. The Raja has written that He Himself is coming to see Amal; and that He is also bringing his Royal Physician with Him."[170] Thakurda symbolises Amal's bridge between the perceptible world of forms and the metaphysical realisation of the Formless. In one of his songs Tagore states, "The Beauty of the Formless cradles in the lap of the forms."[171] He who conjured colourful, vivid pictures of beauteous nature also has the intuition and insight with which he interprets the message of the Formless. Supreme Godhead[172] is not an object of determinative knowledge, and thus It is invisible, its letter is blank. It needs a seer like Thakurda, who is a Fakir or a man who has transcended attachments with worldly possessions, to read and realize the message.

In this section, through our discussion of the Thakurda characters, their disguise or transformation, and engagement with the visuality of the plays, we have attempted to understand the evolution of the playwright's ideas about concealment and revelation, visibility and seeing. By the time Tagore composes his early twentieth-century plays in Santiniketan, we see that he has completely departed from the stereotypical usage of

[170] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 863. Translation mine.
[171] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 257. Translation mine.
[172] The various layers of significance of the invisible Raja have been discussed later in the dissertation.

disguise, an age-old conventional dramatic tool. He probes into its symbolic possibilities to the deepest and discovers potentiality which remained hitherto unexplored on the Bengali stage.

In this chapter we have attempted to analyse the characters in Tagore's plays who appear in "various forms and guises",[173] and who, by travelling through the 'visual' process of veiling and unveiling, seek to arrive at a realisation of their 'essential identity'. For Tagore this 'essential identity' always exceeds the limits of existence defined by the narrow scope of the socio-cultural institutions that human beings are compelled to be a part of. Interestingly, by embarking on this search of 'self-identity', all the characters discussed in the chapter make crucial political comments on their own existence and also on the existence of others who surround them, thereby provoking a reconsideration of the meaning(s) of that which is conveniently understood as 'given'. In short, they move towards an assertion of identity that is expansive and inclusive in nature.

[173] Tagore, from "*Āpni āmār konkhāne*", *Gitabitān,* 173.

Chapter Two

Blindness: "Pour More Light into These Eyes"[1]

Contrasts and conflicts between the ideas of physical eyesight and spiritual/inner vision have been a conventional, even cliched, metaphor and motif used by many philosophers, religious thinkers and authors since ancient times. Tagore, being a poet deeply occupied with the experience of 'seeing',[2] was particularly interested in dealing with the ideas of sight and sightlessness. In many of his works he portrayed blind characters, and through them he attempted to understand and analyse the various meanings (including spiritual, social, cultural and even political) of blindness and perceptions about it. In his poem "*Suradaser Prarthana*" (collected in *Mānasi*, and based on the legend[3] of the blind Bhakti poet Suradas, or Surdas), we find Suradas, being deeply ashamed of his "sinful eyes"[4] of desire and lust, requesting the Goddess of his Soul to gouge them out with the dagger of "morning light" and replace them with the limitless darkness of "formlessness". However, later in the poem he realises that for a poet such darkness cannot be the only truth, and instead what emerges against its

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, from "*Prāna bhariye trishā hariye*", *Gitabitān* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 2002), 75. Translation mine.

[2] Rani Chanda, in her *Ālāpchāri Rabindranāth*, reports that at the age of seventy-eight when Rabindranath was suffering from a severe eye ailment, he said on one occasion, "I cannot afford to lose these eyes. I must take good care of them. I hope God would not be so cruel to me. With these eyes I have seen his creations; I have appreciated them in so many ways, in so many words. They must have made Him glad." Rani Chanda, *Ālāpchāri Rabindranāth* (Calcutta: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 1942), 49. Translation mine.

[3] Here we may recall the similar legend of Bilvamangal, based on which Girish Ghosh (1844-1912) composed his popular mythological play *Bilvamangal Thākur*, first staged in 1886. This might have influenced Tagore's "*Suradāser Prārthanā*" which was composed in 1888. See Jagadish Bhattacharya, *Kavi-mānasi*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Bharavi, 2000), 245-46.

[4] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra-Rachanāvali*, Vol.1 (Kolkata: Visva-bharati, 1986), 302. Translation mine.

backdrop is a formless light of Inspiration, shining on all forms of art and beauty. This is only one instance to show that Tagore's dealings with the idea of blindness and vision are very complex, consisting of multiple layers. He is at the same time a sensuous poet, celebrating the world with all his senses, and a spiritual seeker in search of what is beyond the limits of the world perceptible to the senses. What is most interesting is that there is actually no contradiction between these apparently conflicting selves; rather, they complement each other to constitute the persona of the visionary artist.

This chapter, consisting of four sections, each dealing with one play, aims at understanding the chronological evolution of Tagore's ideas of blindness, and his depiction of its images. Although our main focus will be on the 'idea' and 'metaphor' of blindness, we shall also have occasion to comment on the visual imaging of the 'spectacle' of blindness, of which Rabindranath, being an astute theatrician, was certainly not oblivious.

Section 2.1

In the first section I shall discuss the young Tagore's depiction of blindness (particularly in relation to the character of the blind rishi) in his play *Kāl-mrigayā*, and its engagement with the contemporary debates and discourses around the 'revival' of classical Indian literature (especially the two epics—the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*).[5] While staying within the limits of my dissertation I shall also briefly

[5] With the advent of Western education in India, nineteenth-century Bengal witnessed the emergence of a group of newly educated Indians, who, in the spirit of their "Renaissance", reviving the ancient culture of India, sought to explore the body of Indian classical literature with the two epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, at its centre. They often attempted to (re-)present these classical works in forms befitting the novel taste(s) of the contemporary age.

touch upon Tagore's engagement with the traditional views and values that are encapsulated in the episodes of the epics which he was reworking.

Kāl-mrigayā (1882)[6] is based on the famous narrative of Dasharatha's fateful hunt, appearing both in Valmiki's *Rāmāyana* and Krittivas's *Rāmāyana*, that Tagore was thoroughly acquainted with. However, it is to be clarified that unlike *Vālmiki-pratibhā* (in which Tagore had primarily used Krittivas's *Rāmāyana* as his source), *Kāl-mrigayā* is mainly founded on the aforementioned episode as it appears in the "*Ayodhyā Kāndam*" (*Sarga* 63 and 64) of Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*. Since I cannot read the original Sanskrit text of Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*, I have had to rely on M. N. Datta's English translation (1891).

Before entering a detailed discussion on Tagore's Andha Rishi (literally, blind rishi) and the play's treatment of vision/sight and its lack, for the sake of convenience I shall briefly summarise the story of the fateful hunt as it is narrated by Dasharatha to Kaushalya in the epic.

Once during the early part of his life, Dasharatha, engaged in hunting through a dense forest, reached the bank of the Sarayu River. Night was advancing and darkness was growing thick. He suddenly heard a sound from the river. Thinking it to be the sound of an elephant drinking water, Dasharatha unleashed a shaft in the direction from which the sound came. Instantly, he heard a human cry of pain. Aghast, Dasharatha ran to the spot to find a hermit boy lying in a pool of blood, beating his limbs on the ground and crying. The water pitcher that he had been dipping in the river lay close by. In answer to Dasharatha's question, the boy told him that he had come to the river to

[6] *Kāl-mrigayā* was first published on 5 December 1882 and was first staged on December 23, in Jorasanko, the Tagore extended-family mansion, before an invited gathering of literary men.

collect water for his feeble, aged and blind parents. Soon after, the boy succumbed to his wound and Dasharatha, taking water in the pitcher, went in search of the hermitage in darkness. It was with much difficulty that he found it. As he drew near the boy's parents, they heard his footsteps and mistaking them for those of their son, they called him eagerly. The king with tearful eyes told them what had befallen. Loud wailings and cries rent the hermitage. According to the wish of the blind parents the king took them to where their son lay. There, Dasharatha made a fire and placed the dead body in it. The blind rishi cursed the king that he too would experience grief due to the loss of his son. Then the parents also entered the fire and sacrificed their lives.

In Krittivas's *Rāmāyana*, this story appears with certain variations. One section that does not appear in Valmiki's *Rāmāyana* needs to be separately mentioned here, for it will have bearing on my subsequent argument. This section specifically pertains to the cause of Andhaka's (the name given by Krittivas to the rishi) blindness. Andhaka, by way of giving evidence for the fact that the words uttered by a rishi can never be futile, recollected the curse of the great sage Trijata and his own past misdeeds which led to his blindness. Trijata had come to the dwelling of Andhaka's father for alms. As instructed by his father, Andhaka touched the feet of the sage but while doing so, he saw that the sage suffered from filaria, and he instantly closed his eyes in disgust. This enraged Trijata to curse Andhaka, thereby causing his blindness. Andhaka's wife (Andhaki), who had done likewise, also faced the same consequence.[7]

It is interesting to note that this somewhat sensational account and cause of the couple's blindness do not find any echo in Tagore. In fact, in the fifth scene of the play, their son just before dying tells Dasharatha, "My father, who is blind by birth, afflicted

[7] Krittivas, *Rāmāyana*, ed. Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 2011), 38-39. Translation mine.

by thirst, is eagerly waiting for me to bring water."[8] Since (unlike some of his predecessors) Tagore's project of reworking episodes from the epics was not motivated by any religious sentiment,[9] Krittivas's overtly superstitious account of the blindness may not have attracted him. Moreover, the Krittivas version, which is a classic example of the religious model of disability, according to which disability/impairment is associated with curse, sin, punishment and social/devotional transgression, may not have appealed to Tagore's rationalist and humanitarian sensibilities either.

The most striking aspect of the character of the blind rishi in *Kāl-mrigayā*, which is significantly similar to that in the *Rāmāyana* (both the versions under consideration), is his helplessness and vulnerability. Besides, both Valmiki and Krittivas mention the blind mother but, other than giving expression to certain obvious and expected reactions at the death of her son, she does not make any significant contribution to the narrative. In his dramatic rendition, Tagore has deleted this character, thereby making the sage's situation of helplessness, loneliness and dependence all the more intense and daunting.

I wish to quote a few sections from *Kāl-mrigayā* and compare them with their equivalents in Valmiki's *Rāmāyana* and Krittivas's *Rāmāyana* to show the extent of

[8] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 2000), 75. Translation mine.

[9] The latter half of the 19th century was marked by a proliferation of Bengali plays that were mythological in nature and based on exciting, sentimental and sensational episodes from the epics. Even at the risk of sounding simplistic, for the sake of convenience of discussion it might be noted that once the initial excitement of the Young Bengal movement and the Brahmo Samaj had mellowed down, there came a period of reawakening of Hindu religious sentiments, which may have accounted for such a phenomenon. Playwrights like Girish Ghosh often used Krittivas's *Rāmāyana* and Kashidas's *Mahābhārata* as the staple sources for many of their mythological plays. However, Tagore's projects (of reworking certain episodes from the epics in some of his plays), were responses and reactions to the traditions set by his predecessors like Madhusudan Dutt, Girish Ghosh, Manmohan Basu, not inspired or motivated by any religious sentiment. Dutt, of course, had rejected Hinduism and converted to Christianity.

Tagore's adherence to the sources and his depiction of the blind rishi's state of helplessness and total dependence on his only son.

Kāl-mrigayā

a) At the end of the first scene the boy says, "My *blind* father is alone in the *dark* hut."[10] (emphases mine)
b) The third scene opens with the rishi reciting a Sanskrit verse (which I shall discuss later). He is thirsty, so he stops and asks his son to fetch water for him. This is immediately followed by roars of thunder (as specified in the stage directions), hearing which he attempts to dissuade his son from bringing water: "No, there is no need of bringing water! Don't go, my dear child! It is late night and the clouds are rumbling. You are *the gem of these unseeing eyes*. Who else do I have? I won't be able to bear it."[11] (emphases mine)
c) Before dying, the boy tells Dasharatha, "What wrong have I done you? Why did you strike me with the arrow? With the same arrow you have destroyed the lives of two *unfortunate* individuals."[12] (emphasis mine)

Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*

a) The mortally wounded boy tells Dasharatha, "What wrong, O monarch, had I residing in the woods, done thee, that coming to procure water for my parents, I have been thus afflicted by thee? By piercing my marrow with a shaft, thou hast slain both my aged and blind father and mother. Surely they, *feeble and blind*, who are afflicted by thirst and remaining in expectation of

[10] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 66. Translation mine.
[11] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 68. Translation mine.
[12] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 75. Translation mine.

me, will now bear [the stress and tension of] the expectation as well as the parching thirst."[13] (emphases mine)

b) Dasharatha informs Kaushalya what he saw at the ashram: "There I found his *aged, infirm, forlorn* parents, without anyone to help them in moving about, —*like two birds whose wings have been severed*, keeping up a talk about their son without experiencing any fatigue, and like helpless ones feeding on a hope which has been blasted by me."[14] (emphases mine)

c) On hearing the footsteps of Dasharatha (and mistaking them for those of his son) the father calls out, "Thy mother, O child, was exceedingly anxious in consequence of thy sporting in the water... Thou art the resource of these *helpless ones*; thou art the *eyes of these bereft of their sight*. Our lives are bound up with thee."[15] (emphases mine)

d) The father, falling upon the person of his dead son, laments, "...who procuring kandas, fruits and roots, will feed me like a welcome guest, *incapable of doing anything and furnishing provisions*, and without anyone to take care of myself? And my son, how will I maintain this blind ascetic mother of thine, proud of her son, who is passing her days in misery."[16] (emphases mine)

Krittivas's *Rāmāyana*

a) The fatally wounded Sindhu (the boy) tells Dasharatha, "My blind parents residing in the forest of wood-apple trees will die because of my absence... *I was Andhaka's life*. I used to bring them [Andhaka and Andhaki] water to

[13]M. N. Datta, ed., *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam* (Kolkata: Dev Publication, 1891), 366.
[14]M. N. Datta, ed., *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam*, 368.
[15]M. N. Datta, ed., *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam*, 368.
[16]M. N. Datta, ed., *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam*, 370.

quench their thirst and fruits to satiate their hunger. *Now who will bring them fruits and water?* They will die of hunger. They will die in grief due to the loss of their son."[17] (emphases mine)

b) "The two of them bereft of their eyes cannot see. They call out—'Come son! We are *starving since yesterday*. Give us water and fruits. *Save our lives*.'"[18] (emphases mine)

Thus we see that Tagore in his portrayal of the rishi's helplessness not only adheres to the sources, but also retains certain phrases in the play. "You are the gem of these unseeing eyes" (*Kāl-mrigayā*) is an indirect echo of "Thou art the eyes of those bereft of their sight" (Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*). Again, "With the same arrow you have destroyed the lives of two unfortunate individuals" (*Kāl-mrigayā*) is a clear reflection of "By piercing my marrow with a shaft thou hast slain both my aged and blind father and mother." (Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*).

Now, I shall briefly focus on the sloka that the rishi is found reciting at the beginning of the third scene. This will enable me to explore another aspect of his character. The English translation of the Sanskrit sloka is as follows:

> The chest [of the universe] with mid-region for its insides and the Earth for its bottom, does not decay. The quarters are its [different] corners, and heaven is its lid, which is above. This chest is the storehouse of treasures. Inside it are all things.[19]

---

[17] Krittivas, *Rāmāyana*, ed. Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay, 37. Translation mine.
[18] Krittivas, *Rāmāyana*, ed. Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay, 38. Translation mine.
[19] Swami Lokeswarananda, *Chandogya Upanishad* (English translation), https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/chandogya-upanishad-english/d/doc239010 . Accessed on 3 November 2019.

> The eastern quarter is called Juhu, the southern quarter Sahamana, the western quarter Rajni, and the northern quarter Subhuta. Vayu (the air) is their child. *He who knows this Vayu as the child of the quarters never weeps for his sons. I know the air to be the child of the quarters, may I never weep for my sons*.[20] (emphases mine)

The emphasised lines are particularly significant for they can be read on at least two levels and thus can enlighten two aspects of the character of the rishi. On the first level, the section can appear as a kind of dramatic irony when contrasted against his bitter lamentation with the dead body of his son on his lap. On another level it anticipates his spiritual transcendence and forgiveness with which the final scene of the play closes.

The character of the helpless, dependent, lonely, blind rishi (as portrayed at the end of the first scene) evolves through four phases by the end of the play. These phases are helplessness and abject vulnerability, wrath, lamentation, forgiveness and transcendence. The following four quotations will serve to illustrate this corresponding evolution:

a) When Dasharatha enters the ashram carrying the corpse of the boy, the distressed father, mistaking him for his son, calls out, "It took you so long to return. Come to my heart! Where were you all the night in this inclement weather, forgetting your blind father? Eagerly I have been waiting for you all night. I am afflicted by thirst. Give me water. Come close to me."[21]

---

[20] Swami Lokeswarananda, *Chandogya Upanishad* (English translation), https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/chandogya-upanishad-english/d/doc239011.html . Accessed on 3 November 2019.
[21] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 76. Translation mine.

b) After Dasharatha discloses the truth, the rishi gets angry and says, "Are you not afraid of the consequences? O evil-minded one, what have you done!"[22] He curses: "Since this sorrow arising from the calamity that has befallen my son, is at present mine (through thy instrumentality), I curse thee—thou shalt even in this way find thy death from grief for thy son."[23]

c) Falling on the body of his son, he laments, "O how could someone kill you—an image of affection, a young and delicate child! Did it hurt you a lot? For once come on my lap! How you lie on the dust! Come, I shall keep you close to my heart."[24]

d) After Dasharatha begs mercy and forgiveness, Andha Rishi says, "All my sorrows have ebbed away. I forgive you."[25]

This feature of forgiveness is unique to Tagore for it is not present in the sources. The rishi, far from being a flat character, is not a mere stereotypical depiction of blindness, and emerges as a manifestation of the Tagorean vision of spiritual transcendence.

Before concluding this section it may be useful to comment on the motif of darkness which runs through the play, and is inextricably linked with the idea/portrayal of blindness.[26] This link is established as early as in the first scene, where the boy says, "My *blind* father is alone in the *dark* hut."[27] (emphases mine) Interestingly, '*andha*' and '*āndhār*' (the two words used by Tagore for 'blind' and 'dark' respectively) are

[22] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 77. Translation mine.
[23] M. N. Datta, ed., *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam*, 371. In the play Tagore has quoted the curse in the original Sanskrit from Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*. I have used Datta's English translation.
[24] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 77. Translation mine.
[25] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 77. Translation mine.
[26] Though the fifth chapter of this dissertation is entirely devoted to a discussion on 'Darkness and Light' in the plays of Tagore, I wish to comment on their treatment in *Kāl-mrigayā* in the present chapter for they are both thematically and structurally associated with blindness. Moreover, this might give an additional perspective to the discussion on sightlessness.
[27] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 66. Translation mine.

phonetically and etymologically close to each other, and Tagore has quite astutely and poetically used them to render the link between the two all the more effective. It is also to be considered that darkness in this play is associated not only with physical blindness, but is also connected with other forms of sightlessness/lack of vision. The boy's inability to envision his fate (which in the play is deliberately contrasted against the blind father's ability to sense the future and his repeated attempts to dissuade his son from bringing water) and Dasharatha's fatal act of unleashing the shaft without seeing the target are not only crucial plot points, but they also contribute significantly to the general atmosphere of pathos and awe. However, this play, which begins with the fading light of evening and reaches its tragic climax in the darkness of night, ends with light and morning.

Let us consider the sections from the final scene where we find the mention of light in some detail. Towards the beginning of the scene, Lila[28] comes to Andha Rishi and says, "Where is my brother? To which part of the forest has he gone? Why can't I see him? He promised to play with me this morning. Why hasn't he returned yet?"[29] This is a morning which we know is sombre and does not bring any hope. It is in fact a continuation of the preceding terrible night. It does not bring the boy but brings his dead body to his father. Again, at the end of the scene we find references to light—but they are in complete contrast with the previous one. After forgiving Dasharatha, the rishi addresses his dead son and says, "Go to the eternal realm leaving behind all ties of maya

[28] Lila's identity in the play is unclear. She addresses the boy as "brother" and the rishi as "father", but this does not imply that she is directly related to them. In Indian culture brother and father are words often used to refer to someone very dear and respectable as well. She has a mother who has no role in the play and has no relationship with the rishi either, therefore we can assume that Lila simply knows the rishi and his family very well.

[29] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 75. Translation mine.

and illusion. Go to the realm where there is no darkness of sorrow... Go to the eternal realm which is illuminated by bright, pure and divine light."[30]

These attributes of light are in tune with the forgiving and merciful aspect of the rishi's character and also of Tagorean spiritualism. Thus an evolution is played out in the ocular politics of the play on multiple yet parallel levels.

To conclude, I wish to cite Tagore's own comments about the first production of the play and its effect on the audience. We should remember that he acted the part of Andha Rishi himself, at the young age of 21. This gives an additional perspective to the mature treatment of blindness, and enables us to understand its reception. "Encouraged by the success of this new line in *Vālmiki-pratibhā*, I composed another musical play of the same class. It was called *Kāl-mrigayā* (*The Fateful Hunt*). The plot was based on the story in the *Rāmāyana* of the accidental killing of a blind hermit's only son by King Dasharatha. It was played on a stage erected on our roof-terrace, and the audience seemed profoundly moved by its *pathos*."[31] (emphasis mine) Among several factors, the portrayal of blindness (intertwined with the treatment of light and darkness) must have played a significant role in creating the effect of pathos. Tagore, being a perceptive playwright, director and actor, was not oblivious to the potential of the depiction of blindness on stage that he experienced in this production; and therefore he carefully exploited this visual tool later on more than one occasion, which I shall explore in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Section 2.2

[30] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 78. Translation mine.
[31] Rabindranath Tagore, "My Reminiscences" in *Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2012), 548.

In this section, I shall discuss Tagore's engagement with the 'idea' of blindness in his short verse-drama *Gāndhārir Āvedan*. By focusing on the three main characters, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Duryodhan, I shall attempt to investigate his negotiations with the politics of literal and metaphorical representations of blindness in this play.

Gāndhārir Āvedan, though left undated, is the earliest of the works collected in *Kāhini* (1900), barring *Vidāy Abhisāp.* For the sake of convenience, I provide a summary of the narrative outline in the words of Upendranath Bhattacharya:

> The Pāndavas have been defeated at the unfair game of dice, Draupadi has been insulted and harassed in the court. They are making arrangements for leaving the kingdom and departing for the forest. It is at this time that Gandhari, the mother of Duryodhan, appeals to Dhritarashtra to disown his son, the source of misdeeds. Gandhari is a worshipper of the eternal dharma. The annihilation of the Kaurava dynasty is inevitable, owing to the sins incurred and the indignity bestowed on the dynasty by Duryodhan, who has deviated from the path of justice, courage and duties of a king. The entire universe is stunned by this insult inflicted on humanity. Thus, Gandhari, on behalf of the eternal dharma of humanity, is praying for the abandonment of Duryodhan, the sinner. Having failed with Dhritarashtra, who is *blinded by affection* for his son, Gandhari has approached the Almighty and is waiting for the inevitable and absolute outcome of his justice.[32] (emphasis mine)

I begin this discussion with the character of Dhritarashtra, who, among the three characters under consideration, is the one 'most evidently' blind. However, before

[32] Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Nātya Parikramā* (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2013), 77. Translation mine.

coming to Tagore's Dhritarashtra and the portrayal of his blindness, it is necessary to briefly consider their presentation in the *Mahābhārata.* Section 106 of the "*Ādi Parva*" contains the description of Dhritarashtra and the cause of his blindness:

> Soon after the monthly season of the princess of Kosala had been over, Satyavati, purifying her daughter-in-law with a bath, led her into the sleeping apartment. There seating her upon a luxurious bed, she addressed her, saying, "O Princess of Kosala, thy husband had an elder brother who shall this day enter thy womb as thy child. Wait for him tonight without dropping off to sleep." Hearing these words of her mother-in-law, the amiable princess, as she lay on her bed, began to think of Bhishma and the other elders of the Kuru race. Then the rishi of truthful speech [i.e. Vyasa], who had given his promise in respect of Amvika (the eldest of the princesses) in the first instance, entered her chamber while the lamp was burning. The princess *seeing* his dark visage, his matted locks of copper hue, blazing eyes, his grim beard, *closed her eyes in fear*. The rishi, from desire of accomplishing his mother's wishes, however knew her. But the latter struck with fear *opened not her eyes even once to look at him.* And when Vyasa came out he was met by his mother, who asked him, "Shall the princess have an accomplished son?" Hearing her he replied, "The son of the princess she will bring forth shall be equal in might unto ten thousand elephants. He will be an illustrious royal sage, possessed of great learning and intelligence. The high-souled one shall have in his time a century of sons. *But from the fault of his mother he shall be blind.*" At these words of her son, Satyavati said, "O thou of ascetic wealth, *how can one that is blind become a monarch worthy of the Kurus? How can one that is blind become the protector of his relatives and his family and the glory of his father's race?* It behoveth thee to give another

> king unto the Kurus." Saying "so be it," Vyasa went away. And the first princess of Kosala in due time brought forth a *blind son.*[33] (emphases mine)

The same story almost without variation appears in Kashiram Das as well. Thus, in Tagore's sources the cause of Dhritarashtra's blindness is associated with his mother's refusal to conform to patriarchal injunctions, a typical instance of the ancient religious model of disability.[34] Here we are obviously reminded of the story of Andhaka and his blindness, which I discussed in the previous section. Expectedly, these irrational, superstitious associations with blindness do not find any mention in Tagore, whose rational humanist sensibilities must have rejected them. Of course, the story of Dhritarashtra's birth and the cause of his blindness are beyond the temporal and narrative scope of the play.

It is interesting to mark that Dhritarashtra in *Gāndhārir Āvedan* uses the word '*andha*' or 'blind' several times and that too in one particular speech of his. For the sake of convenience and better understanding, I quote the entire speech below. When Duryodhan, with the intention of creating an emotional impact on his father, complains (in a rather sentimental tone) to Dhritarashtra that because of the 'criticisms' and 'advice' of 'calumniators'[35] like Bhishma, Sanjay and Vidur, he and his brothers have 'always been deprived of paternal affection', Dhritarashtra says:

> Alas, my proud and arrogant son! I wish my paternal affection had been lessened to some extent by the tough criticisms of the well-wishers, then it would have caused much good. Losing my sense of goodness, I have become

[33] Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, "Ādi Parva," *Mahābhārata*, trans. K. M. Ganguli (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008), 297.
[34] According to the religious model, disability is a result of divine curse/punishment inflicted on a person due to sins or moral transgressions committed by him/herself or by his/her parents.
[35] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Fugitive* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 52. In his own translation of *Gāndhārir Āvedan* Tagore makes Duryodhan use the word "calumny".

an ally in your commission of crime and evil. Too much of affection! Owing to this excessive affection I am indeed causing great harm to you. I am setting a *deadly fire* to the great ancient forest of the Kuru dynasty. Even then, my son, you blame me for showing no affection. Enticed by its *gem*, you desired the deadly snake. *I being blind* myself handed the hooded serpent over to you. *Within and without I am forever blind.* Along with you I am moving towards the *darkness of destruction*. My well-wishers are crying out, trying to prevent me. *Nocturnal birds of prey* are making ominous sounds. The path is becoming narrower with every step. My body shivers at the sense of the impending danger. Even then due to my dire affection, I am clasping you tightly to my breast, and together we are *madly flying at the speed of blazing meteors, blindly plunging ourselves into ruin.* Only you and me; and with us we have the Almighty, holding the *blazing bolt of lightning*. *There isn't any vision to move forward*. There is no way of undoing the past. There is only a terrible force that pulls us downwards. Suddenly, a time will come when the Almighty's mace of justice will fall on our head and shake us to consciousness. Till then do not doubt my paternal affection; do not relax your embrace. Till then hastily loot as much as you can to reach your selfish goal. Be happy! Be victorious! Be the king of kings! Beat the drums of victory. Hoist the flag of triumph. In this celebration of victory there shall be no place for justice, dharma, friends or brothers. There shall be no place for Vidur, Bhishma or Sanjay. There shall be no place for criticism, shame or fear. There shall be no place for the welfare of the Kuru dynasty. *Only a blind father with his blind son shall remain, and the God of*

> *death, Yama*—only paternal affection and the Almighty's curse, and no one else.[36] (emphases mine)

This lengthy speech of Dhritarashtra encapsulates the crux of his character in the play. What is more, Tagore has portrayed his Dhritarashtra in such a way that all the aspects of his character are somehow associated with vision or its lack. I wish to take a dual approach to develop my argument.

First, the repetition of the word "blind" in the speech. If noted carefully, it can be realised that the idea of blindness, in this speech and also in the play (as I shall show later) is used by the playwright on two levels: physical/literal and moral/metaphorical. It is a fact that Dhritarashtra is physically blind by birth, and the cause of this blindness, as described in the *Mahābhārata,* has already been specified. In Tagore, when Dhritarashtra says, "Within and without, I am forever blind," he is definitely referring to his congenital/physical blindness. But that is only one aspect of this utterance. The phrase "within and without" makes it evident that there is another level to this blindness, what I wish to call metaphorical. It is not too difficult to understand that this metaphorical blindness, rather conveniently, connotes a lack of insight, perspicacity or even wisdom. This age-old ableist tendency of conflating (albeit metaphorically) disability with negative moral/ethical attributes is a part of conventional, popular, linguistic and cultural practices. Moreover, it is intriguing to note that the need to consciously resist the injustice of such inconsiderate equations of blindness with flawed judgment and morality had never occurred to the great litterateurs of the world, until very recently the proponents of Critical Disability Studies opened up academic discussions on ableist language and cultural ableism. It is in this larger, general context

[36] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. I, 492-93.Translation mine, but in prose.

that I place Tagore's employment of the ableist metaphor of blindness in *Gāndhārir Āvedan*.

To glimpse the ubiquity of the convenient usage of Dhritarashtra's physical blindness to comment on his character and lack of moral integrity, let us consider the remarks of some renowned Tagore critics and commentators. Pramathanath Bishi noted, "Duryodhan is scared of Gandhari. He is entirely dependent on his father's *blind affection*."[37] (emphasis mine) Upendranath Bhattacharya, by way of sketching the narrative outline of the play, wrote, "Having failed with Dhritarashtra, who is *blinded by affection* for his son, Gandhari has approached the Almighty, and is waiting for the inevitable and absolute outcome of his justice."[38] (emphasis mine) Ashok Kumar Mishra moved another step forward and commented, "That Dhritarashtra is not blind is evident from his conversation with Duryodhan. He is aware of the true value of humanitarianism. He knows that the love of the subjects is a valuable asset. He knows that jealousy is the sign of meanness. It is like a poisonous serpent. … *Therefore, he is not blind within. He is blinded by paternal affection*. *He knows that this blindness of his is drawing him with his son towards annihilation,* and that there is no escape. But he is helpless because of his paternal affection."[39] (emphasis mine)

Along with these, it may also be useful to consider the following commentary on the character of Dhritarashtra in the *Mahābhārata*, provided by Madhusraba Dasgupta: "His *blind affection* for Duryodhan made him constantly oscillate between justice and injustice, ultimately turning him into a weak and greedy person, devoid of any good

[37] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindra Nātya Prabāha* (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2014), 18. Translation mine.
[38] Upendranath Bhattacharya, 77. Translation mine.
[39] Ashok Kumar Mishra, *Rabindranātye Rup: Arup* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 44. Translation mine.

senses."[40] (emphasis mine) This fleeting comment only serves to reinstate my argument that the blindness of Dhritarashtra (both in Tagore and in the epic) has almost always been popularly perceived as the pivot of the character and his crises.

That Dhritarashtra in the *Mahābhārata*, although "partial to his sons,"[41] is not "devoid of any good senses" is evident from the following words of his:

> Thou [Duryodhan] art my eldest son and born also of my eldest wife. Therefore, O son, be not jealous of the Pandavas. He that is jealous is always unhappy and suffereth the pangs of death. O Bull of the Bharata race … why shouldst thou, therefore, be jealous of him? O King, in respect of friends and allies thou art equal unto Yudhishthira. Why shouldst thou, therefore, covet, from folly, the property of thy brother? Be not so. Cease to be jealous … O child, coveting others' possessions is exceedingly mean … O king, be not jealous of the sons of Pandu … there is great sin in quarrelling with friends. They that are thy grandsires are theirs also.[42]

The echoes of these words can be found in *Gāndhārir Āvedan* as well, where Dhritarashtra admonishes Duryodhan for his jealousy, trickery and shameful demeanour in the following words:

a) "Having won the kingdom in its entirety where is your happiness, O one with evil thoughts?"
b) "Cursed be your hostilities towards your brothers. Pandavas and Kauravas share the same ancestors, have you forgotten that fact?"

---

[40] Madhusraba Dasgupta, *Samsad Companion to the Mahābhārata* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1999), 223.
[41] Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, "Sabhā Parva," *Mahābhārata*, Book 2, trans. K. M. Ganguli (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008), 143.
[42] Vyasa, "Sabhā Parva", 108.

c) "Envy is puny and is like a virulent serpent."[43]

Thus, we see that Tagore's Dhritarashtra, who is largely modelled after his counterpart in the epic, is wise and acutely aware of the ways of dharma. This brings me back to the idea of metaphorical blindness and its possible connotations, and I strongly hold that Dhritarashtra is not without perspicacity and insight. Rather, the crisis of his character lies elsewhere, which I shall discuss next.

From a specific focus on Dhritarashtra's obsessive usage of the word 'blind', I shift to a somewhat more general discussion on his preoccupation with images of darkness and light, and his 'dearth of vision'. The stasis, or more specifically the inertness on the part of Dhritarashtra, implied in his utterance, "there *isn't any vision* to move forward. There is no way of undoing the past. There is only a terrible force that pulls us downwards. Suddenly, a time will come when the Almighty's mace of justice will fall on our head and shake us to consciousness…", is the central crisis of the character. This pathetic inertness becomes all the more pronounced when Dhritarashtra in response to Gandhari's repeated plea says, "now there is no time for contemplation—no scope for making amendments, no way out. What was to happen, has happened. What is to be the result, will surely come forth."[44]

The actions, rather inaction, of Dhritarashtra in the play are permeated by a fatalistic attitude[45] and a sense of passive acceptance and resignation. Interestingly, his obsession with the images and ancillaries of darkness and light is closely knit with his

[43] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 489-90. Translation mine.
[44] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 499. Translation mine.
[45] This fatalism of Tagore's Dhritarashtra finds its origin in the *Mahābhārata*, "*Sabhā Parva*", chapters 55 and 56.

fatalistic outlook. A reconsideration of the following specific phrases will make it all the more conspicuous:

a) "I am setting a deadly fire to the great ancient forest of the Kuru dynasty."
b) "Enticed by its gem, you desire the deadly snake. I, being blind, myself handed the hooded serpent over to you."
c) "Along with you, I am moving towards the darkness of destruction."
d) "Nocturnal birds of prey are making ominous sounds."
e) "Even then due to my dire affection I am clasping you tightly to my breast and, together we are madly flying at the speed of blazing meteors, blindly plunging ourselves into ruin."
f) "Only you and me; and with us we have the Almighty, holding the blazing bolt of lightning."[46]

Remarkably, illumination and lustre in the above references are associated with death, ruin and doom. Light in the language used by Tagore's Dhritarashtra is, antithetically enough, as dark as darkness itself.

The final words of Dhritarashtra addressed to Duryodhan, before the latter exits and Gandhari enters, need to be considered before concluding this discussion on Dhritarashtra and his blindness. After the guard announces the entry of Gandhari, Duryodhan promptly takes leave of his father, almost in an attempt to flee. Noticing this, Dhritarashtra says, "You flee! Alas, how will you bear your pious mother's *lightning-like* vision, my virtue-fearing son! I cause you no shame"[47] (emphasis mine). It is hard to miss the tone of passive acceptance and even resignation underlying the

[46] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 492-493. Translation mine.
[47] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 494. Translation mine.

overt sarcasm in this dialogue. It is implicitly encoded in the reference to the lack of his own vision. Here we find an instance of Tagore's poetic masterstrokes. By contrasting Gandhari's "lightning-like vision" against Dhritarashtra, Tagore subtly, but poignantly, hints at the latter's lack of vision, moral integrity and even uprightness. Thus, although Tagore in his portrayal of Dhritarashtra's character has largely adhered to his source, the treatment of his blindness and his negotiations with light, darkness and vision/its lack are entirely the playwright's own contribution.

My final comments on Tagore's Dhritarashtra bring me to the discussion of Gandhari. The phrase "pious mother's lightning-like vision" is the first description of her that we get before she actually enters. I argue that the crux of Tagore's Gandhari is encapsulated in these 'blazing' words of Dhritarashtra, who is otherwise fixated with and acutely conscious of his own blindness and also that of his son. This phrase is pregnant with irony, for any attentive reader would be immediately reminded of the popular narrative of Gandhari blindfolding herself. Chapter 110 of the "*Ādi Parva*" mentions that "…the chaste Gandhari hearing that Dhritarashtra was *blind* and that her parents had consented to marry her to him, from love and respect for her future husband, *blindfolded* her own eyes"[48] (emphases mine).

It is interesting to mark that nowhere in the play do we find any mention of or reference to Gandhari's blindfold or her self-imposed blindness. I believe that there are at least two reasons behind this omission. First and most obviously, this narrative of Gandhari blindfolding herself is beyond the limited scope of this "snapshot of a real play"[49]. Secondly and perhaps more significantly, Tagore, by deliberately making no reference to Gandhari's 'lack of sight', which has a negative connotation in the play,

[48] Vyasa, "Ādi Parva," 303.
[49] Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Calcutta: Riddhi, 1979), 160.

attempts to and succeeds in starkly setting her apart from Duryodhan and Dhritarashtra, the other two major characters.[50] In fact, she is the only character in the play who knows the subtle ways of dharma and, more importantly, acts accordingly. She is portrayed as 'the flawless' character. To use the populist, ableist metaphor, Gandhari is the play's only 'unblinkered' character. Actually, she is almost the personification of Tagore's idea of dharma. There are moments when she emerges as a mouthpiece of the playwright for his moral and ethical ideas. In the play, Gandhari says, "Dharma is not for wealth, O king; nor is it a shortcut to pleasure. Dharma itself is its own end."[51] This is directly echoed in an essay by Tagore titled "*Dharma Prachār*" (1904): "Dharma is not for the fulfilment of fragmented worldly needs. Rather, the entire world is for the achievement of the goals of dharma."[52]

This uprightness and virtuosity of Tagore's Gandhari is largely derived from the epic. Pramathanath Bishi holds, "adherence to the path of dharma is the core of Gandhari's character. This aspect of the source has been kept intact in Rabindranath's composition."[53] Duryodhan, desirous of victory, had beseeched Gandhari every day for the eighteen days that the battle of Kurukshetra lasted, saying, "O mother bless me who am fighting with my foes." Implored every time in these words by her son, she always answered, "thither is victory where righteousness is." (Chapter 14, "*Stri Parva*")[54] This instance from the *Mahābhārata* largely captures her character as an ideal woman, adherent to the path of dharma. Madhusraba Dasgupta summarises the character of Gandhari as etched in the epic in the following words: "As an embodiment of truth and

[50] We shall see in the discussion on Duryodhan that both (physically sightless) Gandhari and Dhritarashtra are primarily contrasted against their (physically sighted) son.
[51] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 496. Translation mine.
[52] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Dharma Prachār*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 8 (Calcutta: Kamini, 2002), 577. Translation mine.
[53] Pramathanath Bishi, 310. Translation mine.
[54] Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, "Stri Parva," *Mahābhārata*, trans. K. M. Ganguli (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008), 3972.

justice Gandhari had always raised her voice against injustice all through her life; rebuked Duryodhan several times and even asked Dhritarashtra to abandon him."[55]

However, there is a significant difference between Tagore's Gandhari and the one in the source. I wish to focus on this difference for it will have bearing on my discussion on Gandhari's vision in particular, and the play's treatment of seeing in general. Vyasa's Gandhari, unlike the one sketched by Tagore, is a character of flesh and blood, a mother who, on the one hand, for the sake of dharma, demands the abandonment of her wicked sons and on the other, curses and injures those responsible for their deaths. In chapter 15 of the "*Stri Parva*" we find, "…conversant with the rules of righteousness, the Kuru queen [Gandhari], *possessed of great foresight directed her eyes from within the folds of the cloth that covered them*, to the tip of Yudhisthira's toe, as the prince, with body bent forwards, was about to fall down at her feet. At this, the king, whose nails had before this been all very beautiful, came to have a sore-nail on his toe."[56] (emphasis mine) The "wrathful glance"[57] of Vyasa's Gandhari which injures the one responsible for the death of her sons, becomes "lightning-like vision", which is unbearable for her vicious and wicked son in Tagore.

Before ending this discussion on Tagore's Gandhari, I shall briefly dwell on some of the phrases uttered by her in her conversation with Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhan. When Bhanumati insolently exhibits the jewels and ornaments of Draupadi that are in her possession, Gandhari, repulsed by this act of her daughter-in-law, chides her in the following words:

---

[55] Madhusraba Dasgupta, 246.
[56] Vyasa, "Stri Parva," 3966.
[57] Madhusraba Dasgupta, 246.

> Alas, you fool! Even then that has not been able to teach you any lesson. You are so proud of those ornaments! What *terrible lustre*! It is the adornment of destruction. Is this gem-studded anklet not *burning* you like the *blazing meteor of annihilation*?[58] (emphases mine)

The language of the speech, particularly the images of lustre and illumination, which prominently reflects her 'foresightedness', does not fail to remind us of the "Alas, my proud and arrogant son" speech of Dhritarashtra, already cited earlier. This similarity in their usage of imagery makes the contrast between the vision (or its lack) of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra all the more conspicuous. Thus, though Tagore in his portrayal of Gandhari has significantly adhered to the source, it must be admitted that the positioning of this character in the play's matrix of vision and blindness is entirely his original creation.

Finally, I come to Duryodhan who, unlike his parents, is neither blind nor blindfolded. Yet, this character deserves some attention in this chapter. As mentioned earlier, Dhritarashtra describes Duryodhan as his "blind son". What Dhritarashtra refers to is not physical blindness, rather, it is a metaphor signifying lack of wisdom, righteousness and virtue. Since I have already discussed the problems and connotations of this ableist metaphor earlier, I shall refrain from repeating them again.

If the blind father of the play is obsessed with lack of light and vision, his seeing/sighted son is obsessed with 'visibleness'. The language used by Duryodhan is replete with images of fiery lustre, of triumphant glory, visibility of power and its

[58] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 500. Translation mine.

symbols, and show of arrogance and tyranny. To establish this point, I turn to a few of his utterances:

a) "O lord of the Kurus, petty, comfortable happiness does not satiate the hunger of Kshatriyas. Today I have drunk the *glowing, burning, fiery* nectar of triumph, churned from the sea of envy." (emphases mine)

b) "Comfortably happy was I then, when Pandavas and Kauravas stayed together like the *dark spots on the surface of the moon*—a torpid, shameful, *lustreless* comfort." (emphasis mine)

c) "The *bright reflections* of the victory of the Pandavas used to *illuminate* the *dark chamber* of the Kauravas." (emphases mine)

d) "Having *blown out all our blaze,* we rested comfortably under the glorious shade of the Pandavas—like frogs hibernating in holes of inertness." (emphasis mine)

e) "The *nocturnal moon* does not envy the *sun* of the noon. But a single *morning* does not have enough space for two fraternal *suns* to grace the eastern sky. Today the dispute is settled. Today I am triumphant. Today I am alone." (emphases mine)

f) "Countless *stars* stay knit in brotherly peace. But there is only one *sun* and one *moon*. The *glow* of the Pandu *moon* fades, receding behind the silhouette of distant forests. Today alone is the *Kuru sun*. Today I am triumphant." (emphases mine)

g) "If the king does not hold his head high above all others; if his proud and insolent head is not *constantly visible* to all his subjects, even from a far-off

> distance then how shall the king keep his *ruler's eyes* fixed on them and exert his might?"[59] (emphases mine)

Tagore creates a unique mesh of fiery envy, lustrous visibleness and overt exhibitionism, and successfully captures in it the crudest arrogance of the king and a tyrant's lust for absolute power. For Duryodhan, power is literally equal to 'monarchy', or 'the undivided rule of a single person'. In addition, the images of fire and blazing celestial bodies may also carry connotations of unclear or deluded vision. Since I will have occasion to discuss Tagore's idea of kingship, particularly in relation with light, darkness and (in)visibility in the next chapter, I refrain from entering that discourse here. However, the following lines of Thakurda (in Tagore's *Rājā*), should suffice to show the direct contrast between the two ideas of kingship vis-à-vis visibleness: "Even if my king had *shown* himself he would not have been *visible* to you all. He cannot be distinguished, for he gets unified with all"[60] (emphases mine). Though the basic framework of the character of Duryodhan is derived from the epic, it must be stated that his language and linguistic negotiations with visibleness are the original product of the playwright's creativity.

To conclude, in this section I have endeavoured to critically engage with Tagore's construction of and participation in the politics of blindness, vision and visibility played out in *Gāndhārir Āvedan*. By way of doing so, I have attempted to read the 19th-century rationalistic human values encapsulated in the play, in comparison with the moral and ethical ethos of the epic, through the prism of blindness and seeing.

---

[59] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 489-90. Translation mine.
[60] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 758. Translation mine.

Section 2.3

In this section I shall explore Tagore's treatment of blindness and vision/sight in *Dākghar*, with particular focus on the image of Chhidam. Since in my first chapter (while analysing the significance of Thakurda's disguise) I have already established the importance of this play in relation to the politics of visibility, here I shall directly enter the main discussion. At the outset it needs to be pointed out that unlike the other blind characters analysed in this chapter, Chhidam in *Dākghar* is neither a dramatis persona nor does he develop into a character. He is an image, or a metaphorical image at the most. However, it is to be admitted that this image, which at first glance appears to be rather typical, is not without layers of complexity. He occupies a minimal textual space and we get to know about him only from a brief dialogue between Thakurda and Amal. Nevertheless, even this short passage is enough to raise certain intriguing philosophical and experiential questions.

Before taking up Chhidam, it would be useful to consider how Amal, the central character and symbol of the play, engages with the ideas of seeing and sight. I believe this will eventually help us in placing the blindness of Chhidam in the larger ocular/visual context of the play. Let us begin with the statement which most precisely expresses the very essence and purpose of Amal's being. He says, "I shall *see* everything that is there. I shall just go around *seeing*."[61] (emphases mine) He emerges as what one might call a *voyeur*—one who sees and derives pleasure from seeing.[62] Interestingly enough, in his dialogues immediately preceding the cited one, Amal has summarily dismissed the idea of becoming a pandit who, according to Madhav Datta,

[61] Rabindranath Tagore, *Dākghar*, *Rabindra Nātya-Sangraha,* Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 2001), 851. Translation mine.
[62] "Voyeur" is derived from the French word *voir* which means "to see". Though the word "voyeur" is generally used with a sexual connotation, here I have used it to literally denote "one who sees".

"does not go outside" and "*sees* nothing else [apart from his books]."[63] We may recall the following words of Tagore written to Indira Devi:

> The men of this world that I have landed on, are strange creatures. Day and night they are busy building rules and walls. They are drawing curtains lest they have to *see anything with their eyes*. Indeed the creatures are very strange. It is a wonder that they have not placed the flowering plants under cover or veiled the moon with a blanket. Who knows what these *willingly blind men,* being borne and covered in close palanquins, *see in this world*. If I could choose my afterlife, I would have wanted to quit this world of covers and take birth in the blissful realms of vastness and openness.[64] (emphases mine)

In Amal we clearly see a reflection of the Tagorean celebration of the physical[65]/visual world which (as I shall discuss in the following sections) always extends beyond the limits of a mere sensual exploration.

Let us closely consider the following three passages from the play to explore the nature of Amal's seeing and to appreciate the subtle evolution of his sight/vision. Later on this will have bearing on our understanding of the shades of Chhidam's blindness. The passages are quoted in order of their appearance in the play:

a) Madhav Datta: What will you *see*? What is there so much to *see*?
   Amal: That faraway mountain which can be *seen* from the window—I want to go out there and *see* what is there on its other side.[66] (emphases mine)

---

[63] Tagore, *Dākghar,* 851. Translation mine.
[64] Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhinnapatrāvali* (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 1960), 120. Translation mine.
[65] Tagore, *Chhinnapatrāvali*, 120. Tagore writes to Indira Devi in a letter dated 24 January 1891, "That vast Earth which is lying there—I love it so much. With my *two hands* I want to *grasp* it with its trees, rivers, fields, noise, silence, mornings, evenings and all." (Translation and emphases mine)
[66] Tagore, *Dākghar,* 851. Translation mine.

b) Curd-seller: Our village is at the foot of the Panchmura Hills, by the river Shamli.

Amal: Panchmura Hills, Shamli river—maybe I have *seen* your village—but I

cannot remember when.

Curd-seller: You have *seen* it? Have you ever been to the foot of the hills?

Amal: No, *I have never been there*. But I feel that I have *seen* it. Your village is under some very big ancient trees—by the side of a red road. Isn't it?

Curd-seller: You are right, son.[67]

Amal: And there on the slope of the hills cattle graze.

Curd-seller: How wonderful! You are right! Cattle do graze in our village.

Amal: Women wearing red saris fill their pitchers with water from the river and

carry them on their head.

Curd-seller: Indeed! The milkmaids of our village do take water from the river but all of them do not wear red saris. But, son, you must have visited the place!

Amal: Really curd-seller, *I have never been there*.[68] (emphases mine)

c) Amal: It is as if *I can see it before my eyes*—it feels like I have *seen* it many times before—long back—how long, I cannot remember. Shall I say? I can *see* the King's mailman coming down the hill all alone—always—a lantern in his left hand and a bag of letters on his shoulder. He has been coming over so many nights—so many days. Traversing the course of the stream

[67] The word used in the original Bengali text is "*bābā*", which literally means "father", but in this context, it is used as an affectionate address and might be translated as "son" or "dear".
[68] Tagore, *Dākghar*, 852-53. Translation mine.

> which ends at the foot of the hill, he continues to come along the meandering river. There are fields of millet by the river. He keeps coming over the narrow lanes in the fields. Then there are the sugarcane fields. High mudbanks run along those fields. He keeps coming by those mudbanks. Day and night, he keeps coming, all alone. Crickets are chirping in the field. There isn't a single man on the bank of the river. There are only snipes moving around, waving their tails. *I can see everything*. The more I *see* him coming, the more my heart gets filled with *delight*.
>
> Thakurda: Though I do not have such *fresh eyes*, I too can *see* along with you.[69] (emphases mine)

Passages like these give the play its texture which, in the words of Edward Thompson, is "Filmy and of the very stuff of dreams".[70] They reveal that Amal who, under the strict instruction of the physician has been barred from going outside, exploring the world physically with his eyes, turns to 'picturing' and finally to 'envisioning'. From a voyeur obsessed with 'seeing' he is elevated to a symbol of the imaginative soul, preoccupied with 'picturing'/'envisioning' the unseen, the unseeable—the universal. Moreover, Tagore through Thakurda's utterance, "Though I do not have such fresh eyes, I too can see it along with you", has very subtly established a qualitative distinction between 'seeing' and 'envisioning' (by assigning the latter a greater value).[71]

---

[69] Tagore, *Dākghar*, 860-61. Translation mine.
[70] Edward Thompson, 1979, 212. The covert visual connotation of the phrase should not be overlooked.
[71] Tagore, *Chhinnapatrāvali*, 120. Tagore writes to Indira Devi in a letter dated 16 June 1892, "Beauty is far beyond the reach of the senses. The end to the yearning cannot be found even if one searches with the entire heart, let alone with just eyes or ears". (Translation mine)

It is perhaps necessary to separately point out that the poetic phrase, "fresh eyes," is an obvious reference to a 'new' and 'different' outlook. Here, I wish to clarify that in the original Bengali text, Tagore uses the phrase, "*navin chokh*", which can be variedly translated as "fresh", "new" or "young"[72] eyes. I have deliberately translated *navin* as "fresh" because it evokes the spirit of both newness and unconventionality of which Tagore was a life-long worshipper. In this context it may be pointed out that Thakurda's disclaimer, "… I do not have such fresh eyes …", is only a humble understatement, for towards the end of the play he clearly emerges as a visionary, one with "second sight".[73] When the Headman, with the mean intention of making fun of ailing Amal, gives him a blank sheet of paper saying that it is the letter from the King, Thakurda announces, "… today I can see letters on this blank sheet of paper. The King writes that he is going to come to see Amal himself. He will also bring the royal physician with him."[74]

Having commented on the play's general approach towards the idea of seeing and its various shades, I shall discuss Chhidam and his blindness. For the sake of convenience I shall quote at length the entire conversation between Thakurda and Amal in which the mention of Chhidam is made for the only time:

> Amal: You know, fakir, someone has told me that once I recover he would teach me how to beg. With him I shall go around begging—and I shall go wherever I wish to.
>
> Thakurda: Tell me, who is it?

---

[72] Obviously referring to Amal's youth. I will have occasion to comment on Tagore's idea of youth in my discussion of *Phālguni* in the final section of this chapter.
[73] Pramathanath Bishi, 221. Bishi observes, "Thakurda is Amal's telescope. Through him Amal sees the world that he desires." (Translation mine) The ocular metaphor is too obvious to be overlooked.
[74] Tagore, *Dākghar*, 863. Translation mine.

Amal: Chhidam.

Thakurda: Which Chhidam?

Amal: The one who is *blind* and lame. Every day he comes to my window. A boy like me takes him around in a wheeled cart. I have told him that I shall take him around once I recover.

Thakurda: Well, that would be great fun!

Amal: He has told me that he would teach me how to beg. I requested my uncle to give him alms. He said, he is *fake blind,* fake lame. Well, maybe his *blindness is fake*, but *it is true that he cannot see*. Isn't it?

Thakurda: You are right, son! Whether one calls him blind or not, *the only genuine thing about him is that he cannot see*. If he does not get alms, what makes him come to you and stay here?

Amal: Well, I tell him about various things and places. Poor him! *He cannot see*. I tell him stories about various countries that you tell me. The other day you told me stories about the country of lightness, where nothing has any weight, where just a leap can make one cross mountains. He was delighted to hear those stories. Fakir, what is the way to that place?

Thakurda: There is *an inward way* which may be difficult to find.

Amal: Poor him! He is *blind*. Perhaps he *won't be able to see*. Perhaps forever he will have to go around begging.[75] (emphases mine)

[75] Tagore, *Dākghar,* 861. Translation mine.

In the original Bengali version of this conversation, Tagore has used two different words for "blind", *andha* and *kānā.*[76] However, since this distinction does not have any significance to my present discussion, I have translated both of them as "blind".

Let us collate the facts about Chhidam that we can gather from this dialogue. He is a blind and lame beggar, a wanderer. A boy like Amal takes him around in a cart, and according to Madhav Datta (as reported by Amal), he is fake blind and fake lame. This image of Chhidam, which is metaphorical in nature (as I shall argue later), is also to a large extent a reflection of the socio-economic conditions and certain popular cultural notions that prevailed widely during the period.[77] Here it would be useful to consider the following excerpt from Aparna Nair's "They Shall See His Face: Blindness in British India (1850-1950)":

> Irrespective of their religious affiliation, most South Asians held that those who were able-bodied were morally bound to provide for the support of those who were less able to do so. Outside the family, this philanthropy extended to the figure of the mendicant, disabled or able-bodied … Blindness in particular was considered a unique asset to the urban vagrant: it was thought to take time to demonstrate how a beggar was 'mad, or deaf or dumb', but the Blind instead could at once be exhibited to the occupants of a slowly moving tramcar. […] In the metropole, the blind beggar had historically been the focus of intensely negative stereotypes, ridicule and *moral judgment*, in part a manifestation of the growing hostility towards the poor. Their spatial liminality was thought to render them uniquely vulnerable to vice and sin; they were seen as burdens on

[76] *Kānā* is slang for "blind" and is generally used with a sense of disrespect (but not in the present context).
[77] Many of these conditions and notions sadly persist in Indian society today.

> society and *blind beggars in particular were suspected of faking their disability and thus being undeserving of charity.*[78] (emphases mine)

Clearly, the description of Chhidam which seems to be sketched rather hastily is, by and large, in keeping with the contemporary popular perceptions about disabled mendicants in general and the blind beggar in particular.[79] However, to dismiss him as a mere stereotype would be too simplistic. The image is not without its share of complexity and even within such a brief textual space it does not fail to fascinate the readers. Undoubtedly, the statements which appear to be particularly intriguing are "Well, maybe his blindness is fake but it is true that he cannot see" and "Whether one calls him blind or not, the only genuine thing about him is that he cannot see."

Here, Tagore is engaged in a subtle play of language which is all the more effective in Bengali. What emerges as most striking is the emphatic distinction between being blind and being unable to see. The question which logically follows is that, if Chhidam is "fake blind", then what kind of "inability in seeing" is being talked about? To find a clue to its answer, we need to look at Amal's utterance, "Poor him! He is blind. Perhaps he will not be able to see." Here, seeing the "inward way" to "the country of lightness" is being referred to. Obviously, to see fantastic utopian places like the Kraunchadvip or the country of lightness (stories of which Amal hears from Thakurda and retells to Chhidam), which in this play represent the realm of beauty and imagination, no physical sight is needed. Thus it can be deduced that when Amal says, "…but it is true that he cannot see…", or when Thakurda asserts, "…the only genuine thing about him is that he cannot see", what they refer to is the lack of power to imagine

[78] Aparna Nair, "They Shall See His Face: Blindness in British India", *Medical History* 61, no. 2 (2017): 192-93.
[79] Madhav Datta's claim that Chhidam fakes his disability is a case in point.

or envision. In short, if the phrase "fake blind"[80] suggests that Chhidam is actually capable of seeing with his physical eye, "he cannot see" refers to his inability to see beyond or "see within".[81] Therefore, the significance of the image of Chhidam and his blindness is best realised when he is contrasted with Thakurda and Amal—the two "seers" of the play which is preoccupied with "seeing" and its various shades. In *Dākghar,* Tagore through his skilful use of language and imagery, transforms "ordinary visuals and commonly seen/seeable things into symbols of spiritual mystery and indicators of the way to the unknown and the infinite."[82] In the words of Ashok Kumar Mishra, *Dākghar*, which is "a play of formlessness", is a "medium of communication between the finite and the infinite."[83] This movement of the play—from the concrete to the abstract, or from the finite to the infinite—is also extended to and carefully explained through the subtle negotiations between the ideas of sight/vision and their lack.

Section 2.4

In his play *Phālguni* (1915), a paean to spring, rejuvenation and youth, Tagore engages in a unique discourse of spirituality, disability, music and theatre through the delineation of the character of the blind Baul. Interestingly, in this image, Tagore conflates two identities—one physical and the other spiritual—both of which occupy marginal positions in society in such a way that they function as complementary

[80] The proximity of the two phrases, "fake blind" (*mithyā kānā)* and "willingly blind" (*svechchhā andha*), is noteworthy. This might be perceived as a deliberate usage of different words on Tagore's part—one inferior to the other, one false, the other "self-willed".
[81] This phrase, which is implied by Thakurda's expression "an inward way", has been taken from the Blind Baul's "With the light of my eyes" in *Phālguni.*
[82] Ajitkumar Ghosh, *Banglā Nātaker Itihās* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2014), 305. Translation mine.
[83] Mishra, 227. Translation mine.

metaphors. Through my analysis, I shall explore how the blindness of the Baul and the Baul beliefs of the blind man negotiate with/substantiate each other in order to endorse Tagore's brand of humanism and spirituality, and his ideas of theatre and performance. I shall also attempt to establish a connection between these vertices by placing them in the larger context of Tagore's ocular/visual politics.

Tagore's preoccupation with the syncretic Hindu and Muslim culture and traditions of the Bauls, a liminal community of wandering minstrels of Bengal, is reflected not only in his literary and musical output, but is also prominent in his ways of self-fashioning. He was particularly impressed by the lyrics and the music of these subaltern artists and encouraged research on them in Visva-Bharati. He also created space in the Paush Mela, an annual festival in Santiniketan, for the Bauls to perform at.[84] A review of the existing academic work on Tagore's engagement with the Bauls reveals that this relation was reciprocal in nature. Their influence on him was largely a conscious one. It is remarkable that according to the common understanding of his transactions with Baul culture in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, he is the "discoverer" of Baul songs, who by his "discovery" contributed greatly to the diversity and richness of Bengali literature.[85] His keen interest in the mystical and humanistic aspect of the Baul beliefs is perhaps most clearly manifested through his conscious use of diction, symbolism and imagery. As indicated by scholars like Charles H. Capwell, Tagore's engagement with Baul philosophy and culture was primarily (if not only) on the level of the exoteric.[86] Keeping in view the scope and tastes of the literary and cultural ambience in which he emerged and grew, it would perhaps not be

[84] Ladly Mukhopadhyay, "The Eternal Journey of the Bauls", *Indian Literature* 58, no. 6 (2014): 8–9.
[85] Edward C. Dimock, Jr., "Rabindranath Tagore: 'The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal'", *Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (1959): 34.
[86] Charles H. Capwell, "The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal", *Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1974): 255–64.

unfounded to state that Tagore deliberately avoided the ritualistic, physiological and sexual aspects of Baul practice.

I focus now on the blind Baul in *Phālguni* and the play's general engagement with the politics of visibility. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., in his "Rabindranath Tagore: 'The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal'", by way of commenting on Tagore's depiction of Baul culture in his dramatic output, writes: "In many of Rabindranath's dramas there are characters obviously typed on the Bāuls. Often these characters are not structural to the play, their only function apparently being to sing appropriate Bāul songs."[87] This fleetingly-made generalised statement is rather simplistic and is clearly aimed at belittling the significance of the characters[88] "typed on the Bāuls." It completely overlooks the fact that in many of the plays that Dimock indicates, the "appropriate Bāul songs" not only constitute the structure of the work but also function as its driving force. Tagore himself explains it when he, in the Prologue to *Phālguni*, makes the poet say: "The door to each of its [the play's] acts will be unlocked with the keys of song."[89] Moreover, when Dimock says that "these characters are not structural to the play," he is most likely thinking of a conventional, unified dramatic plot from which Tagore was deliberately attempting to move away in his twentieth-century plays. Interestingly, this spirit of non-conformity is at the core of Baul philosophy and practices. In Dimock's own words, "… all those who go by the name of Bāul seem somehow to come as strangers to the world. They accept no tradition or custom of society."[90] I should also point out that Dimock's phrase "characters obviously typed on the Bāuls" is akin to the comment of Upendranath Bhattacharya who goes to the extent of stating, "The blind

[87] Dimock, "Rabindranath Tagore", 35.
[88] We are compelled to think of the Thakurdas and also characters like Bishu Pagal and Dhananjay Vairagi.
[89] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 881. Translation mine.
[90] Dimock, "Rabindranath Tagore," 38.

Baul is but another avatar of Thakurda."[91] Statements like these only reveal the tendency of creating/imagining certain homogenous sets based on a few points of similarity.

To connect my discussion of the blind Baul with the preceding remarks on songs and deviation from conventions, I quote again the poet in *Phālguni*. When the king (in the Prologue), by way of enquiring about the preparation of the play to be staged, specifically asks about the usage of backdrops/painted scenery, the poet promptly clarifies: "Painted scenery is not needed. Rather, I need the canvas of the mind, on which I shall create pictures only with the brush of music."[92] It may be useful to note that these words are an aphoristic echo of what Tagore had declared in his trailblazing essay titled "*Rangamancha*" (1902), where he had theorized his new approach to theatre, written more than a decade before the composition of *Phālguni*. Tagore wrote:

> In the *Nātyashastra* of Bharata is a description of a stage, but no mention of scenes. It does not seem to me that this absence of concrete scenery can have been much of a loss … To my mind it shows only faint-heartedness on the actor's part to seek their help [of scenery]. The relief from responsibility which he gains from the illusion created by pictorial scenes is one which is begged of the painter … Why all this paraphernalia of *illusion* to *delude* the poor trusting creatures [spectators] who have come with the deliberate intention of believing and being happy?[93] (emphases mine)

Despite these observations of Tagore, it must be admitted that as an astute theatrician and dramatist he could not be (and in reality was not) oblivious to stage effects and

---

[91] Upendranath Bhattacharya, 286. Translation mine.
[92] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 881. Translation mine
[93] Tagore's authorized translation, "The Stage", by Surendranath Tagore. Quoted in Ananda Lal, *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

other formal demands of plays—an audio-visual art form. For instance, he writes in a letter to Gaganendranath Tagore, by way of giving suggestions and instructions about the production of *Phālguni*: "Both *eyes* and *ears* must be well fed. It is more necessary to make them [the audience] feel engrossed than to explain [the meaning] to them … with *Phālguni* we shall try to set the *stage* on fire. You take care of the *stage effects*, and we shall take care of the songs and acting."[94] (emphases mine) This reaffirms the fact that Tagore's ideas always resist any simplistic reception and must be understood and interpreted contextually with all their nuances. What attracted him most was suggestive artistic scenography, not realism.

I wish to return to the excerpt from "*Rangamancha"* in which Tagore gives expression to his revolutionary thoughts about dramaturgy, and focus on the idea of illusion. When read in the context of the character and symbol of the blind Baul, this takes up new meaning. In the Prologue, the poet says about the Baul, "Because he does not see with his eyes, he sees with his entire body, mind, and soul."[95] Using a slightly different phrase, the Baul himself expresses the same sentiment: "I hear with my entire being and not only with my ears."[96] Also Chandrahas, towards the end of the play, echoes these words when he says: "I have not seen with my eyes … I have seen with my entire being … Had my entire body and mind been my voice, I could have expressed it."[97] Thus, Tagore's idea of the stage and his intention behind the delineation of the blind Baul converge. For him, mere dependence on the physical senses and the perceptions produced only by them ("concrete scenery" in case of the stage and physical eyes in case of the Baul) are illusive and misleading. In the words of Upendranath

[94] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya-Sangraha,* Volume I (Kolkata: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 2000), 1046. Translation mine.
[95] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 881. Translation mine.
[96] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 902. Translation mine.
[97] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 911. Translation mine.

Bhattacharya: "The meta-sensory, spiritual mystery cannot be perceived with the physical, worldly sight. It has to be seen with the inner vision. In this respect the external/superficial sight is meaningless. Hence the Baul is blind."[98] Interestingly and ironically, the only person in the play who confidently shows the right path to the group of young men and even leads them is the Baul: "He does not have to search for the path. He can see from within."[99]

Let us consider the following two quotations (the former from "*Rangamancha*" and the latter from *Phālguni*) to understand what Tagore puts forward as the alternative(s) to the dependence and reliance on purely sensory experiences and perceptions:

> a. "The stage that is in the Poet's mind has no lack of space or appurtenances. There scenes follow one another at the touch of his magic wand."[100]
>
> b. "Once I had eyesight. When I became blind I got scared by the loss of my sight. But with the waning of the sight of the sighted, rose the vision of the blind. After the sun had set I saw light in the heart of darkness."[101]

Thus, when read carefully, it becomes evident that Tagore's aesthetics and spirituality are but two sides of the same coin.

It is interesting to mark that Tagore's depictions of blindness in his literary output have never been consistent. He has exploited the metaphor of blindness on varied occasions with varied and sometimes (apparently) contradictory meanings. For instance, while in the song (in *Arup Ratan*) "When I was blind I passed time in the game

---

[98] Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Rabindra-Nātya-Parikramā*, 286. Translation mine.
[99] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 901. Translation mine.
[100] Quoted in Lal, *Three Plays*, 29.
[101] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 902. Translation mine.

of pleasure, but I could not find bliss,"[102] blindness has been used as a metaphor to suggest lack of true/ real knowledge about life and the divine, the phrase "vision of the blind" (in *Phālguni*) emerges as the spiritualisation of blindness. However, the fundamental spiritual belief remains the same, to which both the metaphorical usages point.

However, when these usages are read through the lens of Disability Studies, both of them appear to be equally problematic. While the negative metaphorical use is conspicuously ableist, the convenient spiritualisation and (even) divinisation[103] has a strong subtext of othering and covertly patronising attitude towards disability. Yet this divinisation (or glorification), when read in the context of the colonial period and the colonial attitude towards a disability like blindness, may emerge in a different and even subversive light. Aparna Nair shows how blindness during the colonial regime was not only interpreted as "the inevitable consequence of South Asian ignorance, superstition and backwardness," but was also seen as a "metaphor for the perceived civilisational inferiority and religious failings of South Asian peoples."[104] The following lines from *Phālguni* spoken by one of the young men about the Baul can perhaps be read as Tagore's poignant reaction to the perceived "religious failings" of South Asian people: "as if the dawn has broken within him; as if the sanguine sunrays have anchored between his eyebrows like a little boat."[105] This image of dawn is particularly significant in this play and in others by Tagore, such as *Rājā/Arup Ratan*. It is this image (of the transition from darkness to life) that Tagore uses as the starting point and

[102] Tagore, *Gitabitān,* 167. Translation mine.
[103] According to Upendranath Bhattacharya, "The Baul has inner vision. He knows the subtle ways of the world. He is a spiritual man. He is the symbol of divine knowledge." Bhattacharya, *Rabindra-Nātya-Parikramā*, 286. Translation mine.
[104] Aparna Nair, 181.
[105] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 910. Translation mine.

the recurrent motif of the essay "*Chiranavinatā*" or "The Eternal Newness", which encapsulates the central theme of *Phālguni*:

> Every day the dawn unveils a mystery, every day it tells the same eternal story. But each day the story appears to be new … The dawn standing at the edge of the eastern sky and smiling, gradually removes the cover of darkness like a magician.[106]

Furthermore, when this image of dawn is juxtaposed against the presumed darkness of blindness, the connotation of spirituality becomes too obvious to evade our attention. This juxtaposition (which is visual in nature) is quite consciously extended to the physical appearance of the Baul as well. Tagore, who himself played the role of the Baul in the first production, instructed Gaganendranath to "dress the Baul in white from top to toe" and he further specified that "The white gown that you will design for me should be fitted with long loose sleeves – if the cloth is muslin, the whiteness will appear splendid."[107] The significance of white can be understood at least on two levels: it is conventionally associated with spirituality and purity, and the stark contrast between white and darkness (associated with blindness) would create an extremely powerful stage effect.

Thus, on multiple levels (imagery, language, song, theatre), Tagore used the blindness of the Baul to create a unique visual effect and to make significant artistic, cultural, political and philosophical statements through this effect.

To move further with this argument, I shall discuss the songs and their role in shaping the image of the blind Baul. In this context, the two phrases to which I would

---

[106] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Chiranavinatā*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Volume VII (Kolkata: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 2016), 714. Translation mine.
[107] Quoted in Sen, 136.

like to particularly draw readers' attention are "the brush of music" and "the keys of song." Clearly songs and music form an integral part of the play. Though the Baul sings only six of the numerous songs in this play, his being is almost synonymous with music. This is perhaps best captured in the Baul's own words: "Let me go singing, you follow me. I cannot find my way if I do not sing songs … My song transcends me. It moves ahead, and I follow it."[108] His six songs in order of their appearance are as follows:

a) "Slowly, my friend, slowly lead me to your lonely abode."

b) "The one to whom everyone gives their all, to the same one will I give away all that I call mine. Before I am told and before I leave, wilfully I will spread out my innermost self."

c) "Spring has threaded my garland of victory. Southern wind, burning like fire, blows over my soul."

d) "With the light of eyes I had seen the exterior. Today I shall see within, when there is no light."

e) "O brave, fearless one, victory will come, victory will come, victory will come."

f) "To find you anew, I lose you every moment. O treasure of my love! It is only to show yourself that you become invisible."[109]

Of these songs, the words of the third one are those of Chandrahas being reported by the Baul to the group of young men. The lyrics of the fourth and the sixth songs deserve particular attention in the context of visibility and visual politics. For the sake of convenience the two songs are quoted below in their entirety:

[108] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 902. Translation mine.
[109] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 902–912. Translation mine.

With the light of eyes

I had seen the exterior.

Today I shall see within,

When there is no light.

When you elude the worldly grasp,

The heart is replete with you.

Now, in your own light

I wish to see you.

With you I had played

In the toyhouse.

The toys have been broken

By destructive storms.

Then, let that mere game be abandoned.

Now, let there be a festival of life.

The stringed vina has broken.

Now I sing with the vina of my heart.[110]

[110] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 909. Translation mine.

To find you anew,

I lose you every moment.

O treasure of my love!

It's only to show yourself

That you become invisible.

O treasure of my love!

O, you are not veiled.

You are my eternal one.

You immerse yourself

Into the transient course of *lilā*.[111]

O my loving treasure!

When I roam about in search of you,

My heart trembles in apprehension.

Waves burst upon my adoration.

[111] Simply put, *lilā* is the spontaneous divine play or sport which is without any apparent purpose.

You have no end. Hence you pose like a vacuum

And put an end to yourself.

That smile is washed

By my tears of separation.

O treasure of my love![112]

The first couple of lines of the song "With the light of eyes" can be read (literally and quite conveniently) as a direct reference to the Baul's blindness. But there is more to it which can add to our understanding of the play's politics of visibility. We find two distinct sets of ideas and images which are consciously and deftly juxtaposed in order to create an effective contrast. On the one hand, we have "the light of eyes", "the exterior", "the worldly grasp", "that mere game" and "the stringed vina". This is what I wish to call the set of the physical or the *rupa*/form (in Tagore's own language). On the other hand, we have "see within", "in your own light", "a festival of life" and "the vina of my heart". This is the set of the metaphysical or the *arupa*/formless. If the former is associated with the world of sensory perceptions, the concrete visible world, the latter is in the realm of abstraction and is associated with the idea of insight. These two sets of ideas create a complementary pattern in the system of Tagorean beliefs, where a movement or journey from the former (the physical/sensory) to the latter (the metaphysical/meta-sensory) has always been upheld.

[112] Tagore, *Phālguni*, 912. Translation mine

However, this pattern is far more complex than it appears to be. The following three extracts from Tagore's essay "*Rup o Arup*" may throw some more light on this concept:

> a) "Every expression has two sides. On the one hand, it is limited/closed—or else it cannot be expressed. On the other hand, it is open/free—or else it cannot express the eternal."
>
> b) "Things that are perceived through the senses pretend to be independent and the ultimate. The *sādhak* wants to remove the veil of pretence and see the true substance."
>
> c) "*Rup* or the physical is like this gateway. It can be proud only of its own gap. It deceives when it shows itself. It says the truth when it shows the path. In art and literature, as well as in worldly creation, its only function is to show the sublime and to express the eternal. But like a servant with unhealthy ambition, it often attempts to occupy the throne of its master. It would become dangerous if we join it in its audacity. No matter how dear it is to us, our duty is then to destroy it—even if it is our own ego."[113]

While the first of these quotations reaffirms the complementary pattern of the form/the physical and the formless/the metaphysical, the second one focuses on the illusory nature of the former. The blind Baul who is a *sādhak*[114] (it has been established by now) can "see" beyond the "pretence," for his vision is not distracted by the visible/physical world. The third quotation not only explains the necessity of the movement or the

[113] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Rup o Arup*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Volume IX (Kolkata: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 2016), 522–26. Translation mine.
[114] A spiritual seeker.

journey from the *rupa* to the *arupa* that I have mentioned earlier, but also throws light on the significance of destruction and breakage in the song.

I move to the other song ("To find you anew"), which demands some attention in the context of visibility. In order to understand the pattern of the (apparent) paradoxes that Tagore so deftly deploys in this lyric and also to appreciate its connection with the character of the Baul and the general theme of the play, we need to take into consideration another significant passage from "*Chiranavinatā*":

> This is the world's most ancient day; it has to be born anew every dawn. Every day it has to return to the beginning, or else its original tune will be lost. The dawn always reminds it of its eternal refrain and never allows it to be forgotten. Had the day been a single continuous stretch; had there been no momentary shutting of eyes; amidst work and insolence of power, had it [the world's most ancient day] not intermittently forgotten itself in depthless darkness; and had it not taken birth again in that primeval newness, then dust and garbage would have piled up in layers.[115]

Clearly, the importance of "depthless darkness" lies in the fact that it is this darkness which makes light discernible and reveals it anew. To understand eternity and eternal newness, temporary closure is essential. This spiritual belief has been expressed in the lyric under consideration but with a different set of metaphors. Thus, pairs like "find" and "lose", "show" and "invisible", "eternal" and "transient" are complementary in nature, rather than being paradoxical.[116] I shall discuss the idea of invisibility and darkness in greater detail in the third chapter (devoted to the invisible kings in Tagore).

---

[115] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Chiranavinatā*", 714–715. Translation mine.

[116] It must be admitted that the English translation has not been able to capture the semantic effectiveness and poignancy of these paradoxical/complementary pairings which are reflected in Tagore's Bengali.

Having discussed the significance of the two songs, it should not be difficult for us to see the Baul's blindness and his unique spiritual vision as a part of Tagore's larger philosophy and spiritual belief.

I return now to a general discussion on music and the politics behind its association with blindness in the play. Music has always been very "naturally" associated with blindness, its reality and cultural representations. Nair, in the context of professions pursued by blind persons in the colonial period, succinctly observes:

> As scholars have noted for other spaces, the Blind were popularly believed to have a peculiar affinity for music. Much the same was true in South Asia too with the blind musician having a purported affinity for particular instruments including the *dilruba, sitar, sarangi,* harmonium, *tabla* and the flute. Examples of blind musicians appear in colonial and missionary archives; and Hindu temples as well as all manner of festivals offered blind musicians employment and public spaces. Some others also made a living by teaching music or by marrying musical abilities with religious teaching and becoming 'Kirtankars' and preachers.[117]

Thus, the image of a blind musician in a religious space or context[118] has been a stereotype, and Tagore has conveniently employed it in *Phālguni* to give expression to his profound spiritual thoughts.

Thus, in this section, by outlining certain key features of the blind Baul, I have attempted to explore the politics of vision/sight as played out in Tagore's thoughts about theatre and spirituality. I have also endeavoured to locate the image of the blind Baul

---

[117] Nair, 191.

[118] It should be kept in mind that music is the purest, most untainted, of the art forms in Greek thought as well as Indian thought (the concept of *nāda-brahma* or the Primeval Sound).

in a larger socio-political context to show how Tagore reacted to (endorsed and/or resisted) the popularised imaginations about persons with physical impairments and the spiritual perceptions associated with such individuals. Here, we cannot be oblivious to the radical impact (in terms of ocular politics) that the author—a Nobel Prize-winner himself (that too the first non-European one) —as a "blind bard" on the stage,[119] had on the public.

To conclude, from our discussion of Tagore's treatment of the concept and portrayal of blindness, it is evident that he attempted to release it from its convenient, conventional and simplistic associations with darkness. While being within the scope of the contemporary perceptions about blindness, he never failed to try its boundaries. Although the blind characters analysed in this chapter are quite unique and significantly different from each other, all of them engage in/provoke discourses on the various political and cultural meanings of sight and light. They start out by being etched on the conventional backdrop of lightlessness and lack of vision, but soon emerge as important agents for invoking light. In other words, in the process of 'pouring' light into the blind eyes, the ideas of both light and sightlessness are explored from multiple angles. Interestingly enough, the 'sighted' characters (many of whom lack 'insight') in these plays also participate in the complex and nuanced understanding of sight, and its lack, thereby presenting a juxtaposition of contrasting viewpoints, necessary to perceive the whole.

[119] Edward Thompson, while recounting his memory of the first production of *Phālguni*, comments on Rabindranath's "star performance", and the overwhelming effect that his "own rendering of the double parts, of Chandrasekhar and, later, in the mask proper, of Baul the blind bard" had on the audience. Thompson, 244.

Chapter Three

Invisibility: "The Eyes Can't See You"[1]

Having discussed Tagore's engagements with disguise and blindness in his plays, we move on to his (avant-garde) experimentations with the idea and experience of 'invisibility'. Perhaps it goes without saying that depicting invisibility, and contrasting its connotations with those of visibility (and exhibitionism), particularly in a medium which is audio-visual in nature, demands a novelty of refined artistic perception, which undoubtedly attained its climactic peak in his career as a playwright in the twentieth century. Besides this the period also witnessed a significant evolution of his understanding of the image of the king and the multifarious aspects of kingship and *rāj*-dharma, with which Tagore kept negotiating throughout his political and (quite significantly) spiritual life. Satanjib Raha in his *Rabindra Bhāvnāye Rājā*, has discussed Rabindranath's treatment of the metaphor of kingship in some detail, although the subtle intricacies of the idea of invisibility in the same context have remained largely neglected.

The present chapter consists of four sections, each dealing with one or more plays, chronologically arranged, in which 'appears' an invisible Raja. It is remarkable that despite all possibilities of falling into repetitive patterns and stereotypes, the invisible Rajas of these plays (most of which were written in quick succession) stand uniquely distinct from one another, but in complementary relationships. In the cases of *Arūp Ratan* and *Rakta-*

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, from "*Nayana tomāre pāya nā dekhite*", *Gitabitān* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 2002), 153. Translation mine.

karavi, I have used Ananda Lal's translations, for they, being extremely faithful to the figurative language of the original texts, suit my purpose most appropriately. For other Bengali texts I have used my own translations of the relevant sections as has been the general practice in this dissertation.

Section 3.1

In this section I shall analyse the idea of (in)visibility in general, and the image of the invisible Raja in particular, in the plays *Rājā* (1910) and *Arūp Ratan* (1920).[2] *Arūp Ratan* is "the condensed stageworthy edition of the play *Rājā.*"[3] Ananda Lal quite aptly notes that *Arūp Ratan* is "the final published incarnation of *Rājā*, altered mainly in the shape of compression, but close enough to the original drama to make thematic analyses of both virtually interchangeable."[4] Therefore, in the present discussion, I shall primarily focus on the text of *Arūp Ratan*, but shall also refer to the text of *Rājā* wherever need be. I should clarify that although the narrative outline of the musical drama *Sāpmochan* (1931) is taken from the same Buddhist lore on which *Rājā /Arūp Ratan* was based, Tagore's treatment of the invisible king in *Sāpmochan* is significantly distinct from the one in the earlier plays. Since the treatments are so different that they deserve to be discussed separately, I have done the same in Section 3.4 of this chapter.

---

[2] "Tagore wrote and published the play *Rājā* in late 1910. Ten years later, in early 1920, he published a rewritten 'stage-worthy' version titled *Arūp Ratan*, in which he deleted the character of the invisible Raja altogether. In the following year he prepared the second edition of *Rājā*, restoring many passages from his original manuscript which he had excised from the first edition (1910); the text of this longer second edition is the one currently in circulation… in 1935, Tagore completely reworked the text of *Arūp Ratan* for a production in Calcutta…" See Rabindranath Tagore, *Three Plays*, translated and with an introduction by Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 265.

[3] Tagore in his Preface to the play. Translated by Lal, 269.

[4] Lal, 55.

Before entering the analysis of the invisible Raja in *Arūp Ratan*, it may be useful to consider the story of the beautiful Sudarshana and her 'hideous' husband King Kusa as it appears in Rajendralala Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (1882), a book that Tagore admitted to have read and borrowed details from, for some of his plays. The legend of Sudarshana appears in the *Kusa Jātaka* and the *Mahāvastu-Avadāna*, both in Mitra's anthology. Following are extracts (as quoted in Lal) from the latter, which give the lengthier rendition of the tale:

> Mahendraka, the tribal king of Bhadrakasat in Kanyakubja, had a very beautiful daughter. Alinda immediately after Kusa's accession, set a negotiation on foot for her son's marriage to that princess. The match was soon settled. … But Alinda was apprehensive lest her fair daughter-in-law would commit suicide at the sight of so deformed a husband. She, therefore, prepared rooms underground where, under the plea of family customs, she placed the young couple. No light was admitted into the room. The couple enjoyed their honey-moon in the dark. But Sudarsana, the princess, grew impatient to see her beloved husband … Alinda, to avoid Sudarsana's seeing the ugly husband, made one of her step-sons personate Kusa on the throne, while the real Kusa with his thick lips, corpulent belly, deformed head, held the royal umbrella. Sudarsana was pleased with her supposed husband, but she expressed her indignation at so black and ugly a person being allowed to hold the parasol. On one occasion when walking in the royal park she fled from him as from a monster.
>
> But in a short time, her mistake was corrected. At a great conflagration of the city the elephant park was saved, simply by the activity of the king. …

Sudarsana then found out her error. She learned, to her great surprise and grief, that the monster at the park was her real husband. She instantly begged the permission of her mother-in-law to proceed to Kanyakubja. The permission was granted, and she set out for Kanyakubja to hide her shame.

The king, unable to bear the separation, appointed one of his half-brothers as regent, and proceeded himself to the north … in private he tried to persuade his refractory wife, but to no purpose. …

In the meanwhile, the scandal of Sudarsana's leaving, and in a way divorcing, her husband spread far and wide. Seven feudatories of the king of Kanyakubja offered to marry her. But their offers were indignantly rejected by the king. They made a common cause with one another, and advanced to seize the capital. The king, in wrath scolded his refractory daughter, and threatened to cut her into seven pieces for these seven rebels, if he got worsted in the coming conflict. Sudarsana, trembling with fear at so terrible a threat, had now recourse to her almost divorced husband. … He promised to save her, and to fight her father's cause. … The hero advanced on an elephant and towards his enemies, and by a shout at the onset so quailed their spirit that they surrendered themselves his captives. … Kusa set out in the company of his humbled wife for his own kingdom. On his way, he looked at his own image reflected in a glassy brook, and was so much disgusted at his deformity that he wanted to drown himself. But just at that time Indra manifested himself before him, and presented him a garland set with the rare jewel called Jyotirasa. "Put this on, and it will make you", said Indra, "the most beautiful man on earth. When you wish to assume your own form, cover this with your

> clothes and your beauty will be hidden." Kusa put on the jewel, and Sudarsana was transported with delight, when she found her husband blessed with a celestial form.[5]

To facilitate a comparative analysis, I wish to cite Tagore's Preface (January 1920) to *Arūp Ratan* which also serves to provide a thematic and narrative summary of the play:

> Sudarsana sought the Raja externally. She sent the bridal garland to the place where things can be seen by the eyes, touched by the hands, amassed in the storehouse, where there's men and money and fame. With the vanity of intelligence she must have determined that she could attain success in life externally by the strength of intelligence alone. Her companion Surangama told her that it would not be wrong to know the Lord in all respects through externals, but only after He is known in the interior secret chamber where He comes Himself and summons; however it would be wrong to call "rajas" those who delude the eyes through maya. Sudarshana did not heed these words. She surrendered herself in her mind to Subarna [literally, gold or one with beautiful colour] on seeing his beauty. Then – how a fire started on all sides of her; how a battle over her ensued among a group of many false external rajas as soon as she left the Raja internal; how her introduction to her own Raja occurred in the midst of that conflagration; how her vanity was destroyed by the shock of sorrow; and eventually how after accepting defeat, leaving the palace, standing in the street, she gained the company of that

[5] Lal, 265-267. Mitra uses standard diacritical marks for all the Sanskrit names, but I have dropped them here.

> Lord of hers, the Lord Who can be perceived in all lands, in all times, in all forms, in the blissful *rasa* of one's own interior; – all that has been narrated in this play.[6]

Satanjib Raha[7] has presented a comparison between the narrative of the Buddhist lore and that of the play *Rājā* in some detail. I shall refrain myself from repeating it all over again. But there are a few aspects, pertaining specifically to the themes of (in)visibility, vision, sight and seeing, which Raha has either overlooked or not considered deeply; and therefore they must be discussed here.

For the sake of convenience, I wish to arrange this comparative analysis in phases. First, let us take up the question of the Raja's 'ugliness'. In the Buddhist lore, the entire narrative revolves around the 'ugliness' of Kusa. The repeated and emphatic usage of words and phrases like "so deformed a husband", "thick lips, corpulent belly, deformed head", "black and ugly", "monster", "disgusted at his [Kusa's] deformity", makes it evident that the physical and literal 'ugliness' of the king not only forms the central plot point of the narrative, but is also its important thematic premise. However, in *Rājā /Arūp Ratan*, the main focus is on the invisibility of "the unseen Raja"[8]. In fact this invisibility is so crucial and central to Tagore's conception of the play and the philosophy embedded in it, that he emphatically explains it with the help of a para-textual comment. In *Rājā* Scene I, when the Raja 'appears' for the first time in the text (actually, we hear his voice from offstage), Tagore adds a footnote stating, "In this play the Raja is *never to be seen* on the stage"[9] (emphasis mine).

---

[6] Translated by Lal, 269.
[7] Satanjib Raha, *Rabindra Bhāvnāye Rājā* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2012), 125-66.
[8] Lal, 282.
[9] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Visva Bharati), 748. Translation mine.

It may be interesting to spend some time in speculating about the possible reason behind such an unusual use of the para-textual tool. In a letter dated 3 November 1910 to Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay, the co-editor of the periodical *Prabāsi*, Tagore writes, "Here [in Shilaidaha] I have started writing a play, but you should not claim it. It is a short play, of *Shāradotsav*'s kind. I am composing it to meet the demands of my school. If it is published in instalments in your periodical, no one would like it."[10] Again, in another letter dated 16 November 1916, this time to his dear student Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, he explains the unconventional nature of the play more explicitly: "It [*Rājā*] is not a conventional drama. It is of *Shāradotsav*'s kind. The narrative thread is subtle, and with it a few songs have been woven together."[11] From these excerpts it is fairly evident that Tagore was quite aware of the avant-garde nature of the play. To be specific, he was acutely conscious of the theatrical unconventionality he was experimenting with, which ran the risk of being misconstrued. Edward Thompson, according to whom the play is "very difficult to present", wrote, "*Rājā* was found obscure by his own countrymen." He further added, "This may be in part the fault of what I have called his elvish plot and his capricious freaks of construction."[12] Phrases and comments like these are enough to show that the play with all its theatrical novelty and unconventionality was indeed misunderstood by literary critics like Thompson. Thus, the use of the para-textual note appears almost as the playwright's anticipatory attempt to explain an experiment which was so novel and original. In other words, the constant invisibility of a character throughout a play was (and still is) so unusual that Tagore could not depend only on the subtle hints in the main text. However, in *Arūp*

[10] Asoke Kumar Misra, *Rabindranāttye Rūp: Arūp* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing), 268. Translation mine.
[11] Misra, 268-269. Translation mine.
[12] Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Calcutta: Riddhi India), 212.

Ratan, there is no such para-textual explanation. Perhaps, by the time Tagore reached *Arūp Ratan*, word about the original production had already spread, and he had become more confident about the unconventional technique. What is more, he repeated the seemingly redundant word *"nepathye*"[13], literally behind the scene or offstage, for all the Raja's dialogues in *Rājā*, except those at the end of the play.

Now let us return to the idea of 'ugly' and 'beautiful'. It is significant that unlike the Buddhist lore where Kusa's physical and literal 'ugliness' and 'deformity' are pronounced in emphatic and unequivocal terms, Tagore does not specifically highlight his Raja's physical ugliness. Moreover, when this concept of ugliness is mentioned in the play, it is treated purely and explicitly on the symbolic and philosophical level. To elucidate this point, I would like to closely consider the following section taken from the second scene of *Rājā*:

> Visvabasu: Here, Thakurda, this person is spreading rumours that *our Raja is ugly*; and that is why he does not show himself.
>
> Thakurda: Why are you getting so angry, Vishu? *His Raja is definitely ugly* – otherwise why would people like him, with such faces, live in his kingdom? His own parents have not named him Kartik[14]. *He meditates on an image of Raja that is similar to his own face*, as reflected in the mirror.
>
> Virupaksha: Thakurda, I shall not take the name, but I have heard it from someone who cannot be disbelieved.

[13] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 951.
[14] Kartikeya or Kartik is a Hindu god of war and valour. In Bengali culture, he is synonymous with male beauty.

> Thakurda: Who would you believe more than yourself?
>
> Virupaksha: No, but I can *prove* it to you.
>
> 1st [citizen]: This person has no shame. Not only is he saying things which shouldn't be said; on top of that he wants to prove it …
>
> 2nd: Oh, let us bring him down to dust, and make him equal to dust.
>
> Thakurda: Come on, don't be angry. Today he wants to participate in the festival by spreading around that his raja is ugly. Go, Virupaksha, you would get many people who would believe your words. Go, make a group with them and have a gala time.[15] (emphases mine).

The clause "he meditates on an image of Raja that is similar to his own face, as reflected in the mirror …" makes the metaphorical significance of "ugliness" evident. Raja is ugly to Virupaksha only because he "wants" to see him as such.[16] To the Formless, man ascribes a form that suits his own beliefs or even predilections. In addition, Virupaksha, with his desperate attempt to "prove" Raja's ugliness, manifests as a representative of the empiricist, for whom knowledge and experience are equal to mere empirical facts.[17] Here it may be fleetingly noted that the name 'Virupaksha' is suggestive. It is made of two

---

[15] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 754-755. Translation mine.

[16] In the fourth chapter of *Bhāgavad-Gitā* we find (verse eleven) – "In whatever way my devotee surrenders unto me, I reward him accordingly. Everyone follows my path in all respect, O son of Pritha." Quoted in Kṛṣṇadasa Kaviraja Gosvami, *Sri Caitanya Caritāmrta,* Vol. 1, trans. by A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupada, (Hong Kong: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983), 299.
In Gosvami's *Sri Caitanya Caritāmrta* we find an echo of the above words: "In whatever transcendental mellow [*bhāva*] my devotee worships me, I reciprocate with him. That is my natural behaviour."
The purport of these statements is that the supreme godhead by 'His' inherent nature, reveals Himself before his devotees according to their inherent devotional service. Gosvami, 240.

[17] Lal writes, "Tagore also peoples his play with a fairly representative cross-section of humanity running the gamut from the sceptics to the faithful, the ignorant to the empiricists." See Lal, 56.

words: '*virupa*', which means averse, ugly, deformed, ill-shaped, and '*aksha*', which means soul, organ of sense.

In order to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Raja's ugliness, let us move on to some of the other phrases and words used in the play to describe him. Towards the beginning, when Sudarshana, curious to know about her Raja, asks Surangama, "Is he very beautiful?", the latter replies in somewhat cryptic language, "Beautiful? One day I went to play with beauty. The day that play ended, my heart burst, that day I understood what's called beauty. There was a day I felt frightened in calling him terrifying, today I rejoice in calling him terrifying."[18] In the song "When I was blind", which immediately follows this dialogue, Surangama calls her Raja "O terror mine, destruction mine!"[19] Again in Scene IV, when fire starts on all sides of the palace (resulting from Vikrambahu's conspiracy), and Sudarshana's 'seeing' of her Raja takes place in the midst of that conflagration, she describes him as "Terrible, it's terrible. I am afraid to even remember it."[20] Thus, words like "terrible" and "terrifying" are repeatedly used to describe the Raja who, in the play, in the words of Lal, symbolizes "the supreme godhead."[21] But what is the source of this 'terror'? Surely, it has nothing to do with his physical appearance, for he who is invisible, or formless to be specific, cannot be *physically* ugly, hideous, or even terrifying. The answer to this question can be found in the perceptive remarks of S.C. Sengupta, for whom the average person considers "his appearance repulsive, because God is formless and the human eye cannot stand the presence of the formless."[22]

---

[18] Lal, 276.
[19] Lal, 276.
[20] Lal, 301.
[21] Lal, 56.
[22] S.C. Sengupta, *The Great Sentinel: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore* (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1948), 172.

The terrifying aspect of the Raja can be interpreted from another perspective as well. For Tagore, God is "fundamentally benign and benevolent, but could also be harsh, cruel, and terrible – the preserver and the destroyer. 'In his one hand he has a sword, in the other a garland.'"[23] "A bolt of lightning at the heart of a lotus is painted on the flag of my Raja,"[24] says Thakurda in *Rājā*. Tagore believed that in order to attain spiritual maturation, one must realize and accept both the blissful and the terrifying aspects of God. When an average person fails to grasp this duality, it causes much pain and agony. In fact, the play suggests that the journey of spiritual maturation and disillusionment always takes place through the path of sorrow and suffering. "In violent agony anew you tuned all my desires."[25] In other words, this 'tuning', which clearly stands for the process of spiritual growth, is terrifyingly painful. Surangama's 'tuning' has occurred before the commencement of the narrative of the play; and Sudarshana's 'tuning' takes place during its course. Thus, we see that the "terrifying" or "terrible" aspects of Tagore's Raja have several layers, none of which are anywhere close to the physical ugliness and deformity of the king of the Buddhist lore.

Although the two kings, Tagore's Raja and King Kusa, have nothing in common in terms of their ugliness and terrifying aspects, both of them are described as "black". Let us try to unpack the meanings of this "blackness". According to the story of Kusa, "… she [Sudarshana] expressed her indignation at so black and ugly a person [Kusa] being allowed to hold the parasol."[26] In the play, Sudarshana says her Raja is black: "Black, black. I thought of the sky that's climbed by a comet, black like that sky – black like storm clouds

[23] Quoted in Lal, 57.
[24] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 758.
[25] Translated by Lal, 276.
[26] Lal, 266.

– black like a shoreless ocean."[27] Clearly, while Kusa's blackness is physical and is associated with or is an extension of his physical ugliness and hideousness,[28] Raja's blackness is far from being so simplistic. In fact, it is so complex that we need to reconsider/expand our understanding of the symbolism itself. Misra notes, "Tagore, here, probably wanted to see Raja as Death."[29] Misra's observation is not unfounded, though in the play Sudarshana does not appear to meet death. I wish to cite two sections, one from *Rājā* and the other from *Arūp Ratan.* The Raja in *Rājā*, by way of explaining his nature, says, "When one who is not prepared suddenly sees me, he fails to tolerate me. He considers me to be a danger, and tries to flee from me."[30] Towards the beginning of *Arūp Ratan*, Surangama quite explicitly states, "I tell him 'You are the storm', I tell him 'You are sorrow', I tell him 'You are death'."[31] Conventionally speaking, death is associated with the colour black. In fact, Tagore himself in one of his songs composed at a young age, expressly wrote, "O Death, you are my Shyam."[32] Shyam(a) is one of the names of Lord Krishna, but it also means blue, dark and black. Thus, we see that in Tagore, the supreme godhead who is the source of "bliss" can also be merged with terror, death and blackness. This takes us back to the earlier discussion on the Tagorean duality of God – Bliss and Death.

Next, let us take up the question of 'invisibility'. In the Buddhist narrative we see that Kusa's mother was apprehensive lest her beautiful daughter-in-law would kill herself at the sight of her ugly and hideous husband. Therefore, she prepared rooms underground,

---

[27] Lal, 301.
[28] Since it is beyond the scope of the present dissertation, I restrain myself from delving into the problematics of the incorrect, albeit popular/populist/popularized equation between blackness and ugliness.
[29] Misra, 302. Translation mine.
[30] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 774.
[31] Lal, 276.
[32] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitavitān* (Calcutta: Reflect Publication, 2002), 244.

into which light was not admitted, and under the plea of family customs 'placed' the young couple there. Thus, it is a case of mere concealment and not invisibility. What is more, this concealment is a ploy devised by Alinda to deceive her fair daughter-in-law. Interestingly, in the rest of the narrative, Kusa is overtly visible – so much so that his visibility functions as the driving force of the plot. He is visible as the one holding the regal parasol; he is visible in the royal park, and when his wife sees him she flees from him as from a monster. Again, towards the end of the story, when he sees the image of his own hideous countenance reflected in a clear brook, he is repulsed by it. However, Tagore's Raja is invisible, and as mentioned earlier, he is never to be seen on the stage. In the play he is variedly described as "the unseen raja"[33], "the Elusive Raja"[34] and "*Formless Jewel*"[35]. In order to understand the meaning of the Raja's elusiveness and invisibility, it is necessary to consider the significance of the idea of 'formlessness'. For this, let us turn to a few sections from the *Kenopanishad* and the *Kathopanishad*, texts which played a seminal role in shaping Tagore's spiritual beliefs and metaphysical thought.

In the *Kenopanishad* Mantras 1 to 6, when the pupil wants to know if there be anything even behind the mind, that might give the "motive power" to the mind and all the senses, the preceptor answers, "It is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of speech. He is also the prana of the prana, the eye of the eye … there goes neither the eye nor speech nor mind; we know it not: nor do we see how to teach one about it. Different it is from all that are known, and is beyond the unknown as well – thus we have heard from the ancient seers who explained that to us … what none can see with the eyes, but by which

[33] Lal, 282.
[34] Lal, 281.
[35] Lal's translation of the title, *Arūp Ratan*

one sees the function of the eyes, know that alone as the Brahman and not this they worship here."[36]

Again, we find in *Kathopanishad,* Mantra 1.3.15: "Having reflected on him, whose nature is not sound, or touch, or form, or taste, or smell, who is changeless, eternal, without beginning and without end, beyond Mahat, eternal in its fixity; he escapes from the mouth of death."[37]

This concept of "formlessness" and its influence on Tagore can be succinctly summarized in Lal's words: "in the monistic philosophy of the Vedanta school *Arūp* is an epithet of Brahman or Brahma, the supreme universal spirit or absolute godhead that cannot be described in human terms because it would be futile to try to do so. … Our mortal world is the ocean of forms and beauty, in which one tries – or at least should try – to find the elusive formless jewel. This quest underlies the present play from start to finish, as it does much of Tagore's creative work."[38]

Thus, in simplest terms, the Raja's invisibility and formlessness mean that he symbolizes an 'idea' or 'experience' which cannot be perceived by the eyes, and by extension, the physical senses; he can only be described as the destination/culmination of spiritual pursuit or the Realization.

Before moving on to the final aspect of this section, I would like to touch upon the subject of transformation, physical transformation to be specific, which in the Buddhist narrative plays a significant role in bringing about its 'neat' closure, and even a 'happy' ending. Kusa's transformation from his hideous form to a celestial one comes literally as a

---

[36] Swami Sharvananda (ed.), *Kena-Upanishad* (Madras: The Ramakrishna Math Mylapore, 1920), 6-13.
[37] Sris Chandra Vasu (ed.), *Kathopanishad* (Allahabad: The Panini Office, Bhuvaneshvari Asram, 1905), 126-27.
[38] Lal, 267.

boon and a narrative 'reward' for Kusa and Sudarshana alike. "Kusa put on the jewel, and Sudarsana was transported with delight, when she found her husband blessed with a celestial form."[39] It is perhaps not very difficult to gauge that the apparently satisfactory ending only serves to reinstate the binary notions of ugly and beautiful. However, quite expectedly, this ending of the Buddhist lore (which somewhat lacks in subtlety) does not find any parallel in Tagore's play, of which the central theme is man's spiritual quest for the Divine, the Formless Jewel. What is more, the utterance of Tagore's Sudarshana, "You're not beautiful, lord, not beautiful, you're unequalled …"[40] breaks down the superficial binary of ugly and beautiful. Tagore's play also does end with a transformation, but it is very significantly different from the one in the Buddhist lore. *Rājā* ends with the spiritual transformation of both Sudarshana and King Bikram. In Sudarshana's own words her transformation may be described as follows: "When I was in the palace, I trod right in the midst of only gold and silver – today I'll undo that ill fate of mine by going through his dust. Who'd have known this happy news, I am united today with that Raja of dust and earth at every step in this dust and earth."[41] This turning away from "gold and silver" to "dust and earth" may be understood as the relinquishing of the world of materialism and physical sight, and accepting the life of simplicity by attaining spiritual vision.

In the case of King Bikram, this transformation is even more stark. He earnestly pleads, "Thakurda, don't forget me too in this dust-game of yours. I will have to get this royal attire so soiled that it can't be recognized again."[42]

---

[39] Lal, 267.
[40] Lal, 318.
[41] Lal, 315-316.
[42] Lal, 316.

To better understand the connotation of this desire of King Bikram to 'invisibilize' his overtly visible royal attire, we need to consider the *political* significance of the Raja's invisibility or 'unseenness'.

> Kaundilya: This time people have come from all over the world; all are saying "Everything we've seen is fine but why haven't we seen the Raja?" – I cannot give anyone an answer. That has remained one big gap here.
>
> Thakurda: Gap! Well the entire kingdom has become absolutely stuffed with the Raja only because the Raja doesn't show up in one place in this country of ours – you call that a gap! But he has even made all of us into rajas.[43]

This is a conception of what I wish to call 'ideal democracy', literally the rule of the people. The Raja has not only invisibilized himself and his royal paraphernalia, but he has even made all the citizens of his country into rajas. Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, by way of conflating the political and spiritual significance of the Raja, goes to the extent of stating that the Raja "by bringing everyone out into the open path of freedom, has made all of them into rajas. This is clearly the present concept of the Democratic God."[44] This is subtly pitted against the image of autocracy and tyranny which thrives on terror, repression, violence, and crude exhibition of "dreadful power".[45] One of the foreign visitors to the kingdom expects:

> in every country the souls of people country-wide begin shivering in fright like bamboo leaves on seeing a raja, and here the Raja can't be found even after searching! If nothing else, if from time to time in some cases he rolls his eyes and

[43] Lal, 284.
[44] Here Chakravarti uses two terms, 'democratic *ishvar*' and '*ganesh bhagavān*'. Ajitkumar Chakravarti, *Kāvya Parikramā* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1933), 14.
[45] Lal, 285.

> says without reason, "Bring me the fellow's head", at least then we'd understand there's a Raja like a raja indeed.[46]

Here we may remember the words of Duryodhana in *Gāndhārir Avedan*: "If the king does not hold his head high above all others; if his proud and insolent head is not *constantly visible* to all his subjects, even from a far-off distance, then how shall the king keep his *ruler's eyes* fixed on them and exert his might?"[47] (emphases mine) Tagore's Raja is a strong critique of fascism and all sorts of untruths by a "slave-king"[48]. When placed in its immediate context of a colonial regime and oppression, the play's political commentary becomes all the more obvious and inevitable.

Thus, in this section we see that Tagore's innovative treatment of invisibility, particularly with respect to his conception and presentation of the Raja, is both theatrically and thematically unique. He derives only a sketchy narrative outline from the ancient Buddhist lore, and interprets it through the lens of his modern political thoughts and humanist philosophical beliefs. What in the Buddhist narrative was gross, physical, simplistic and even problematic, has become subtle, symbolic, nuanced and political in Tagore. The idea of 'the Invisible King', which Tagore explores so extensively in his *Rājā*, becomes a favourite of his, and gets revisited in many of his subsequent plays which will be discussed in the later sections of the present chapter.

Section 3.2

[46] Lal, 285.
[47] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 489-90. Translation mine.
[48] Lal, 285. From that quintessential song of democracy in the play, "*Amra sabai raja*" ("We are all rajas").

Although this section will mainly focus on the invisible Raja of *Dākghar*, I wish to comment first on *Achalāyatan*. Chronologically, and also in terms of the 'depiction' of Rajas, *Achalāyatan* (1911)[49] forms a bridge between *Rājā* (1910) and *Dākghar* (1912). Unlike *Rājā* but somewhat like *Dākghar*, the Raja of *Achalāyatan* does not appear as a character in the play. He is not just invisible, but also never heard. We only get to hear about him from Dadathakur, who, as discussed in my first chapter, is the mouthpiece of the playwright himself. In other words, Tagore in *Achalāyatan* has literally and theatrically made his "Formless Jewel" truly imperceptible to the senses. This suggests that the treatment of the metaphysical symbolism of formlessness that Tagore experimented with and explored so extensively in the preceding play, is developed more abstractly in *Achalāyatan*. It seems that since Tagore exhausts the spiritual allegory in *Rājā*, he assumes that his audience/readers would understand the symbolism of the invisible Raja well enough in *Achalāyatan*, and subsequently also in *Dākghar*. It may also be said that by the time he reached *Achalāyatan*, Tagore was quite confident and assertive about his unconventional treatment of the invisible Raja, and could actually 'afford' its heightened level of abstraction in this play.

There is only a very brief section in the second scene where we find the mention of this Raja. For the sake of convenience, let us consider the entire section at length:

(Enter a group of Shonpanshus)

Dadathakur: What happened? Why have you come running all excited?

First Shonpanshu: Chandak has been killed.

[49] (it appeared in *Prabasi*, 1911)

Dadathakur: Killed? By whom?

Second Shonpanshu: The king of Sthabirpattan.

Panchak: Our king? But why?

Second Shonpanshu: Chandak was meditating in a ruined temple in the forest to become a Sthabirak. King Manthargupta heard the news and slew him.

Third Shonpanshu: Earlier, the boundary wall of their kingdom was thirty-five cubits high. Now they have employed men to raise it to eighty cubits, lest everybody suddenly jumps over the wall to become a Sthabirak.

Fourth Shonpanshu: They have taken away ten Shonpanshus from our country. Perhaps they will sacrifice them before their goddess Kaljhanti.

Dadathakur: Come on, let us go then.

First Shonpanshu: Where?

Dadathakur: To Sthabirpattan.

Second Shonpanshu: Right now?

Dadathakur: Yes, right now.

All: Come, let us go, let us go.

Dadathakur: Our Raja has ordained – when their sin in the form of walls rises to blur the light of the sky, we must raze them to the ground.

First Shonpanshu: We will do it!

All: We'll do it!

Dadathakur: And then we will build the Raja's highway over those demolished walls.

All: Yes, we will build the Raja's highway.

Dadathakur: Our Raja's victory-chariot will roll over it.

All: Yes, it will, it will.[50]

Here we find the mention of two rajas[51]: Manthargupta, the king of Sthabirpattan, and Raja, the friend of Dadathakur. They are carefully and poignantly juxtaposed by Tagore to create a unique effect of contrast. The suggestive names 'Sthabirpattan' and 'Manthargupta' make the contrast even starker. 'Sthabirpattan' literally means the city of stagnation and decrepitude; and Manthargupta is a compound of two words, *manthar* meaning slow, idle, sluggish, inert, slothful, dull, and *gupta* meaning hidden, protected, guarded, secret. This king, as depicted in the cited section, is the embodiment of religious orthodoxy, autocracy, violence, and even communalism. Pitted against him is Dadathakur's Raja who evidently symbolizes the idea and spirit of resistance and revolt. This Tagorean idea of revolt has two aspects: the destruction of dreary, decrepit, dead habits, and the re-creation of new, lively, free thoughts. The phrases "raze them to the ground" and "build the Raja's highway over those demolished walls" evoke the two aspects respectively.

---

[50] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 823-24. Translation mine.

[51] In the original Bengali text, the word "*rājā*" has been used throughout. However, I have deliberately used two words, "Raja" and "king" in my translation to distinguish King Manthargupta from the Raja. In addition, the name Raja would enable me to establish the continuity of the spiritual allegory that Tagore introduced and developed in his play *Rājā*.

In his essay "*Path o pātheya*" collected in his anthology *Rājā-Prajā,* Tagore writes, "Destruction is graceful because it inspires new creation. Otherwise, only demolition and injudicious revolt can never be benevolent."[52] It may be noted that this dualistic aspect of the idea of revolt converges[53] with the Tagorean dualism of God, which has been discussed in the previous section. However, from the perspective of visibility and vision, the terms which interest us the most are "the walls" and "the light of the sky". The walls, on the one hand, stand for the crude exhibition of autocratic arrogance, and on the other hand, symbolize the violent apparatuses of fragmentation and communal segregation. Tagore, while commenting on *Achalāyatan* in his *Ātmaparichay*, notes: "The consciousness that enables our spirit to know itself is roused by conflict and by breaking the walls of [dead] habit and dreary comfort."[54] Furthermore, the symbolic significance of the walls becomes overtly political when Tagore adds, "I think today a war has broken out in Europe because the guru has arrived. He is having to break down the age-old walls of accumulated wealth, pride, and arrogance."[55] Thus, 'the ordain' of the Raja suggests that "the narrow domestic walls"[56] which obfuscate and even distract true vision or "the light of the sky" ought to be demolished. Since the last chapter of this dissertation will deal with the concept of darkness and light, I refrain from dwelling on it in the present discussion. However, here it should

[52] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Path o Pātheya*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 10 (Calcutta: Visvabharati, 1942), 454. Translation mine.
[53] Tagore himself explains this convergence in simplest terms when he writes "The path of creation runs through destruction." See Rabindranath Tagore, "*Ātmaparichay*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 27 (Calcutta: Visvabharati, 1965), 231. Translation mine.
[54] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 27, 231. Translation mine.
[55] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 27, 232. Translation mine.
[56] From Tagore's famous "Where the mind is without fear". Tagore, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (London: Chiswick Press, 1912), 18.

suffice to state that “the sky” is a metaphor that Tagore frequently uses to suggest the Omnipresent, the Vast.

There is another section in the second scene where we find an oblique reference to the Raja:

> Dadathakur: My friend has taught me a mantra that breaks the fangs of fear forever.
>
> Panchak: We realize that when we look at you. But where did you find that friend, Thakur?
>
> Dadathakur: With conviction and courage I put my heart forward, and that is how I got him. I didn’t have to go anywhere.
>
> Panchak: How is that?
>
> Dadathakur: The child that has no confidence cries in the dark for its mother when it finds the bed empty, and the child who has confidence just stretches its hand and finds her to its heart’s content. Then the darkness of fear becomes more intensely sweet. If the mother asks him then, “Do you want the light?” the child says, “Light and darkness are the same if you are near me.”
>
> Panchak: Dadathakur, it took me a lot of courage to leave our *achalāyatan* and come to you. But I don’t have the courage to go near your friend.
>
> Dadathakur: Why, what are you afraid of?
>
> Panchak: A bird born in the cage fears the sky most. The metal bars of the cage give it pain, yet if the door is open for it, its heart throbs in fear. It sings “How shall

> I live if I am not caged?" We have not learnt to let ourselves go – without fear. That is our age-old habit.[57]

Although we do not find any mention of the Raja, we hear about Dadathakur's "friend". However, our reading of the play *Rājā* tells us that this friend is none other than the very same Raja[58]. For Satanjib Raha, "Rabindranath's true Raja [in *Achalāyatan*] and Dadathakur have almost converged to a point."[59] It is to be clarified that although Dadathakur is the playwright's alter ego, he is quite consciously never merged with the Raja, who, in Tagore's spiritual realm, stands for the Supreme Godhead. Returning to the cited section, the lines "with conviction and courage I put my heart forward, and that is how I got him. I didn't have to go anywhere …" are interesting from the perspective of (in)visibility, for they suggestively reaffirm the observation that the Raja is not to be found anywhere physically; he can only be experienced in the heart, spiritually through the process of sadhana. Also, it may be noted that the image of "the sky" is again associated with Dadathakur's friend the Raja, signifying his infinitude and vastness.

Next, I come to *Dākghar* (1912), the narrative of which at the surface level is about an ailing child nearing his death. Many critics have shown a tendency of reading the plays *Rājā* and *Dākghar* together as a pair. Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, for instance, holds that "*Dākghar* and its earlier play *Rājā* are completely new of their kind in Bengali drama. It is needless to state that they are enigmatic in nature."[60] Ashutosh Bhattacharya goes to the

---

[57] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 819-820. Translation mine.
[58] In Scene V of *Rājā*, the impostor king says, "This person [Thakurda] identifies himself as the friend of the Raja of this country." Again, in Scene XVI, Sudarshana says, "I have heard that you are my Raja's friend. Do accept my pranam, and bless me." See Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 771, 788. Translation mine.
[59] Raha, 176. Translation mine.
[60] Ajitkumar Chakravarti, *Kāvya Parikramā* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1933), 14. Translation mine.

extent of stating, "In terms of ideas, the play *Dākghar* is complementary to *Rājā*."[61] While being appropriate on the broader level(s), these somewhat generalized or even fleeting comments need to be qualified. The Rajas and their representations in these two plays are distinct and dissimilar in ways more than one, which will become evident from the subsequent discussion.

As mentioned earlier, unlike *Rājā /Arūp Ratan*, in *Dākghar* the Raja is not only invisible, but is also never heard. In other words, while in the earlier play the Raja is the central 'character', in *Dākghar* he is an 'abstraction'. Satanjib Raha notes, "In this play [*Dākghar*] there is no Raja, but the news of his arrival."[62] The clause "there is no Raja" may be accepted only if it is considered in a strictly limited sense. It may be modified as "there is no physically present Raja in *Dākghar*" although the entire play is pervaded by "waiting for the Raja and his letter". Thus we find that the two plays, despite evincing a similar conception of the invisible Raja, present different manifestations/ perceptions of it.

Let us begin by considering the moment in the play where we hear about the Raja for the first time. In the second part/scene, Amal engages in conversation with a series of characters: the Curd Seller, the Watchman, the Headman, Sudha and A Group of Boys. These characters have their entries and exits, although Amal sits still, confined to his position beside the open window. In other words, the stasis and confinement imposed on Amal are astutely juxtaposed and contrasted with the free-flowing life of the outside world.

---

[61] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bānglā Nātyasāhityer Itihas,* Vol. 2 (Kolkata: A. Mukherjee and Co. Pvt Ltd, 1955), 180. Translation mine.
[62] Raha, 179. Translation mine.

The flow of life in connection with the passage of time[63] is most evidently manifested through the character of the Watchman, and it is he who tells Amal about the Raja for the first time. Significantly enough, Tagore himself played the role of the Watchman (and Thakurda) when the play[64] was staged for the first time in Bengali at the Bichitra Bhavan in Jorasanko, Calcutta, in 1917. Rathindranath Tagore wrote in his memoir, "It was a great pleasure to see Baba [Father] himself taking up the roles of Thakurda and the Watchman."[65] The dialogue goes as follows:

> Amal: There, on the street the Watchman is on his round. Watchman! Watchman! For once please come and listen to me.
>
> (Enter Watchman)
>
> Watchman: What's this row all about? Why are you calling me? Aren't you scared of me?
>
> Amal: Why, why should I be scared of you?
>
> Watchman: Suppose I take you away, then?
>
> Amal: Where will you take me to? Far away, beyond those mountains?
>
> Watchman: Suppose I take you straight to the Raja, then?

[63] The Watchman says, "I ring the bell only when it is time … the bell sounds to tell everyone that time waits for none. It goes on forever." See Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 853. Translation mine.
[64] *The Post Office,* the English translation of *Dākghar*, had been staged in 1913 at the Abbey Theatre in Ireland for the first time in.
[65] Quoted in Shila Bhattacharya, "*Dākghar: Manchāyane Sangit*", Devabrata Biswas and Ashutosh Biswas, ed., *Dākghar: Ananta Jivan-bikshā* (Kolkata: Prajnabikash, 2014), 206. Translation mine.

> Amal: To the Raja? Please do! But the physician has asked me not to go out. No one can ever take me away to anywhere. I have got to stay here all day long.[66]

It may be noted that the Raja (or his name) is invoked by the Watchman initially to evoke a sense of awe or even fear. Clearly, the speaker intends to scare Amal when he says "Suppose I take you straight to the Raja, then?" However, the connotation of the Raja is immediately changed by Amal's prompt reply, "To the Raja? Please do!" From an (folklorish) object of fear[67], he becomes the ultimate object of aspiration/desire. In passing it may be noted that such a transformation or, rather, movement (albeit a much more detailed and sustained one) was seen in *Rājā* as well. There Sudarshana underwent a change; moving from ignorance to knowledge, she learnt to see her Raja as not only 'Terrible' but also as 'Blissful'.

Additionally, I should point out that the Headman always refers to or speaks of the Raja as an/the embodiment of punition and fear. For instance, he says in a cynical and even threatening tone:

> … Madhav Datta has become too audacious. Just because he has grown a little wealthy, kings and emperors are now the only matter of discussion in his house. Wait, I shall teach him a lesson! Well, you boy, see, I will make arrangements so that the king's letter reaches your house very soon … I shall let the king know about you. Then he won't be able to wait for long. Immediately he will send his footmen

[66] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 853-54. Translation mine.
[67] Given the overt association of the Watchman with the flow/passage of time, as illustrated earlier, the symbolic connotation of the Raja as Death is difficult to overlook. Since the idea of Raja and Death has already been explored in the previous section, I refrain from repeating it here.

> to ask after you. Madhav Datta has indeed become very audacious. If the king gets to know he will be straightened and put in order.[68]

As in my discussion of *Achalāyatan*, I have deliberately translated Raja as "king" to suit this specific occasion, distinguishing the *arūp* Raja from the image of the fearful, tyrannical king.

Now let us analyse the significance of the Post Office from the perspective of 'seeing' and visibility. The Raja of *Dākghar*, as mentioned earlier, is beyond all sensory/physical perceptions; but his Post Office, his Postmen, and his Letter are apparently worldly, visible and even tangible. Shubhashish Goswami in his essay "*Dākghar Nātake Tatva Bhāvnā: Svarup o Bistār*" offers one interpretation: "In the play *Dākghar*, Post Office, Letter and Postmen – all three are symbols. The Post Office is this world, nature with all its vastness and variety; the Letter refers to the forms of beauty and bliss; and the Postmen are the six seasons and other expressions of beauty."[69] I shall discuss the Letter separately, but here let us see how Tagore, through Amal and the Watchman, describes the Post Office:

> Amal: … tell me something, Watchman!
>
> Watchman: Yes, dear?
>
> Amal: What is going on there, in that house on the other side of the road where a flag has been hoisted high up and people are always going in and out?

---

[68] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 856. Translation mine.
[69] Shubhashish Goswami, "*Dākghar Natake Tatva Bhāvnā: Svarup o Vistār*", Devabrata Biswas and Ashutosh Biswas, ed., *Dākghar: Ananta Jivan-bikshā*, 28-29. Translation mine.

Watchman: A new post office has been set up there.

Amal: Post office? Whose post office?

Watchman: Who? The Raja's, surely! Whose else can it be?[70]

Unlike the Raja, his Post Office is obviously visible to people. It is not only "visibly" located on the other side of the road, but also has a flag hoisted high on it. This visibility of the post office and its flag is further emphasized when the Watchman, in response to Amal's innocent query "How do you know he [Raja] will write a letter to me as well?" replies, "Why else should he set up the post office with such a huge golden flag right in front of your window!"[71] It should be clarified that the tone of description of this overt visibility of the post office has nothing in common with the crude exhibition of power that we have marked and analysed in the contexts of tyrannical and autocratic kings like Duryodhana (of *Gāndhārir Avedan*) and Bikram (of *Rājā /Arūp Ratan*). In fact, the "visibility" of the Post Office in connection with its "universal" accessibility ("People are always going in and out") stands in stark contrast with the idea of exhibitionistic monocracy. The descriptions of the Post Office and its visibility evince a sense of a celebration of the tangible, the physical and even the worldly/earthly. What is more, the sense of celebration is furthered by the symbolism of the Postmen.

Amal: Well, who will fetch me the Raja's letter when it comes?

Watchman: Why, the Raja has many Postmen! Haven't you seen them running about with golden badges on their chests?

---

[70] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 854. Translation mine.
[71] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 855. Translation mine.

Amal: Where do they go?

Watchman: From door to door, from country to country.

Amal: I will be the Raja's Postman when I grow up.

Watchman: Ha ha ha ha! Postman? That's a great profession indeed! Rain or shine, delivering letters from door to door to the poor and the wealthy – that's hard work![72]

The visibleness and the quotidian feature of the Postmen with the golden badges have been deliberately juxtaposed with the formlessness of the physically imperceptible/ 'absent' Raja. The vivid descriptions of the Post Office and the Postmen symbolize and constitute the world of *rūp* or form. This, in Tagorean philosophy, is complementary, not contradictory, to the idea of *arūp* or the Formless. For Asoke Kumar Misra, the "conflict between forms and formlessness had always been there in Rabindranath's mind."[73] We could object to the word "conflict". While it is true that Tagore throughout his literary career remained preoccupied with the interplay of *rūp* and *arūp,* and their varied shades and significances, he never conceived them as conflicting ideas. Rather, for him, forms and Formlessness are the complementary parts of the Eternal. In his essay "*Rūp o Arūp*", collected in the anthology *Sanchay*, this idea has been expressed in the most precise language: "The Eternal Truth or the Eternal Stability expresses itself through eternal mobility. This is why all expressions have two aspects – on the one hand they are limited, or else they cannot be expressed; on the other hand, they are limitless, or else they cannot express the Eternal … It is by moving through the forms and transcending the limits of these transient forms that the process of spiritual realization attempts to reach the Eternal

[72] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 855. Translation mine.
[73] Misra, 257. Translation mine.

Truth … We get to perceive the manifestations of the bliss of the Eternal through the ever-changing, infinite expressions of the varied and ever-flowing forms of the world."[74]

Returning to the description of the Postmen, the phrases "from door to door" and "from country to country" used in the context of the nature of the work of the Postmen and their destinations, suggest the universality and all-pervasiveness of the expressions of "the Blissful". The symbolic and metonymic significance of the phrase "rain or shine" gets crystallized when in response to Amal's query about the names and identities of the Raja's Postmen, we hear one of the boys saying, "One of them is Badal Postman! Another is called Sarat! There are many more."[75] The names Badal and Sarat literally mean monsoon or cloud, and autumn respectively. Tagore suggests that the Formless and His/Its 'messages' are expressed or manifested through the innumerable forms of natural and earthly beauty which are ever-changing and which vary from season to season, from time to time. We may recall the following section from *Rājā*:

> Raja: Doesn't any form of mine appear in your mind?
>
> Sudarshana: Of course it does! Otherwise how would I live?
>
> Raja: How does it look like?
>
> Sudarshana: Well, it is not always the same. On rainy days, when monsoon clouds intensify the silhouette of the forest at the horizon, I imagine the form of my Raja as something similar – similarly descending; similarly permeating; similarly appeasing the eyes; similarly filling up the heart! The eyelids are similarly

[74] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Rūp o Arūp*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 18 (Calcutta: Visvabharati, 1944), 337. Translation mine.
[75] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 858. Translation mine.

> shadowing! The smile on the face is similarly intense and deep! Again, in autumn, when the curtain of the sky slides far away, it seems as if you, having taken a bath, wearing a garland of *kunda* flowers around your neck and a turban of fine white cloth on your head, are walking through your forests of *sephāli* flowers; and an impression of white sandal paste is on your chest; and your sight is beyond the horizon. Then it seems like you are my traveller friend. And now in spring, when the forests are all colourful, I see you wearing your earrings and armlets, draping yellow scarf, and with the efflorescence of *ashok* flowers in your hands. All the golden strings of your veena are restless with melody.[76]

The symbolic association of Raja's Postmen with the visible, tangible, physical forms of nature and earthly beauty reaches its imagistic climax when Amal, in his conversation with Thakurda, relates a picturesque description of his ideations about the Postman:

> It is as if I can see it before my eyes – it feels like I have seen it many times before – long back – how long, I cannot remember … I can see the Raja's Postman coming down the hill, all alone – always – a lantern in his left hand, and a bag of letters on his shoulder. He has been coming over so many nights – so many days. Traversing the course of the stream which ends at the foot of the hill, he continues to come along the meandering river. There are fields of millet by the river. He keeps coming over the narrow lane in the fields. Then there are the sugarcane fields. High mud banks run along those fields. He keeps coming by those mud banks. Day and night, he keeps coming, all alone. Crickets are chirping in the fields. There isn't a single

[76] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 748-49. Translation mine.

> man on the bank of the river. There are only snipes moving around, bobbing their tails. I can see everything. The more I see him coming, the more my heart gets filled with delight.[77]

Thus, from the above discussion on the symbolism of the Raja's Post Office and his Postmen, what becomes obvious is Tagore's intense love for the physical/visible world and its beauteous forms. We may recall the following section from *Chhinnapatra* where Tagore expresses his passionate love for the world in the most explicit language:

> This enormous world which is lying quietly over there – I love it so much. I feel like clutching its trees, rivers, fields, noise, silence, dawn, dusk – all of it with both my hands. I think: the treasures of this world that we have received – could any heaven have given us this? I do not know what else heaven might have given us, but from where would it have given us such a wealth of affection as is there in these immature human beings, so full of tenderness and frailty, so full of pitiful anxiety. This clay mother of ours, this earth that is our own, has brought in her lap all the poor mortal hearts' cheerful treasures in its fields of golden crop, by the banks of these affectionate rivers, in its localities full of a love that is sometimes happy and sometimes sad. We wretched people cannot keep these, we cannot save them. Many invisible forceful powers come and snatch these away from our hearts … I love this world so much. Her face has a far-spreading melancholy over it – as if she thinks to herself, "I am the daughter of a God, but I do not have the powers of a God. I

[77] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 860-61. Translation mine.

love, but I cannot protect. I start things, but I cannot complete them. I give birth but I cannot save from death."[78]

Finally, I come to the Raja's letter. It is in this letter, or blank letter to be specific, that we find Tagore's thoughts about the interplay between forms and Formlessness emulsifying into a single symbol. The letter, significantly enough, arrives at the end, constituting the climax and the culmination of the play's sustained attempts to explore the invisible, the Formless, through an imagerial celebration of the variety of forms. Let us consider at length the section where the Headman gives the letter to Amal.

Headman: O Madhav Datta, I hear that you socialize with important and powerful persons these days!

Madhav Datta: What are you saying, Headman? Please spare us your jests. We are but nobody.

Headman: But that boy of yours is expecting a letter from the Raja.

Madhav Datta: He is but a child. He is silly. His words are not to be treated with any seriousness.

Headman: Indeed, why not! No wonder that the Raja would have a hard time in finding a family better than yours. Don't you see why the Raja's new post office is planted right in front of your window? You, boy, there is a letter for you from the Raja.

Amal: (startled) Really? Is it true?

---

[78] Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhinnapatra* (Calcutta: Visvabharati Granthalaya, 1912), 52. Translation mine.

Headman: How can it be anything but true! You are the Raja's friend! (gives a blank paper) Ha ha ha! Here is his letter.

Amal: Please don't make fun of me. Fakir, fakir, tell me, is this really his letter?

Thakurda: Yes, dear! I as fakir assure you, this is indeed his letter.

Amal: But I can't see anything on it. Everything appears blank[79] to me today. Headman, please tell me what is written in this letter?

Headman: The king says, "I am calling on you shortly. Keep offerings of *muri murki*[80] ready for me. I don't like the royal palace any longer." Ha ha ha!

Madhav Datta: (with folded hands) Headman, I beseech you, kindly do not joke about these things.

Thakurda: Joke? What joke? He would not dare to joke!

Madhav Datta: Thakurda, have you gone mad or what?

Thakurda: Yes, I have gone mad. That is why today I can see letters on this blank paper. He writes that he is coming to call on Amal. He is also bringing his royal physician with him.

Amal: Fakir, there, I hear the sound of his music! Can't you hear?

Headman: Ha ha ha! He won't be able to hear until he is a little more mad.

---

[79] The Bengali word *sādā* has been used here. *Sādā* can also mean white. The spiritual connotation of white has been commented on in section 2.4.

[80] Common snacks of puffed rice and sweetened parched paddy. Here it has the connotation of inexpensive food for ordinary people.

> Amal: Headman, I thought you were angry with me and did not like me. I could have never imagined that you would bring me the Raja's letter.[81]

Evidently, at the surface level Thakurda's interpretation of the blank paper (with which the cynical Headman intended to mock Amal's innocent beliefs) as the Raja's letter is a tragic attempt to comfort a child literally on his deathbed. However, this irony far exceeds its immediate situational purpose and serves to make the spiritual undertone of the play obvious. The letter also contains a paradox – on the one hand it is a concrete object, a real physical thing; and on the other hand it is blank, abstract. The complementariness of *rūp* and *arūp* that we have discussed before is succinctly and subtly encoded in this apparent paradox. It suggests that the expression of the Formless is contained within the limits of the form. Mere physical sight is inadequate for reading this letter; instead it needs the inner sight of a visionary-like Thakurda to decipher and interpret its blankness. Much like the invisible Raja, the letter signifies a mere absence to those who attempt to perceive it through the physical senses. However, to a 'seer' who realizes the limitations of sensory perceptions, it carries the message of the Formless, the Eternal, the Vast.

Before concluding, I would like to briefly consider a section from "*Rūp o Arūp*" which serves to summarize the significance of the blank letter and the overall discussion on forms and Formlessness as well:

> This is why suggestiveness is valued so much in art and literature. Since it is through this suggestiveness that forms forbear the mere explicit as far as possible and merge with the implicit, man's heart is not obstructed by it. What does the gate

[81] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 863. Translation mine.

> of a royal garden look like? No matter how lofty it is, no matter how ornamental the subtle artistic patterns painted on it are, it never says, "I am the end of all paths." Its only work is to state that the true destination is beyond it. No matter how firmly the portal is built with hard stones, it always leaves a significant gap in itself. In fact, it stands high only to show its own gap. Its absence is more than its presence. If it completely fills up its absence or the gap, then the path through the portal leading to the garden gets sealed forever. Then it becomes the most dastardly obstruction. Then it becomes a wall. The fools think that this is the only thing worth seeing, that there is nothing beyond it. However, the connoisseurs, knowing that it is only a gross superfluity, get prepared to seek the path elsewhere. All forms are like this portal. It can be proud only of its own gap. It deceives when it shows itself, it reveals Truth when it shows the path. In art as well as in creation its only purpose is to show the Eternal, express the Bliss.[82]

And this "purpose" is encoded (literally) in the blank paper. Its blankness is the 'gap', the suggestiveness that Tagore is talking about. It does not obstruct the reader's vision, rather allows the visionary (Fakir/Thakurda) to read through it, interpret it. In short, the blank letter is a metaphor that is synonymous with the royal portal.

Thus, in this section we see that in *Achalāyatan* and *Dākghar*, Tagore treats the metaphor/symbol of the invisible Raja (which was introduced in *Rājā*) with astute subtlety. In fact, in these two plays we get an insight into a different manifestation of the Truth beyond. Also, forms and Formlessness, physical and spiritual, absence and presence as

[82] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Rūp o Arūp*", *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 18, 339. Translation mine.

explored in these plays do not appear as conflicting binaries; rather, they complement and substantiate each other. On the one hand, we see that in Tagore the significance or even utility of the visible lies in expressing the invisible; and on the other hand, the invisible suggests or at times even manifests itself through the visible, the worldly. To conclude, the Raja in *Achalāyatan* and *Dākghar* is physically absent, but his expressions are not.

Section 3.3

Next, I come to *Rakta-karavi* (1924).[83] Again, in this play we meet a Raja who remains invisible or visually absent for most of the time, but speaks, and becomes visible (appears on the stage) only towards the very end. However, the nature (literal and metaphorical) of this in/visibility is markedly distinct from what we have encountered so far. In addition, the Raja of this play with his symbolic significance has nothing in common with the invisible Rajas that we have discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. Sombhu Mitra in his detailed analysis of Bohurupee's production of *Rakta-karavi* observes[84] that there had been attempts to associate this Raja with the Rajas of *Dākghar*, *Rājā* or *Phālguni*; but having failed, these attempts only led to confusion and further bewilderment. Sankha Ghosh, in his *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra-nātak*, marks (albeit fleetingly) the importance of the Raja's "absence on the stage"[85] and his subsequent visual appearance at the end. In a tone somewhat similar to that of Mitra[86], he holds that unlike the other Rajas[87] the in/visible

[83] Tagore began this play under the title *Yakshapuri* in the summer of 1923, while vacationing in Shillong, Assam. Later in the year he changed the title of the play, still in manuscript, to *Nandini*. In late 1924 the full text was published in the journal *Pravāsi*, the title altered a second time to *Rakta-karavi*... The Bengali original was not printed as a book until December 1926. From Lal, 129.
[84] Sombhu Mitra, *Nātak: Raktakaravi* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd, 1992), 31.
[85] Sankha Ghosh, *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra Nātak* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1969), 117-118. Translation mine.
[86] Ghosh, 32.
[87] Presumably of *Rājā*, *Achalāyatan* and *Dākghar*.

Raja of *Rakta-karavi* is not a mere abstract idea. He also refers to Lorca's character Pepe (in the play *The House of Bernarda Alba*) to state (rather vaguely) that the absence in *Rakta-karavi* is no such "simplistic dramaticism either."[88] Soumitra Basu is somewhat more specific; he writes, "The Rajas of *Dākghar* and *Rājā* have emerged out of the poems of the *Gitānjali* period. He is the ultimate and the essential goal of life; he is the Supreme Godhead. These spiritual thoughts and ideas have no relation with *Rakta-karavi*"[89]. Despite these comments, it is curious that none of the commentators/interpreters have proceeded to explore the significance of this in/visibility in any sustained manner. Keeping this gap in view, I shall endeavour to understand and analyse this idea of in/visibility, by primarily focusing on the presentation of the Raja, but also touching upon certain other related and relevant aspects of the play.

Let us begin by considering some of the comments made by the playwright in his introduction to the play:

> Nobody expects agreement of opinion among historians concerning the actual name of Yakshapuri's Raja. This much we know, that he has a nickname – *Makar-raja*. The reason for this nomenclature will be understood in due time through the mouths of the people.
>
> On the outer wall of the Raja's residence is a *screen window*. From behind that screen Makar-raja serves men to the degree he pleases. We do not know any more about his reasons for such strange behaviour than the meagre conversation and discussion on it that the characters provide.

---

[88] Ghosh, 117. Translation mine.
[89] Soumitra Basu, *Rabindranāther Raktakaravi: Anya Bhāvnāye* (Calcutta: Ratnavali, 2000), 35.

...

> Sometimes aquatic creatures of the inedible variety accidentally get caught in fishermen's *nets*. Not only do they not suit the work of filling stomachs or filling pockets, in the process they *tear the nets* too. A girl named Nandini has arrived in a similar manner in the *story-net* of this play. This girl, it seems, will not allow the *barrier* behind which Makar-raja stays to endure.
>
> At the very beginning of the play we shall meet this girl on the verandah outside the Raja's screen window. It would be impossible to describe very clearly what kind of window it is. Only those who are its artisans understand its *artifice.*
>
> All of the dramatic incidents that we witness occur on the verandah outside this screen window of the Raja's residence. We get to know very little indeed of what happens inside. (emphases mine)[90]

In these comments what strikes us most overtly is the repeated mention of the complex and intricate "screen window" which conceals the Raja and visually dominates "all of the dramatic incidents". This emphasis on the screen or net is again highlighted in the opening stage direction:

> The town in which these dramatic events are set is named *Yakshapuri*. Its band of labourers is employed in underground mining for gold. Its Raja lives behind *an extremely complex screen*. That netted screen of the palace is the *only scene in this*

[90] Translated by Lal, 131-132.

> *play*. The entire action occurs on the outer portion of the screen. (italicized emphases mine)[91]

This, in Tagore's English recension, is reduced to "The curtain rises on a window covered by a network of intricate pattern in front of the palace."[92] Interestingly enough, even in this single sentence which Ananda Lal describes as "cursory and singularly unhelpful"[93] it is impossible not to mark the emphasis on the window, the net and its intricate patterns. Clearly this netted window occupies a particularly crucial and even dominant position in the visual conception of the play. This screen window, therefore, in my discussion, demands a close analysis. First of all, the fact that the netted window or the screen is "the only scene in this play" reminds us of Tagore's ideas about stage and theatre that he had propounded in his 1902 essay "*Rangamancha*". There he had strongly emphasized the minimal use of "concrete scenery" or painted backdrops and sets. What is more, the 'only scenery' in *Rakta-karavi*, the screen, is nothing akin to a mere painting of "a few trees, a cottage, or a bit of a river"[94], the use of which Tagore rejected, for he believed that a spectator cannot have any difficulty in imagining it. Instead, the netted window is a highly suggestive scene and has layers and purpose beyond its mere visual presence. It not only dominates the stage, but is also commented on and even interpreted by several characters. Two particular comments of Nandini can be considered with special attention:

A. "Then again, you've [Professor] kept your Raja hidden behind this strange screen wall, fearing that it will be discovered he is human."[95]

---

[91] Lal, 135.
[92] Lal, 106.
[93] Lal, 106.
[94] Quoted in Lal, 29.
[95] Lal, 136.

B. “Well, you’ve [Raja] tied yourself up in a screen, so I don’t understand why you behave so restlessly.”[96]

Clearly, the screen has two aspects: it has been imposed on the Raja to conceal him/dominate men; and at the same time the Raja has imposed it on himself, although it has made him only restless and unhappy.

Many scholars and commentators have made attempts to variously explain the “intricate patterns” of the “extremely complex screen”, the artifice of which, as Tagore tells us, is perhaps understood only by its artisans. Some of these comments which will have bearings on my understanding and subsequent arguments may be cited here.

Ashutosh Bhattacharya says, “The Raja, in an unperturbed state, stays behind the impenetrable screen constructed by himself ... This Raja is a symbol of the machine-based, capitalist civilization of the West ... The significance of the screen is quite simple. Its purpose is to suggest that machine and mechanical existence is completely detached from the free stream of life that flows over the world.”[97] This Romantic interpretation is to an extent simplistic, mono-dimensional and therefore reductive. Plus, Bhattacharya’s claim that the Raja stays behind the screen in “an unperturbed state” is straightaway unacceptable. The Raja’s restlessness, weariness, frustration, jealousy, anger and even vulnerability or frailty penetrate through the screen repeatedly and become conspicuously ‘visible’ in the entire play. Sankha Ghosh offers a psychological interpretation. For him the Raja is “bound by his own ego”[98] and he sees the screen as “the patterns of our ego”[99].

---

[96] Lal, 142.
[97] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, 199-200. Translation mine.
[98] Ghosh, 107. Translation mine.
[99] Ghosh, 108. Translation mine.

Some critics have focused more on the political aspect of the symbolism of the screen. For instance, Hirankumar Sanyal describes it as "phalanx of bureaucracy"[100] while Satanjib Raha as the "blindness of State power"[101]. However, one of Raha's comments demands particularly close attention: "It seems that this stage direction [regarding the window screen with which the play opens] was needless; and the director of this play could have done away with this screen which obstructs the vision of the spectators ... for today's Raja, owing to the all-pervasiveness of the state apparatuses, is present everywhere."[102] This remark only shows Raha's lack of understanding of theatre as an audio-visual medium, and his failure in grasping the visual politics of the play. First, the very purpose of the screen is to create obscurity and obfuscate vision. The potential of creating the visual disturbance or discomfort that it has, adds to its meaning and reflects the eerie uneasiness that permeates the entire Yakshapuri and all its people and their actions. Also, most importantly, images relating to net, screen and barricade constitute a crucial aspect of Tagore's envisioning of the thematic development of the play and the conception of its essence. For instance, in his essay "Nationalism in the West" published in *The Atlantic* in March 1917, he says, "Human society grew more and more into a marionette show of politicians, soldiers, manufacturers and bureaucrats, built by *wire arrangements* of wonderful efficiency."[103] Later, in "Red Oleanders: Author's Interpretation" published in the *Manchester Guardian*, Tagore writes, "Such an objectified passion lacks the true majesty of human nature; it only assumes a terrifying bigness, its physiognomy blurred through its *cover of an intricate network*, – the

[100] Hirankumar Sanyal, "The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore", in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961), 238.
[101] Raha, 198. Translation mine.
[102] Raha, 200. Translation mine.
[103] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in the West", in *The Atlantic*, March 1917. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1917/03/nationalism-in-the-west/645914/ Accessed on 12.04.2022. Emphasis mine.

scientific system. It *barricades* itself against all direct human touch with *barriers* of race pride and prestige of power."[104]

Having commented on the visual significance of the screen, I move on to analyse the in/visibility of the Raja. This I would discuss from two perspectives: the invisible Raja concealed behind the screen, and the visible Raja whom Nandini meets inside his house and who ultimately reveals himself by emerging outside from behind the obstacle of the 'ugly' netted screen.

First, his invisibility. "Makar-raja" and "Yaksha-raja" are two names (used in Tagore's Introduction) with which I would like to begin. It is in Bishu's dialogue with Chandra and Phagulal that we find them being used in the play proper:

A. "Bishu: Your feminine intelligence hasn't yet understood the Sardar, has it?

Chandra: Why, he appears to me quite –

Bishu: Yes, quite dazzling. The teeth of a *makar*, dovetailing very neatly as they bite you. Makar-raja himself couldn't loosen them even if he wished."[105]

B. "Bishu: Those piles of gold are wine, our Yaksha-raja's solidified wine."[106]

Lal in his note on Makar-raja explains: "The *makar* or *makara* is a mythical sea-monster, often incorrectly equated with crocodiles, sharks or dolphins, but probably possessing some of the attributes of each, as well as the head and forelegs of a deer. The Hindu god of love, Kama, has the *makar* as his emblem and displays it on his banner ... Significantly, the

[104] Quoted in Basu, 186.
[105] Lal, 149.
[106] Lal, 149.

makar is also one of the nine legendary treasures of Kubera."[107] We mark the association of the Raja with Kubera. The Yakshas, which also recur as a verbal motif throughout the play, form a class of demigods or Upadevas. Kubera is their King, and myriads of Yakshas remain in his assembly, worshipping him.[108] Thus the Raja of *Rakta-karavi* has a close and direct relationship with Kubera, or (to be specific) what it represents in Tagorean philosophy. It would be useful to refer to a section from Tagore's essay *"Shikshār Milan"* (1921) in which, having witnessed the "titanic wealth" of America, he reflects, "Lakshmi and Kubera are very different from each other. The crux of the idea of Lakshmi is benevolence and welfare. It is through this benevolence that wealth gains beauty. The crux of the idea of Kubera is procurement and accumulation. Through this accumulation wealth gains multitude. Multitude has no final meaning. Two twos are four, four twos are eight, eight twos are sixteen. The numbers keep galloping forward."[109] Thus, at this level we see the Raja clearly 'embodying' greed and the intoxication of accumulation. But it is to be marked that both the names "Makar-raja" and "Yaksha-raja" are used by Bishu, and Bishu alone, who has never 'seen' the Raja, or has met him only from outside the screen window. Thus, the Raja as a symbol of repulsive greed and accumulation, "strained of humanity" (in the words of the professor), is a disembodied image, a perception that is filtered/distilled through the 'complex' and 'ugly' net. The human being is left invisible behind the screen. Here, it may be fleetingly mentioned that words like "strained" and "distilled" are repeatedly used in the play in the context of the Raja:

---

[107] Lal, 340.
[108] Vettam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Work with Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1975), 829.
[109] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Shikshār Milan*", in *Shikshā* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalaya, 1945), 237.

A. Professor: As the spirit of our dead treasure possesses awesome force, so does our Raja, *strained* of humanity, possess equally fearsome might.[110] (emphasis mine)

B. Voice [of The Raja]: Why am I unable to *distil* the glow of those red oleanders of yours and wear it as collyrium around my eyes?[111] (emphasis mine)

C. Scholar: Now tell me, where will I meet your Raja?

Professor: There's no way of meeting; the conversation will take place through that screen.

Scholar: What are you saying? Through this screen?

Professor: If not that, what else? It's not the kind of witty love-talk that can occur through a veil, it's absolutely *clear* [filtered][112] dialogue.[113] (emphasis mine)

Now, let us look at another aspect of the Raja's invisibility. The Raja, like some of the other major characters, appears thrice in the text: in the first two appearances we only get to hear his (disembodied) voice; and it is only in his final appearance that he opens the door and literally 'reveals' himself onstage. However, this pattern is more complex than it seems. When read closely, we find that while being invisible or hidden behind the 'mist' of the screen, there are occasions when certain parts/fragments of the Raja become visible. Towards the end of his first appearance we hear:

---

[110] Lal, 136.
[111] Lal, 141.
[112] The word used in the original Bengali text is "*chhānkā*", which literally means filtered, strained.
[113] Lal, 165.

> Voice: All right, go – but I'm extending this hand out of the window, place your hand upon it once.
>
> Nandini: No, no, I feel afraid if a hand appears suddenly without the rest of yourself.
>
> Voice: Just because I want to hold with one hand everyone runs away from me. But if I wanted to hold you with all of me, would you allow it, Nandin?[114]

This image of 'hand in hand' will return at the end of the play but with a significantly different suggestion. In fact, this image will reach a climax and subsequently culminate in a completion. But more on this will come later. This dialogue on the sudden appearance of a disembodied body part excluding the rest of him and Nandini's response to it inevitably reminds us of the conniptions that Tagore himself had to go through when he was young. In his *My Reminiscences* he recalls:

> Aghore babu would sometimes try to bring the zephyr of outside knowledge to play on our arid schoolroom routine. One day he brought a paper parcel out of his pocket and said, "Today I'll show you a wonderful piece of work by the Creator." Then he untied the wrapping, produced a portion of the windpipe of a human being and proceeded to expound the marvels of its mechanism.
>
> I still remember my shock. I had always thought the whole man spoke -- had never even imagined that the act of speech could be viewed in this detached way. *However wonderful the mechanism of a part may be, it is certainly less so than the whole person.* Not that I put it to myself in so many words, but that was

[114] Lal, 143.

> the cause of my dismay. Perhaps because the tutor had lost sight of this truth I could not respond to the enthusiasm with which he discoursed that day.
>
> Another day he took us to the dissecting-room of the Medical College. The body of an old woman was stretched on the table. This did not disturb me overmuch. But an amputated leg lying on the floor upset me altogether. To view man in this *fragmentary* way seemed to me so horrid, so absurd, that I could not rid myself of the impression of that dark, unmeaning leg for many days.[115] (emphases mine)

Again, during the Raja's second appearance we see:

> Voice: Either I possess, or I destroy. I cannot feel kindness for one whom I cannot possess. Even the act of crushing him is really one way of possessing.
>
> Nandini: What's that, why do you bring your hand out like that, with fist clenched?
>
> Voice: All right, I remove my hand; run away, like the pigeon flies on seeing the falcon's shadow.[116]

Here, the disembodied hand "with fist clenched" is the visible symbol of predation, avaricious accumulation and rapacious desire of possessing. It almost appears like a visual representation of the falcon metaphor. The image of dehumanized fragments (of the "Personal Man")[117] yoked together to multiply the efficiency of the "organized man",[118] is succinctly worded in *Jāpān Jātri*, where Tagore observes: "This commerce-hunter is gasping, and yet stuffing lumps into its mouth. The sight evokes fear. It knows no pause,

---

[115] Rabindranath Tagore, "My Reminiscences", in *Tagore Omnibus*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Rupa, 2003), 445-46.
[116] Lal, 160.
[117] Quoted in Basu, 185.
[118] Quoted in Basu, 185.

and the noise that it is producing is awful. It is taking lumps in its iron fists and stuffing them into its mouth, grinding with its iron teeth, digesting in the ever-burning hunger of its iron stomach. Finally the gold blood is made to flow through the iron arteries and veins of its world-wide body."[119] The paradox contained in the metaphor is extremely poignant: a catalogue of human body parts is invoked to comment on the dehumanized and dehumanizing mechanisms of commerce, industry, capital, market profit and the overall system of organized power.

Interestingly, the Raja is not the only one with a fragmented self. Some of the other characters also lead a fragmented existence. The Professor by way of describing himself says, "Do you know, Nandini, I too am behind a screen? Only the pandit in me is awake, excluding the rest of man in me."[120] Again, in response to Nandini's (apparently innocent) query "they have brought me here, why didn't they bring Ranjan too?", he explains, "Their procedure is to bring everything piece by piece."[121] Later on, he adds, "Animals fear an eclipsed sun, they don't fear the full sun. Yakshapuri is a town eclipsed. The Rahu of the golden pits has bitten into it. It isn't whole itself, it doesn't want anyone else to remain whole."[122] Similarly Bishu in his conversation with Nandini, while commenting on his own condition in Yakshapuri, says, "All this time, since I entered Yakshapuri, I used to think I'd lost the sky from my life. I used to think they had ground me under a husking pedal into a thick heap with the other fragmented people here. Within it there were no openings."[123]

---

[119] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Jāpān Jātri*" in *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 10 (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalaya, 1990), 415. Translation mine.
[120] Lal, 137.
[121] Lal, 137.
[122] Lal, 138.
[123] Lal, 153.

It is not difficult to see that both Professor and Bishu, while expressing deep frustration about their personal incompleteness and fragmented existence, use generalized phrases like "to bring everything piece by piece", "anyone else to remain whole" or "other fragmented people". Hence, it would perhaps not be untrue to infer that all the characters (including Nandini, for she too throughout the play remains without her complementary part, Ranjan) are, in the words of Sombhu Mitra, "fractions of human being".[124] Of course all these fragmentations are not of the same kind, particularly because some of the characters owing to their insight are conscious of their condition, while most of them are not. In the context of the visual politics of the play it is to be pointed out that by literally visibilizing the disembodied parts of the invisible/invisibilized Raja, Tagore (an astute and conscious theatrician) gives a visual language to this abstract idea of fragmentariness and detachment, which runs as a motif throughout the play.

Having discussed the significance of the Raja's invisibility, now I come to the visibleness of the Raja to understand how it adds to the thematic development of the play in general and the treatment of invisibility in particular. Nandini is the only character who vocally and vehemently disregards the barrier of the screen wall[125] and repeatedly wants to see/discover the Raja. While speaking with the professor she says, "I have come to see your Raja inside his house."[126] She further declares: "you've kept your Raja hidden behind this strange screen wall, fearing that it will be discovered he is human. I want to open the dark lid to those tunnels of yours and pour light into them; so also do I want to tear down that ugly screen and liberate the man inside."[127] We mark that although these two

[124] Mitra, 38.
[125] She is the only character in the play who "knocks on"/strikes at the screen door.
[126] Lal, 137.
[127] Lal, 136.

statements are apparently similar, there is an essential difference between the connotations and intents of their tone. Again, she directly tells the Raja, "My heart feels full today in happiness. I want to go into your house with that happiness."[128] And echoing the words of the Paush song "Who would remain in their house today? Open the doors!," she offers, "Come out, you too, Raja, let me take you to the fields!"[129] Thus, we understand that Nandini expresses two kinds of desire; she wants to "visually" experience the invisible Raja in two ways: She wants to see/discover the Raja by going inside his house; and also wants to liberate the man in him (from his self-imposed bondage)[130] by bringing him outside. Interestingly, both these desires of Nandini are actually realized in the play, thereby necessitating an analysis of the Raja's visibility from two perspectives: inside his house, the "political laboratory",[131] and outside his house, beyond the barriers of the complex and intricate patterns of the net.

Let us discuss them one by one.There are two sections where we find Nandini describing the Raja as she had seen him inside his house:

> A. Nandini: Your power is strange! The day you allowed me to enter your treasury I wasn't at all surprised to see your piles of gold. But I was fascinated by seeing the immense power with which you were effortlessly arranging them into a mound. Still I say, can lumps of gold answer to the wonderful rhythm of those hands of yours, as can fields of rice?[132]

---

[128] Lal, 139.
[129] Lal, 140.
[130] Nandini says, "Well, you've [Raja] tied yourself up in a screen, so I don't understand why you behave so restlessly." Lal, 142.
[131] Quoted in Basu, 186.
[132] Lal, 140-141.

B. Bishu: ... Tell me, aren't you afraid of him?

Nandini: From outside this screen one feels fear. But I've gone inside and seen him.

Bishu: What did you see?

Nandini: I saw a man, but gigantic. The forehead like the gateway of a huge seven-sectioned building. The two arms the iron bolts of some unapproachable fort. It seemed like somebody from the *Rāmāyana* or *Mahābhārata* had come down.

Bishu: What did you see when you entered the room?

Nandini: A falcon sat upon his right arm; he set it on a perch and kept staring at my face. After that, just like he'd been running his fingers down the falcon's wing, he took my hand in the same way and began stroking it gently. A little later he asked suddenly, "Don't you fear me?" I said, "Not one bit." Then he held my open hair in his hands and for some time sat with eyes closed.

Bishu: How did you feel?

Nandini: I felt good. Shall I tell you in what way? He was like a thousand-year-old banyan tree, I like a small bird. If I swing a little while on the tip of one of his branches, surely he feels happy down to his marrow. I wish to give this bit of happiness to that lonely soul.

Bishu: After that what did he say?

Nandini: At one point he started up and, placing his gaze like a spearhead on my face, suddenly said, "I want to know you." My body shivered involuntarily. I said,

> "What is there to know? Am I your manuscript?" He said, "I know all that there is in manuscripts, I don't know you."[133]

In the first section, it is difficult to miss the mention of hands; but this time it is neither the sudden, shocking appearance of a disembodied, fragmented limb, excluding the rest of the man, nor a cruel and horrifying hand with fist clenched. Instead, here Nandini talks about "the immense power" and "the wonderful rhythm of those hands" and wants them to be engaged in the 'simple' work of "the fields", not in hoarding away of lumps of gold. In Tagore's own words, "Nandini ... knows that wealth and power are *māyā*, and that the highest expression of life is in love"[134].

The second section quoted above provides more detailed images of the Raja, and therefore demands closer attention. The phrase which is obviously remarkable is the antithesis "a man, but gigantic." We see that the obscure, abstract, terrifying, invisible Raja, visible only in 'pieces' from outside the netted screen, is a visible (albeit still inside his treasury/house) man. However, intimidating descriptions like 'gigantic', "forehead like the gateway of a huge seven-sectioned building", "two arms the iron bolts of some unapproachable fort" and "somebody from the *Rāmāyana* or *Mahābhārata*" clearly resist any normal, realistic understanding of 'man'. This is, obviously, not the description of any human being, but a set of vivid metaphors symbolizing a non-human idea or power. Interestingly, similar similes and metaphors can be found in many of Tagore's letters to his friend, C. F. Andrews. A few of them may be cited here:

---

[133] Lal, 155-156.
[134] Basu, 186.

A. “In this country [America] I live in the dungeon of the castle of *bigness*. My heart is starved. Day and night I dream of Santiniketan, which blossoms like a flower in the atmosphere of the unbounded freedom of simplicity ... Here I feel everyday what a terrible nightmare it is for the human soul to bear this *monster* Arithmetic.”[135] (13 December 1920, New York; emphases mine)

B. “In our mythology we have often heard of a man taking the side of the gods and saving Paradise from the dominion of *Giants*. But in our history we often notice man holding alliance with *Giants* and trying to defeat the gods. His guns and ships of *huge power* and proportion are turned out from the arsenal of the *Giants*. In the fight of *bigness* against goodness, man has joined the former, counting the coins of his reward in number and not in quality – in lead and not in gold.”[136] (19 December 1920, New York; emphases mine)

C. “Civilization in the West is a magnifying glass. It makes the most ordinary things *hugely big*. Its buildings, business, amusements, are *exaggerations*. The spirit of the West loves its high-heeled boots, whose heels are much *bigger* than itself.”[137] (5 February 1921, New York; emphasis mine)

We see that the immediate impression that the post-World-War-I West with its industries, machinery, mass production, enormous wealth and structures, and organized powers had created on the mind of Tagore found expression through the recurrent images of “bigness”, “giant” and “monster”. However, Tagore does not use the word “giant” or “gigantic” in a

[135] Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1926), 108.
[136] Tagore, *Letters to a Friend*, 108.
[137] Tagore, *Letters to a Friend*, 119.

particularly pejorative sense. In his "*Shikshār Milan*" he explains, "has the image of power that you have witnessed in the West satisfied you? No, it hasn't. There I have seen the face of pleasure and not happiness. I stayed for seven months at a stretch in the giant's city of wealth in America. I use the word 'giant' not in any negative sense. In English it could perhaps be phrased as titanic wealth."[138] Again in "*Red Oleanders*: Author's Interpretation", he describes "Giant" as "not a gigantic man, but a multitude of men turned into a gigantic system."[139] Thus, the man that Nandini had seen in the Raja's treasury/house is an "organized man" magnified and 'exaggerated' by the complex and non-human mechanisms of the powers of a scientific system. But the rest of the lengthy dialogue of Nandini that we have cited offers an image of the Raja more complex than this unilinear equation. Nandini reports to Bishu that the Raja "gently" stroked her hand and held her hair in his hands and sat for some time with his eyes closed. These stereotypically romantic actions are in contrast with the interpretations of the gigantic Raja that we have discussed above. Actually, here we see a glimpse of a "personal man",[140] an individual human being who is 'not dead', but concealed, overpowered and dominated by the organized man. Of course, for the complete revelation of the human being or in Tagore's words "the personal man", we will have to wait till the ending of the play.

Before moving on to the final part of the present section, let us, for the sake of convenience, briefly summarize what we have discussed in it so far. Through the lens of 'seeing' we have encountered two Rajas in *Rakta-karavi*: the Raja hidden and invisible behind the screen and the Raja visible within his own house. The former represents abstract

[138] Tagore, "Shikshār Milan", 237.
[139] Quoted in Basu, 185.
[140] Basu, 185.

obscurity, cruelty, coercion, possession and dehumanized fragmentariness, while the latter stands for a wonderful enormity of wealth and power, an organized man overshadowing and hiding the "personal man", the individual human being. Thus, what transpires is a pattern of evolution; and this evolution has yet another layer to it.

Now, we come to the conclusion of the play. Nandini's assertive demand (the tone is markedly different from the previous pleadings and requests) following her final knocking at the window, "The time has come, open the door"[141], and the Raja's subsequent (threatening) declaration, "The time has come to reveal myself to you"[142], prepare us for the climactic revelation. Here it may be fleetingly observed that this 'coming of time' has an interesting progression in the play, which also does echo the progressive revelation of the Raja. From a definite "I don't have time, none at all"[143] we come to a tentative and perhaps more hopeful "The time hasn't come yet",[144] finally culminating in a decisive "The time has come to reveal myself to you." The door ultimately opens; the Raja comes out. Notably, this unique theatrical moment also marks the 'arrival' of Ranjan, previously invisible like the Raja. With the Raja, Ranjan, or his dead body to be specific, also becomes visible. The two propelling forces of the play (both related to visibility), the revelation of the live Raja and of dead Ranjan, culminate and converge at a single point. This is far from being coincidental and has a significant dramatic purpose. To understand this purpose, it may be useful to summarize an interesting observation made by Soumitra Basu: Most of the plays of Tagore essentially dramatize a conflict between the force of dreary, decrepit lifelessness and the spirit of life and bliss. Given Tagore's deep-rooted optimism, this

[141] Lal, 181.
[142] Lal, 182.
[143] Lal, 139.
[144] Lal, 157.

conflict always gets resolved in an ultimate triumph or realization of the spirit of life. In many of his nineteenth-century plays this resolution is attained through an occurrence of death. One may recall plays like *Prakritir Pratishodh, Vālmiki-pratibhā, Kāl-mrigayā, Rājā o Rāni, Visarjan* and *Mālini*. Basu, with a pictoral representation, shows how this pattern gets played out in these works. Notably, this pattern returns in the twentieth-century plays *Muktadhārā* and *Rakta-karavi*.[145]

With the revelation of the dead body of Ranjan, whom the Raja (who can only "destroy consciousness"[146]) himself has killed, we see a drastic change in him. Instead of 'change' it would perhaps be more appropriate to call it a true and complete realization/revelation of the man that was always in him, albeit in a dormant, or rather 'dominated' state. He realizes that he has been tricked by his own people and that his machinery does not obey him. He, or rather the man awakened in him, prepares himself to break down his own prison, his own apparatus of repression. He starts with the act of breaking the staff of his own flag, the (spectacular) icons of his institution of power. These are the physical, visible symbols of tearing and destroying the net that he had imposed on himself and which his own organization had used so craftily and subtly to hide/dominate him. Thus, revelations occur at many levels, making the moment of opening the door and coming out uniquely powerful, both visually and metaphorically. Also, the reference to hands comes back at the end, but this time it carries connotations of trust, bonding, and even a deep sense of sorrow and repentance.

[145] Basu, 11-13.
[146] Lal, 182.

> Raja: ... Do you have the courage to trust me? Come with me. Make me your companion today, Nandin.
>
> Nandini: Where will you go?
>
> Raja: To battle against me, but *keeping your hand in my own hand*. Can't you understand? That battle has begun ... *Let your hand come into my own hand and kill me,* kill, utterly kill, only that will be my salvation[147]. (emphases mine)

Thus, gradually we move from a fragmented limb to the bolts of an unapproachable fort, and finally to the image of human bonding. The visible Raja, free from the obscurity of the misty net, outside his treasury/house is a man liberated. When we get to see the Raja finally on stage, we actually get to see the man, an ordinary mortal like any other, not some larger-than-life superhuman. Since Tagore does not provide any stage directions about his physical appearance at this point, we must assume that he wants to show the Raja humanized, as if reverse-transformed from a spectral/demonic invisibility to a New Man who now fights for humanity, but too late.

To conclude, we see that Tagore's treatment of the trope of the invisible Raja in *Rakta-karavi* breaks away from the pattern of a type that was created and reworked in the three plays discussed earlier in this chapter. In addition, the static screen, always present on the stage, owing to the repeated but varied references to it in different contexts, itself remains alive and gives an imagistic motion and a climactic thrust to the plot.

---

[147] Lal, 183.

Section 3.4

Finally, I come to *Sāpmochan*, literally 'deliverance from curse'. This musical play, originally conceived and composed with dance, was published in December 1931.[148] The narrative sections were published as a separate prose poem in 1932. A revised version of the play was published in March 1933, on the occasion of its performances at the Empire Theatre in Calcutta. It is this revised edition which is currently available as the authorised version, and therefore shall be used as the primary text for my present discussion.

Sāpmochan occupies a special place in Tagore's theatrical oeuvre. In the words of Protima Devi, Tagore's daughter-in-law who was in charge of the dance curriculum at the music school founded by him in Santiniketan, "It is in the period of *Sāpmochan* that we first attempted to bring elements of drama into dance."[149] In ways more than one, the form of this play is the first of its kind. Shantideb Ghosh explains: "Gurudev composed in prose a narrative poem based on the idea of the play *Rājā* or *Arūp Ratan*. This narrative poem was named *Sāpmochan*. The narrative was divided into seven sections; and for each section he selected a bunch of songs from among his earlier creations. Also, sections from a couple of his earlier poems were set to tune to be used in this play. These songs are: 'Are you a mere picture on canvas?' and 'O absent-minded one, I won't bring my garland of songs to you.'"[150] Tagore had himself written in the preface to the play, "The narrative of *Sāpmochan* has a reflection of the same Buddhist tale on which the play *Rājā* was based."[151] Although the comments of Tagore and Ghosh on the relation between the two

[148] It was composed for the occasion of the celebration of his seventieth birth anniversary in Calcutta.
[149] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān,* Vol. 11 (Kolkata: Dip Prakashan, 2010), 318. Translation mine.
[150] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 11, 318. Translation mine.
[151] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 541. Translation mine.

plays are apparently similar, a closer reading reveals a significant difference between their perceptions of the nature of this relation. According to Tagore's claim it is based only on a "reflection" of the same Buddhist tale (already cited earlier in this chapter), while for Ghosh *Sāpmochan* is based on the very "idea" of *Rājā*. Though the main focus of my subsequent argument would be on the in/visibility of Raja Aruneshwar, I will have occasion to make contextual remarks on these interesting intertextual relations.

I wish to start with a narrative outline of the story of *Sāpmochan,* which unlike that of *Rājā* is simple, brief and quite straightforward. By way of introducing the performance of the play to his Sri Lankan audience at Colombo in May 1934, Tagore somewhat curiously declares, "Let me confess that the story is immaterial; it can be ignored with impunity."[152] In spite of this claim, there can be little doubt that the 'story' in reality was quite close to his heart for he kept reworking and experimenting with it multiple times in various forms throughout the latter half of his literary career. Also, while comparing *Sāpmochan* with its preceding musical plays like *Vasanta* and *Navin*, which were based on the cycle of seasons, Shantideb Ghosh quite assertively holds, "In *Shishutirtha* or *Sāpmochan* the story is of prime importance. In order to give it an impactful dramatic structure, its songs have been selected or their lyrics have been altered. In other words, the songs have come later on in accordance with the moods and ideas of the story."[153] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay almost echoes these words: "In the case of *Shishutirtha* and *Sāpmochan*, it is to give a dramatic form to the story that the songs have been selected and the dances have been choreographed. That is to say, music has come as a vehicle to the

[152] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān,* Vol. 11, 336.
[153] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān,* Vol. 11, 343. Translation mine.

story and its ideas."[154] However, as far as the performance of *Sāpmochan* as a dance drama is concerned, in the context of which Tagore had made the afore-cited remark, it may be safely said that it is in fact its narrative which serves as a vehicle to give expression to "the spirit of art which reveals itself in the rhythm of movements, in the lyric of colour, form and sound, and refuses to be defined or described by words."[155]

The story centres around Saurasen and Madhushri who were born on earth after being banished from the heavenly court of Indra, the king of gods. Saurasen was one of the finest heavenly musicians in the court and Madhushri his beloved. Once, Saurasen failed to keep the beat of his mridangam with the rhythm of Urvashi's dance. This was due to his lack of attention caused by separation from Madhushri, who had gone to Mount Sumeru to circumambulate the sun. The heavenly court having lost its rhythm cursed Saurasen to be born on earth as Aruneshwar at the royal home of the Gandharas. Owing to the curse his physical beauty was also to get disfigured. Madhushri, on returning, heard about the punishment and prayed to Indrani, the wife of Indra, not to cause separation. In fact, she desired to be with her lover in the same world, suffering from the same sorrow. Indrani interceded with Indra, who granted Madhushri her prayer and maintained that their suffering would redeem them of their sin.

Because of the curse, Saurasen and Madhushri were born in different kingdoms as King Aruneshwar and Princess Kamalika. Aruneshwar, having chanced upon a picture of Kamalika, immediately fell in love with her. He believed in having had a relationship with her in their previous life. He proposed to marry the princess, which was gladly accepted by

---

[154] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān*, Vol. 11, 344. Translation mine.
[155] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān*, Vol. 11, 337. Translation mine.

her father. However, Aruneshwar, presumably being concerned of his ugly appearance, sent his veena as his embodiment for the marriage.

After their marriage, when Kamalika reached the king's palace, she noticed that her husband met her only during night in a dark chamber. He used his arts of dance and music, and suggestive words to avoid showing his face to her. However, she kept insisting to him to show himself in light. Finally, when he revealed himself to her, she was shocked by his ugliness. She even felt cheated by Aruneshwar and deserted his palace. She went away to an isolated palace in a forest that was meant for hunting. Later, the soulful, plaintive melody of the veena played by Aruneshwar mesmerised her and she realised that mere physical vision is misleading and even delusive. It is by undertaking a spiritual journey through sorrow that she realised the worth of the inner vision which enabled her to see the Beautiful in her beloved husband.

First of all, even a cursory reading of this summary reveals that Raja Aruneshwar, unlike the unnamed, invisible Raja of *Rājā/Arūp Ratan,* in no way symbolises the Formless Supreme Godhead. The spiritual allegory of the omnipresent, "Formless Jewel" has been transformed into a love story. It may be useful to cite Asrukumar Sikdar, for whom "There are figurative suggestions of spiritualism in *Rājā*; and in *Arūp Ratan* this spiritualism is extremely overt. In *Sāpmochan* the relationship between Aruneshwar and Kamalika is one of human love. The story of *Sāpmochan* is based on the foundation of humanism, without much theoretical complexity."[156] Another commentator, Kanai Samanta, in a similar tone holds: "Redemption of sin through penance and sorrow, leading to deliverance from curse

[156] Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān*, Vol. 11, 348. Translation mine.

and ultimately Aruneshwar's re-attainment of his divine beauty – despite this bit of supernaturalism, the entire narrative of *Sāpmochan*, right from its beginning to end, is in the human realm. It contains the earthly rhythm of familiar human lives with their happiness and sorrow, hopes and despairs, desires and emotions, actions and reactions … It is a tale of varied human fate with sorrow and bliss blended in it".[157] However, critics like Satyendranath Ghoshal, ignoring the aspect of human love, have shown tendencies of interpreting *Sāpmochan* mainly from the angle of spiritualism:

> The theme of *Sāpmochan* is exactly similar to that of *Rājā*. Here too we find in Rani Kamalika's (her name in heaven was Madhushri) mind a hatred for ugliness, and an unreasonable attraction for external beauty. When the Rani is anxious to know how she would recognise Raja Aruneshwar (his name in heaven was Saurasen), the Raja tells her, "You could imagine in any which way. That imagination of yours would be the truth." We feel that through these few words of the Raja, the poet's ideas contained in both *Rājā* and *Arūp Ratan* have been aptly expressed. It means Brahma is beyond forms; and therefore, one could perceive it in any form one imagines.
>
> The Rani was shocked to see the ugliness of the Raja – "What an injustice! What a cruel deception!" But soon enough her divine vision was aroused. Then, seeing the Formless, the Rani said, " O my lord! O my beloved! How beautiful you are!"[158]

[157] Kanai Samanta, *Rabindranātyakalpana: Anyānya Prasanga* (Santiniketan: Visva Bharati Gaveshana Prakashan Bibhag, 1986), 7-8. Translation mine.
[158] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān*, Vol. 11, 346-347. Translation mine.

The spiritual undertone, or rather connotation, of *Sāpmochan* is undeniable and inevitable. But this attempt to read the play solely on the lines of *Rājā*/*Arūp Ratan* seems quite restrictive. It gives an impression that this play is a mere derivation, thereby narrowing our scope of understanding it as a separate work of theatre art. It implies that Raja Aruneshwar symbolises Brahma, which I consider far-fetched, and the usage of the phrase "divine vision" in the context of *Sāpmochan* appears as a convenient interpretation through the lens of mysticism.

However, Ghoshal's reference to "the Formless" or "*arūp*" needs to be studied with closer attention. Here I wish to refer to a couple of songs – "Oh, their sight rushes forward" and "The formless vina plays concealed behind beauty" – the first and the last songs of *Arūp Ratan* respectively. Interestingly, both of these songs were also present in the first edition[159] of *Sāpmochan*. For the sake of convenience, I quote their lyrics:

A. Oh, their sight rushes forward

On the road to wealth and pride, to plenty –

Oh, in droves.

They have made a vow to see,

But the mind does not know whom to see,

When they look into love's gaze

Oh, their eyes must overflow with tears.

[159] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 949-950.

Do not call upon me,

I go to the ferry-ghat, the formless-*rasa*-ocean.

Winds unfettered strike the sail,

At the time of going toward the coast

I will drown both of these eyes

Oh, within the shoreless nectar-sea.[160]

B. The formless vina plays concealed behind beauty,

That vina began playing within the heart today.

My world fills up with melody,

Dissensions end both near and far,

That raga I have put to use in all my work.

All the bonds of getting and seeing are cut,

All the weeping came to fruition today.

Being lost in the divine *rasa*,

That is seeing and is getting,

Estrangement, union in one garb unite today.[161]

[160] Translated by Lal, 273.
[161] Lal, 318.

The use of the word "formless" in both songs is practically impossible to overlook. These songs were quite strategically placed at the beginning and ending of *Arūp Ratan*. They indeed encapsulate the crux of the spiritual allegory of the play. Their appearance in the first version of *Sāpmochan* could not have been a mere coincidence; nor could their deletion from the later editions be any act of arbitrary decision. It may be inferred that initially Tagore conceived *Sāpmochan*, which, by the way, was composed quite hastily (literally overnight), as a reworking of *Rājā*/*Arūp Ratan*. Consequently, the spiritual overtones of the previous plays were retained. However, later on, as he revisited and revised the play, he explored with greater focus the aspect of human love contained in it. What is more, Tagore might have also realised that the idea of 'formlessness' which was so significantly dramatized in *Arūp Ratan* through the constant invisibility/absence of the Raja onstage could not have been as impactful and appropriate in the case of Raja Aruneshwar.

This brings us to the specific issue of invisibility. Unlike *Rājā*/*Arūp Ratan*, Aruneshwar does not remain invisible throughout the play. He is invisible only to Rani Kamalika, and that too for a brief period. Here, the form that Tagore was dealing with needs to be kept in consideration. Asoke Kumar Misra, by way of introducing the genre of dance drama in his *Rabindranāttye Rūp: Arūp,* observes that in dance drama the "abstraction" of ideas and themes which are textually expressed in language, gets manifested through forms of physical movements and dances. In it "formlessness is expressed through the limits of forms".[162] Because of this, in a dance drama it might not have been possible to execute the constant invisibility of one of the protagonists, or to

[162] Misra, 226. Translation mine.

produce its desired dramatic impact. What is more, dance along with music plays a significant role in the characterisation of Aruneshwar and his relationship with Kamalika. In fact, references to Aruneshwar's dance, which he had brought from his previous life, appear at every crucial turn of his relation with the Rani. It would not be too far-fetched to state that dance is not a mere formal constituent of the play, but it has a significant role in shaping its thematic development as well. Here, the following passages from the play may be considered:

> A. The veena played in the dark. The groom went round the bride in the dark with the dance form of celestial arts. That art had come down to his mortal body as companion of the exile. The dance's sorrow hit the Rani's heart like the high tide rising in the sea at midnight, inundating with tears.[163]
>
> B. Said the Raja, "Tomorrow is the last day of Chaitra. It is the day of my dance with companions in the privacy of the *nāgkeshar* wood. Look out from the palace top."[164]
>
> C. Night passed after night. The man who dances like a shadow in the darkness under the trees, cannot be seen with eyes, but his heart could be perceived. In the swinging branches of the lonely deodar wood, carrying as though the loud wailing of the southern sea breeze. The Rani thought to herself, when he came near it was a dark evening; when the moon was up his garland remained, but he was not there.[165]

[163] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 549. Translation mine.
[164] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 550. Translation mine.
[165] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 552. Translation mine.

> D. The Rani sat up on her bed with her braid dishevelled, her bosom shivering. The veena's tune opened up in the sky a never-ending path of trysting. Her mind moved along the path in the void strewn with melodies. But it was towards whom? It was him who she had known before the encounter, but had forgotten after the encounter. One day the fragrance of neem flowers carried an invitation from the indescribable into the dark chamber. The Rani left the bed and stood before the window. Below was the dance of that shadowy figure, the undulating waves of estrangement.[166]

Then comes the issue of 'ugliness'. In *Sāpmochan* it is the physical ugliness, and not the invisibility, of the Raja which occupies the focal point of the narrative; and in this respect it deviates significantly from the earlier plays on which it is supposedly based. In *Rājā*/*Arūp Ratan* the 'ugliness' of the Raja is insignificant. Although he is referred to or described several times as "black", "terrible" and "terrifying", these have connotations different from physical deformity or ugliness (as has already been discussed in an earlier section). The ugliness in *Sāpmochan* has also been subjected to interpretations through the spiritual lens by critics like Pramathanath Bisi. For him, "*Sāpmochan* can truly be called a dance drama. The curse in this play is due to the celestial musician Saurasen's inability to maintain rhythm in his art. Nataraj is engaged in the cosmic dance of maintaining rhythm and balance between birth and death, creation and destruction. The unfortunate one who fails to keep pace with this rhythm of his is bound to suffer pain and sorrow in life. Penance and subsequent deliverance from such a curse is at the root of the idea of *Sāpmochan* ... Due to the guilt of missing a beat Saurasen became the disfigured Aruneshwar. This is because the world is ugly and bereft of all beauty to the one who fails to perceive and

[166] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 552. Translation mine.

realise the symmetrical beats of the *lilā* of Nataraj's feet."[167] Though this interpretation may appear to be tangential, it cannot be denied that the physical ugliness of Aruneshwar has layers beyond what it literally means. Aruneshwar's acts of sending the veena as his representative at the time of his marriage with Kamalika, keeping the nuptial chamber dark, meeting his wife only in the darkness of night, concealing his identity during the dance with his friends in the spring festival, and repeatedly denying Kamalika the sight of his countenance, together give us a feeling that heused invisibility and darkness as a ploy to hide his disfigured form from his beloved wife. One may go to the extent of recalling the tale of Kusa where Alinda, the mother of Kusa, devises many elaborate ploys to keep the hideous form of her son hidden from her beautiful daughter-in-law, Sudarshana:

> Alinda was apprehensive lest her fair daughter-in-law would commit suicide at the sight of so deformed a husband. She, therefore, prepared rooms underground where, under the plea of family customs, she placed the young couple. No light was admitted into the room. The couple enjoyed their honey-moon in the dark. But Sudarsana, the princess, grew impatient to see her beloved husband ... Alinda, to avoid Sudarsana's seeing the ugly husband, made one of her step-sons personate Kusa on the throne, while the real Kusa with his thick lips, corpulent belly, deformed head, held the royal umbrella.[168]

Evidently, these desperate and crafty ploys of Alinda do not find any parallel in Aruneshwar's attempt to conceal his disfigurement from Kamalika. Rather, to understand the spiritual essence of his concealment we need to regard the following words of his

---

[167] Pramathanath Bisi, *Rabindranātyaprabāha* (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 2014), 115-116. Translation mine.
[168] Quoted by Lal, 266. I have dropped the diacritical marks in the original.

attentively: "Do see me in my songs. First see me in your heart; the time to see me outside will come afterwards. Otherwise there will be an error. The rhythm will get broken."[169]

The deformity of Aruneshwar makes sense if we understand it as an absence of delusive beauty which has its appeal only to physical sight. Kamalika desired to see Aruneshwar's "flower-like pleasant form" with her "eyes of infatuation"[170]; but he wanted her (whose "mind was distracted") to prepare herself for the truth. Kamalika, however, was insistent, desperate and restless, and in haste she made "an error". She saw only a form of ugliness and disfigurement and not the human being who loves her. Finally, when she, having suffered and caused much suffering, realises the worth of true love, she sees her husband as one with "a beautiful form". Like ugliness, beauty in the context of *Sāpmochan* is also to be understood not in the restrictive sense of physical beauty, but as a metaphor. At the end of the Kusa tale we see that through divine intervention Kusa obtains a beautiful body, seeing which his wife becomes exceedingly delighted. There is no aspect of realisation or inner transformation in the case of either of the characters. However, in *Sāpmochan,* it is Kamalika's vision that undergoes a transformation; and this transformed vision enables her to perceive her beloved as beautiful. Again, one may find clear and obvious similarities with Tagore's Sudarshana. But while the Rani at the end of both *Rājā* and *Arūp Ratan* says, "You're not beautiful, lord, not beautiful, you're unequalled"[171], Kamalika's last words in *Sāpmochan* are "My lord, my beloved, how beautiful you are!"[172]

---

[169] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 549. Translation mine.
[170] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 549. Translation mine.
[171] Lal, 318.
[172] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 554. Translation mine.

The variation is slight but highly significant. In the former, the spiritual aspect is pronounced, while in the latter human love is prioritized.

Here, I wish to refer to a song that, interestingly enough, appears in all the three texts, *Rājā*, *Arūp Ratan* and *Sāpmochan*. What is more, this song was also present in the first edition of *Sāpmochan*:

> Alas, where do they fly, outside and far away,
>
> Your restless eyes like forest birds escape into the forest.
>
> Oh, when the flute plays charming sounds within your heart,
>
> Then of your own accord you'll return crying, to yield,
>
> Your haste, and dying to wander here and there, will end –
>
> Ah, now those eyes like forest birds escape into the forest.
>
> Why don't you see who comes and goes at the heart's door,
>
> Do your ears hear the message brought by the south wind?
>
> Now with flower-fragrance, happy laughter, ardent song,
>
> Eternal Spring has entered life in search of you,
>
> Returned from seeking him outside, you're almost mad,
>
> Ah, now those eyes like forest birds escape into the forest.[173]

[173] Translated by Lal, 280.

The message of the play, which has been succinctly captured in the metaphors of the lyric, is one that Tagore has constantly reiterated throughout his literary life. Love that is contingent solely on sensual gratification and external beauty perceived with "the restless eyes" is bound to end in error. True love[174], like true devotion, does not strive to seek the beloved "outside"; instead it attempts to perceive the truth and the Beautiful at "the heart's door", beyond the limits of physical sight. In fact, true beauty for Tagore "is without any pride of external decorative ornamentation,"[175] and true love can be attained through a path of realisation which, more often than not, is laden with pain, sorrow and tears. It is this (idealistic) message of *Sāpmochan* which brings it thematically close not only to *Rājā*/*Arūp Ratan*, but also to many of his other works like *Chitrāngadā*, *Chandālikā* and *Tapati*.

From the discussion in this section it should become evident that *Sāpmochan* is not just what Ashutosh Bhattacharya calls "a truncated, stage-worthy version of *Rājā* infused with dance and music."[176] In fact, to conclude, it may be said that in this play (composed towards the end of his long literary career) Tagore invokes an idea, a trope that he invented, revised and almost exhausted towards the beginning of the second phase of his career as a dramatist, and reinvents it in such unique ways (both thematic and formal), that instead of becoming a mere version/reworking, it emerges as a work which marks the beginning of another phase not only in his own literary and theatrical life, but also of Bangla performing arts and literature in general.

Thus, in this chapter we, through our analysis of characters who 'can't be seen with the eyes', arrive at Tagore's complex understanding of and experimentation with the

---

[174] In Tagore the ideas of human love and divine love are often conflated.
[175] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 715. Translation mine.
[176] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, 178. Translation mine.

concepts of visibility and invisibility. What strikes us as most remarkable is that these experimentations are done in a medium which extensively depends on being visible. In Tagore's treatment, the ideas of visibility and invisibility are not restricted merely to their spiritual connotations, but are extended to political significances as well. We have also noted that the characters who can't be seen with the eyes are not 'absolutely' invisible. In other words, 'invisibility' and absence, which in the context of an audio-visual medium run the risk of being conflated, are kept separate, thereby enabling an unconventional exploration of the visual potential of the form of plays. Tagore resists any reductive categorisation, and when these characters become 'perceptible'/ accessible to the senses, they enable a holistic view on 'visibility'.

Chapter Four

Light and Darkness: "Light That Springs from the Source of Darkness Is Yours"[1]

Theatre as an art form based on visual performance is naturally contingent upon the 'play' (pun intended) of light and darkness, including even the technology of stage lighting. However, not only on the level of form, but also the engagement of drama with the themes and motifs of light and darkness is quite ubiquitous and (more often than not) conventional. In this final chapter we shall focus on Tagore's negotiations with the dialectics of this binary in his plays, which are, somewhat expectedly, manifested primarily through his poetic usage of metaphors and imagery. But there are also some unique, formal ways in which he explores the varied potential of the experience of light and darkness in this audio-visual medium. What is to be noted with attention is that these negotiations and experimentations of Tagore can be understood and traced through certain distinct, though not unrelated, patterns or tropes, the trajectories of which can be categorised into certain phases. 1908 can be considered as a critical point, for it is not only the year in which (after a long pause in terms of composition of drama) his first major twentieth-century prose play (*Shāradotsav*) gets composed, but, more importantly, it also marks a transitional moment, the beginning of a new phase in his career as a dramatist and theatrician. Thus, it would be reasonable to divide this chapter into two sections – the first one dealing with the nineteenth-century plays and the latter with those composed in the succeeding century. This would also neatly coincide with the pre-Santiniketan and the Santiniketan stages of his life.

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitabitān* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 2002), 128. Translation mine.

Further, in order to avoid unnecessary repetition and inordinate protraction, each section will focus mainly, but not exclusively, on two plays which serve as the paradigm or the representative sample for the analysis of the phase in consideration; and the rationale behind the selection of the particular samples will be explained as the contexts arise.

Section 4.1

We begin with the pre-Santiniketan phase, the plays of the nineteenth century. The main focus is on *Prakritir Pratishodh* (1884) and *Mālini* (1896); but other plays from this period would also be referred to as and when needed. Although chronologically *Prakritir Pratishodh* is preceded by three plays, *Rudrachanda* (1881), *Vālmiki-pratibhā* (1881) and *Kāl-mrigayā* (1882), all of which engage with the ideas of light and darkness, I choose to pay particular attention to this play for it occupies a special position in Tagore's literary output. As explained by Ananda Lal, "... [t]he creative peak of this earliest phase of Tagore's playwriting career came with *Prakritir Pratishodh*, a moving verse-tragedy about an ascetic who finds truth not in renunciation but in affection for an ostracised orphan girl."[2] Tagore himself regarded this play with particular significance in the evolution of his thoughts and ideas. In *My Reminiscences* he wrote, "'Nature's Revenge' may be seen as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work or, rather, to the subject on which all my writings have dwelt: the delight of attaining the Infinite within the finite."[3] Let us take a fleeting glance at the basic narrative outline of the play as worded by the playwright himself:

[2] Lal, 18.
[3] Rabindranath Tagore, "My Reminiscences", in *Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005), 579.

> In Karwar I wrote the 'Prakritir Pratishodh' (Nature's Revenge), a dramatic poem. The hero was a sanyasi who [thinking that the Infinite is outside and beyond everything] was striving for a victory over Nature by cutting the bonds of desire and affection to arrive at a true knowledge of himself. A little girl brings him back to the world from communion with the infinite and into the bondage of human affection. Then the sanyasi realises that the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love. Only in the aura of love does every limit merge with the limitless.[4]

The entire play, consisting of sixteen scenes, is structured as an oscillation between darkness and light which in turn reflects the conflicting emotions in the sanyasi's heart – the constant oscillation between his utmost attempts to sever the bonds of human love and affection and his 'natural' affinity for the flow of life, love and beauty of the world. Here, for a close understanding of the play's overall engagement with the binary of light and darkness, let us look at the usage of images and visual associations in each of its scenes through the following tabular representation:[5]

Scene	Phrases containing visual associations
1	"Cave" (stage direction) "Here I am alone in the dark cave ... The night of the primeval age sits still by my side, holding back its breath ... hosts of old frogs are sleeping in the cold stagnant water of darkness. Bats bring in the cave the news of a faraway moonless night... By sitting still I have extinguished the sun and the moon... The senses of sight, sound

[4] Tagore, "My Reminiscences", 578.
[5] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 87-118. Translation mine.

	taste and smell have fled away... In darkness I have performed the great act of killing the beloved children of Nature" (Sanyasi).
2	"Everywhere is visible the light of day. Light is a cruel and harsh prison that confines the stretch of vision... Darkness is freedom; darkness is peace; darkness is where our minds can roam about. Darkness is the representation of the infinite; it is the nest of rest. A handful of darkness can conceal the entire creation" (Sanyasi). "Behold, the dawn breaks; the sun rises and the flowers bloom in forests... in the sunlight we all shall dance together under the shade of trees" (Farmers' song).
3	"Afternoon" (Stage direction).
4	"This world is like a huge dark crevice" (Sanyasi).
5	"At the entrance of the cave" (Stage direction). "Dear, how will you live in this darkness, you all are the little creatures of light" (Sanyasi).
6	"Afternoon, at the entrance of the cave" (Stage direction). "The twilight of feelings and emotions is gradually spreading on this soul of mine. Clouds are occluding the vision of knowledge" (Sanyasi)
7	"The world looks beautiful... the golden dusk is gradually melting into the blue sea. Down there darkness intensifies in the forests, the golden shade of evening has lit up the top of the forest... Lamps are getting lit up one by one... O delusive one, show me your performance of worldly magic. Play with the sun and the moon." (Sanyasi) "Light and darkness, life and death, day and night, hope and despair, rise and fall, are merely its footsteps." (Sanyasi)

8	“At the entrance of the cave.” (Stage direction) “Everything appears so beautiful in this world.” (Sanyasi) “What awful darkness! How awful is this stifling cave; Come dear, let us go out and sit in the light of the moon... I wish to become that tree and stand in the moonlight.” (Sanyasi) “Come back to your own realm of eternal darkness; let all suns and moons be extinguished; I feel confounded in this trifling world of light; darkness never misleads anyone.” (Sanyasi)
9	“Cave” (Stage direction) “Who has suddenly sent you from the world? Why have you brought the light of day, the fragrance of blossoms, and the soothing effect of breeze... By looking at your innocent face I regain my faith in this world.” (Sanyasi)
10	“The Infinite is expressing itself through the limits of the finite... By shutting these eyes and throwing this world away, where was I roaming in search of the Infinite... I must look at this world with love – only then will I be able to see its true form.” (Sanyasi).
11	“Come, O Darkness! Drown my parched and scorched soul into the sea of destruction.” (Sanyasi)
12	“At the entrance of the cave.” (Sanyasi) “Gradually the darkness is fading away; the sights of the world are becoming prominent; trees, sunlight and people are suddenly appearing within this cave.” (Sanyasi) “Father, behold that creeper! Behold the buds that will bloom in the light of dawn.” (Girl).

	"you are the light of illusion, you are a mirage." (Sanyasi)
13	"Storm, rain and night." (Stage direction)
14	"Morning. The sanyasi runs out of the forest." (Stage direction) "Abandoning the path lit up by the sun and the moon, why am I futilely roaming in darkness!" (Sanyasi)
15	"The waves of bliss dance around the sun and the moon." (Sanyasi)
16	"Cave" (Stage direction). "O delight of my eyes, gem of my heart, idol of affection! Dear, I have come." (Sanyasi).

From the above table it can be inferred with assertion that the language of the play is obsessed with the images of light and darkness, and it is expressed most overtly and even glaringly through the metaphors used by the Sanyasi. In him we mark a tentative and wavering progression from an all-pervading darkness of detachment and renunciation to a realisation and recognition of the value of this world and its waves of light perceptible to the human senses. Here I must refer to the poem "*Suradāser Prārthanā*"[6] (collected in *Mānasi*) in which Suradas, being ashamed of his sinful eyes of desire and lust, wants them to be removed and replaced with darkness:

I am unable to swim in this stream of forms any longer.

Lift me, take me away from this illuminated world of forms.

With the removal of these eyes, all the limits of the world will disappear.

In my lonely darkness of infinitude will disappear the sky and the entire world.

[6] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 1, 305-06.

> In that vast, lightless heart I shall stay all by myself.
>
> I shall always remain still on the seat of destruction.[7]

This is of course redolent of the sanyasi's skewed idea of attaining emancipation through the sadhana of darkness alone. "*Suradāser Prārthanā*", much like *Prakritir Pratishodh,* does not end on this sombre note of nihilism, but transcends to the level of light.

In *Prakritir Pratishodh,* the connotations of the binary of darkness and light function on two levels – one being a conventional level and the other unconventional – each of them deserving separate analysis. First let us consider the conventional level; and in this context certain other Tagore plays of the nineteenth century (where this pattern is repeated) will also be discussed. The association of darkness with loneliness, stagnation, lack of kindness, death, harshness, and violence, and that of light with love, beauty, affection, bonding and the flow of life. constitute the traditional, straightforward positive-negative interpretation of the two. The following two quotations will make this binary evident:

> (a) By staying still in this dark cavern, I have performed the great act of killing. Today I have achieved my goal; my oath has been fulfilled. I have killed your [Nature's] children... The skeletons of your servants, Affection, Love and Kindness lie in the crematorium.[8]

[7] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali,* Vol. 1, 305. Translation mine.
[8] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 88-89. Translation mine.

> (b) Ah, how wonderful is this morning and its light! This world is not an illusion; it is true.... Attentively I shall read the script of this world... With love I shall look at this world – only then will I be able to realise its true form.[9]

Notably, while the sanyasi wavers between the images of darkness and light, the little girl, who brings about the final change in his heart, remains a constant metaphor of innocence and worldly beauty: "the light of day", "the fragrance of blossoms" and "the soothing effect of breeze".[10] This conventional understanding of light and darkness permeates (formally, linguistically and figuratively) most of the other plays of this phase. Let us consider a few of them before returning to *Prakritir Pratishodh*.

In the first scene of *Rudrachanda,* we see the titular character in a stormy night in a cave, engaged in the worship of Bhairav,[11] the god of destruction. In a monologue resembling the soliloquy of the sanyasi in *Prakritir Pratishodh*, he says in rather ominous language:

> Your enormous shape casts a dark shadow.
>
> Assuming the form of a moonless night, it pervades the entire world.
>
> The clouds of your matted hair engulf the universe.
>
> Your teeth dazzle like flashes of lightning. Your breath extinguishes the light of the stars, the sun and the moon.[12]

Despite the overt similarities it must be admitted that the tone of darkness in the above lines is much more intense and even ferocious than what we see in the opening scene

---

[9] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 108. Translation mine.
[10] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 105, 114. Translations mine.
[11] "'The Terrible', 'The Formidable', 'The Frightening', Bhairav is the name of Siva in his fearsome aspect as the Destroyer. Siva's violent traits are said to be emphasised in this manifestation." Lal, 348.
[12] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 35. Translation mine.

of *Prakritir Pratishodh.* The conventional contrast of light and darkness that we find in the later plays is anticipated in *Rudrachanda* itself. While in the second scene *Rudrachanda* invokes "the most intense blinding darkness of the infernal[13] realm" and commands it to swallow "the hopes and joy, the smiles and light, and the tenderness"[14] of the heart of Amiya, the innocent little girl, in the third scene she, in the company of Chand, the poet (who can even "make the dark forest smile"[15]) sings a song of spring and light:

> In spring a *mālati* flower, a drop of beauty, opens its eyes for the first time. It looks around and sees the beauteous world. Suddenly the dawn breaks. What joy overflows! The morning sun stands near its head and witnesses its awakening... Today the sky is so blue! The eyes of the sun are smiling![16]

Of course, this juxtaposition serves to heighten the sombre tone of the darkness of which *Rudrachanda* is an embodiment, but it also underlines the harshness of the scorching sun which is described in the subsequent song: "... Everywhere dazzles the light of the noon that stares with its angry winkless eyes. The tender life of the flower gradually withers away."[17] Interestingly enough, the infernal darkness and the angry eyes of the sun, two images apparently contrary to its light, are used to signify the same feelings of cruelty, violence, wrath and revenge against which is pitted the soothing visual of the bond of love between Amiya and Chand.

---

[13] We might be reminded of the description of Hell that Tagore offers in a later verse drama, *Narakbās*, collected in *Kāhini*: "All the tears of the world seem to have become vapour to create this realm of profound darkness, devoid of the sun, the moon and the stars. His blot of intensified grief like some nightmare silently stifles the firmament." Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 511. Translation mine.

[14] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 36. Translation mine.

[15] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 36. Translation mine.

[16] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 41. Translation mine. The *mālati* is a white flower.

[17] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 43. Translation mine.

The musical plays *Vālmiki-pratibhā* and *Kāl-mrigayā* are also replete with stifling images of darkness and their final emancipation into the light of knowledge and realisation. *Vālmiki-pratibhā* begins with a detailed description of robbery, violence and bloodshed, which is soon followed by the commandment of the leader of the dacoits: "Here, listen to me! This is a moonless night. I shall offer my worship to Kali. Go at once! Make haste! Bring a sacrifice."[18] Here it is significant that Kali[19] (much like Bhairav of *Rudrachanda*) stands for death, destruction, wrath and ritualistic blood sacrifice. What is more, Kali literally means the Black One. The sombre tone of the first scene is further deepened when we hear a young girl[20] crying –

The sky gets covered with clouds.

How am I going to return home?

It is such a dark night!

Throughout the day I have been roaming in the forest.

My feet are numb,

And my body is weary and tired.

How am I going to return home?

What a dense forest it is!

Where have I come?...

What am I going to do in this dark night?...

[18] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 14. Translation mine.
[19] "Kali is the most terrifying manifestation of the goddess Durga. Associated with dark rituals and blood sacrifices, she is portrayed as having black skin and a tongue dripping with the blood of demons; she carries on her person their severed hands and heads. ... The root meaning of *kāli* is 'black', and the word also suggests 'disgrace' or 'defamation'." Lal, 353.
[20] Later, we get to know that she is none other than Saraswati in disguise.

Dark clouds permeate the sky.

Lightning flashes every now and then.

I am alone; my body shivers in fear![21]

This darkness continues to dominate the play till its fifth scene where Valmiki's heart undergoes a complete change. After seeing a hunter killing a *krauncha* bird from a pair, he spontaneously cries out in the words of the source *Rāmāyana*, "O fowler! Since thou hast slain one of a pair of *krauncha*s, thou shalt never attain prosperity!"[22] However, in Tagore this change in Valmiki does not take place abruptly. Prior to the scene of the slaying of the *krauncha*, we see him rescuing the girl from the violent hands of the dacoits and also stopping them from killing a couple of deer. However, the shift from darkness to light, unlike the gradual change in Valmiki's nature, happens quite suddenly. Although in the third scene we get a fleeting mention of "the night coming to an end"[23], it does not usher in any ray of light as such. In fact the description of the dark stormy night found in the songs of the forest goddesses in the fourth scene makes the atmosphere of darkness all the more menacing. Finally, in the *krauncha* episode, immediately after Valmiki utters the famous "*Ma nishād*" sloka, the tone of the play gets changed; and the playwright being conscious of the abruptness of the change, does not fail to highlight it:

What is it! What is it that I see in my heart!

What light appears in the middle of this intense darkness!

I am amazed! Whose kindness have I received?

---

[21] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 15. Translation mine.
[22] M. N. Datta, ed., 'Bālakāndam', *Rāmāyana* (Calcutta: Deva Publication, 1891), 9.
[23] Tagore, Rabindra *Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 19. Translation mine.

(Saraswati appears)

Who is this? Who is this still flash of lightning?[24]

All the directions have become illuminated!

Whose image is this, painted in the soothing light of the moon!

Who is this goddess seated on lotus?[25]

Here it needs to be pointed out that although Krittibas is Tagore's primary source for *Vālmiki-pratibhā,* the depiction of this luminous image[26] of Saraswati is largely derived from Biharilal Chakrabarti's *Shāradāmangal* (1879), a text that Tagore was thoroughly acquainted with:

The female *krauncha* bird wailed over the death of her dear mate.

The entire forest got filled with her woeful cries.

Seeing this, the hermit's mind was benumbed.

His kind heart got overwhelmed with sorrow.

Suddenly a luminous goddess appeared in the middle of his forehead,

Like a flash of lightning amidst dark clouds.

Light and only light! A strange kind of light appeared!

It outshone the sun,

And the whole world was illuminated by it.

[24] In the original Bengali text, the phrase "*sthir chapalā*" has been used to express this oxymoron.
[25] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 24. Translation mine.
[26] In the play she is also described as "the embodied image of dawn", "One who gives sight to the sightless". Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 25. Translation mine.

It was neither the sun nor the moon,

But a strange, bright, peaceful light that shone on the forehead of the rishi![27]

We do not fail to mark that in this play the shift from darkness to light is deftly paralleled with Valmiki's movement from Kali to Saraswati[28], the life of violence, destruction and robbery to the realm of poetry, music and creation. We shall come back to the motif of Kali while discussing *Visarjan*, but before that let us touch upon *Kāl-mrigayā* briefly, where we find a similar conventional pattern being repeated. While the play begins with "My blind father is alone in the dark hut"[29] and "Night comes, and the forest becomes dark. Layers of clouds permeate the sky"[30], at the end we hear, "Go to the eternal realm where there is no sorrow or darkness … Go to the luminous realm, which overflows with the bright light of purity and virtue."[31] Here this shift is not only reflective of the play's movement from violence and bloodshed to repentance and forgiveness, but is also merged with the evolution of the metaphor of blindness. Since this has been adequately addressed in an earlier chapter, I refrain from repeating it here.

In *Visarjan* (1890), which is dominated by the theme of bloodshed in general, and ritualistic blood sacrifice in particular, Kali emerges as its central image. As an idol she is actually/ visibly present on the stage in most of the scenes, and her significance in the play is also metaphorical. Let us consider the sections cited below to understand

[27] Biharilal Chakrabarti, *Shāradāmangal* (Kolkata: Yogendranath Vidyaratna, 1879), 9-11. Translation mine.
[28] Other names of Saraswati include Shubhra and Sveta which literally mean 'one who is white, bright and shining'.
[29] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 66. Translation mine.
[30] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 68. Translation mine.
[31] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 78. Translation mine.

how Tagore conflates the idea/image of Kali (and darkness of night) with violence and killing in the name of religion[32], bloodshed, and even a conspiracy of pedicide:

> (a) She who is naked dances in the battlefield.
>
> We dance with her.
>
> The Naked One is mad; she has darkened all the ten directions.
>
> Her red lolling tongue burns like a flame of fire.
>
> Creatures are rushing towards it like insects.
>
> Her black hair covers the sky.
>
> The sun and the moon hide in fear.
>
> Red streams of blood flow down her body. The three realms tremble in fear when she frowns.[33]
>
> (b) Who says that killing is a sinful act!
>
> This world is a huge slaughter-house.
>
> Don't you know that every moment countless creatures are closing their eyes forever?
>
> Whose play is it?
>
> The dust of this earth is made of innumerable killings.

[32] In a poem titled "*Dharma-moha*", Tagore writes, "When delusion in the name of religion occludes a man's vision, / He kills and is himself destined to be killed ... / O the Raja of dharma, strike the prison-walls of religion with your bolt of thunder! / Bring the light of knowledge to this hapless country." Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 8 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1989), 206-07. Translation mine.

[33] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 277. Translation mine.

At every footstep thousands of insects are getting trampled.

Aren't they living creatures too?

Old Time is ever scripting the narrative of transient life on the pages of this world in letters of blood.

Killing is in the wilderness;

Killing is in the habitations of man;

Killing is in birds' nests, in insects' holes;

Killing is in the depthless sea, in the clear sky.

There is killing for the sake of livelihood,

For the mere pleasure of sport,

For no apparent reason ...

The world is being incessantly driven by killing ...

Mahakali, the spirit of Time and Death, stands with her sharp, thirsty tongue extended,

With a skull in her hand,

Into which is being eternally poured the stream of blood of this world,

Like juice squeezed from a cluster of grapes[34].

(c) On the last night of Shravan I shall bring and offer royal blood at the feet of the goddess.[35]

[34] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 284. Translation mine.
[35] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 295. Translation mine.

(d) Today at midnight secretly offer him [the child Dhruva] in my name at the feet of the goddess. His blood will extinguish the fire of anger of the goddess.[36]

Unlike the pattern of linear transcendence from darkness to light that we have noted in the earlier plays, *Visarjan* does not contain any explicit reference to light[37] and sublimation as such. Perhaps owing to the genre that Tagore was composing, a full-length five-act tragedy modelled upon seventeenth-century English classics, he could not accommodate a specific reference to light at the end, but instead we are offered a spectacular and literally iconoclastic scene of the immersion (or "throwing away", to quote Tagore's stage direction that most directors even today do not dare to carry out) of the idol of Kali into the river Gomati.

Having explored the conventional treatment of the binary of light and darkness in some of Tagore's other early plays, we can proceed to the unconventional treatment. Let us start with the following soliloquy of the sanyasi from the second scene of *Prakritir Pratishodh*:

Everywhere is visible the light of day—

The ribs of Creation have been exposed in front of the eyes.

Light is a cruel and harsh prison that confines the stretch of vision with objects.

At every step our mind is obstructed.

It knows not where to rest.

---

[36] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 304. Translation mine.

[37] However, it is remarkable that in the stage copy of the 1923 production at the Empire Theatre, as noted by Abhijit Sen, 'the performance mentions not only stage properties to be used ("articles for worship, flowers, basket, piece of cloth, lamp and stand", "copper plate", "spears, shields, axes", "knife", "crown, garland") but also the time for each dramatic sequence, ("dawn", "morning", "Afternoon", "evening", "sunset"; or the more specific "8 Am", "12 A.M."; or even a combination of both, "Night 9 P.m."). Presumably these were shorthands for light effects which become more obvious in requirements for "midnight (moon)" or the direction for "red tinge" (between "dawn" and "morning").' Sen, 157.

> Darkness is freedom; darkness is peace;
>
> Darkness is where our mind can roam about.
>
> Darkness is the representation of the Infinite; it is the nest of rest.
>
> A handful of darkness can conceal the entire Creation—
>
> The beginning and the end of the world disappear.
>
> In a moment the free, limitless life releases a sigh of relief by going outside the limits of the world.[38]

Although these words, given the context in which they are used, apparently transpire as a deliberate distortion or even perversion of the commonsensical, traditional positive-negative understanding of day and night, light and darkness, in the broader context of Tagore's multi-faceted negotiations with the concepts of visibility and invisibility, these actually anticipate, albeit in a limited sense, some of his daring experimentations with light and darkness in his later mature plays. Here it would be useful to clarify the significance of light in the second scene, which is deliberately and carefully pitted against the all-pervading sinister darkness of the first. If the darkness of the first scene, as shown earlier, represents loneliness, detachment, indifference and severing of the bonds of love and affection, the light of the second scene is associated with the dreary flow of mundane life, which is full of superstitions, quarrels, scandal-mongering, inanity and even selfishness. Interestingly, on reading the cited soliloquy closely (where light is equated with a sense of confinement and restriction, and darkness with infinitude and freedom), we see a faint echo of certain parts of an essay by Tagore composed in early 1882, titled "*Prātah-kāl o Sandhyā-kāl*" ("Morning and Evening"):

---

[38] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 89. Translation mine.

> In the morning 'I' disappears, and in the evening everything apart from this 'I' disappears. In the morning I am just one of the innumerable human beings, and all the activities of the machinery of this world become visible to me. I feel that I am merely one of the creatures of that vast machine … In the evening the machinery of the world becomes invisible to me and thus this 'I' does not appear to be merely controlled by this world. It feels that I, as an individual, am the world … In the morning I belong to the world, and in the evening the world belongs to me. In the morning I am a creature, and in the evening I am the Creator … One who in the morning was a minor character in a play, in the evening becomes its protagonist … In the light of day 'I' gets diffused, disappeared and dissipated, and in the darkness of evening it is the world that disappears and gets diffused.[39]

In another similar essay, "*Din o Rātri"* ("Day and Night") composed in 1903, the same sentiment is expressed in a language that comes closer to the words of the sanyasi:

> In the light of day the difference amongst objects and beings become overtly visible to us. Light divides us, separates us from each other. It makes our limits explicit ... Darkness reveals to us more than what it conceals. Without darkness we could not have gathered knowledge about the various realms and light would have kept us imprisoned.[40]

I wish to briefly dwell upon *Chitrāngadā* (1892) where the play of light and darkness is unique and distinct from what we have encountered so far. Even at the risk of sounding somewhat pre-critical and ornamental, it may be stated that *Chitrāngadā*

---

[39] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1990), 689. Translation mine.
[40] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 7 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1988), 453. Translation mine.

is a painting in which the effect of chiaroscuro has been dexterously used. Interestingly, it is the first play where Tagore explicitly deals with the subject of sexuality and sexual desire. Its primary motifs follow a track of evolution from the delusion of infatuation and lust to the realisation of the disillusioned Truth. Without repeating what has already been discussed in my first chapter, let us see how this development has been charted out[41] through the usage of images pertaining to light and darkness:

Scene	Phrases containing light imagery
1	"He (Arjun), with his straight tall physique instantly stood up before me – just like a bright flame leaping from the smouldering embers hidden under heaps of ashes, when fuelled from outside."
2	"the golden clouds of dawn", "golden dusk", "the light of delight of the primeval dawn", "golden stalks of golden lotuses ... quivering like countless serpents of fire."
3	"What fire of physical beauty surrounds me! I myself get burnt, and I burn others ...", "faint moonlight", "the crescent moon of dawn".
4	"the dawn of desire", "the evening of satiation"
6	"the golden deer of illusion"

[41] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 329-57. Translation mine

8	"the transient brightness of a forest flower", "the golden hue of clouds".
9	"the beautiful hue of the sun of dawn", "The light of truth devoid of all external ornamentation."
11	"Sunrise."

While the images of twilight evoke a sense of transience and mysterious enchantment, gold/ golden suggests the attractiveness of illusion/delusion; and the images related to fire, somewhat conventionally, stand for lust and passionate sexual urge. Although I shall come back to the discussion on fire in detail in the subsequent section, here it may be interesting to refer to a few sections of Tagore's novel, *Chokher Bāli*[42], where he repeatedly uses the fire metaphor while writing about sexual tension and passion:

> (a) "Every vein in her [Vinodini's] body seemed to be on fire. Her eyes rained sparks on whatever they beheld. Such a comfortable home and such an amorous husband! I could have made a kingdom of this home, and a slave of this husband ..." (Chapter 11).
>
> (b) "Just as smouldering embers reignite when a fire is stirred, the intrusion of a third party renewed the fading passion of the newlyweds ..." (Chapter 15).
>
> (c) "Mahendra clasped Vinodini to his heart in a hard embrace, and declared, 'Even your contempt will not break my resolve. I shall take you away with me,

[42] Tagore, *Chokher Bāli*, trans. Radha Chakravarty (Noida: Random House India, 2012), 50, 61, 155.

> and somehow, you must love me ... You have set a great fire blazing, all around us ... You can neither quench the flames nor escape them.'" (Chapter 34).

However, as is expected from Tagore, *Chitrāngadā* does not end with the falsehood of infatuation, lust or illusion, but grows out of it into the bright "light of truth", which has already been analysed earlier.

Finally in this section, we come to *Mālini* (1896). Ananda Lal, by way of explaining its significance (in terms of both content and form) in Tagore's playwriting career, holds that it is "the first dramatic expression of his deep respect for Buddhist principles.[43] It also reflects Tagore's change in direction from his earlier multi-plot tragedies to a more simple, direct action that deals with a single situation—a trend to simplify that developed into the standard structural technique for his later plays."[44] Although the play is based on the story of Malini in the *Mahāvastu-avadanā*, collected in Rajendralala Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, the similarities between the two texts are extremely faint and insignificant. Yet, despite all its importance in Tagore's oeuvre, *Mālini* has remained less popular and also somewhat neglected in the field of academics. For the sake of convenience let us begin with the outline sketch of its narrative.

Malini, the princess of Kashi, having received teachings from Buddhist monks, is deeply influenced by Buddhism. Though born in a devout Hindu family, she adopts "the new religion".[45] She finds no solace in the material wealth and worldly pleasures

---

[43] Tagore writes elsewhere "Buddha, who developed the practical side of the teaching of the Upanishads, preached the same message when he said, 'With everything, whether it is above or below, remote or near, visible or invisible, thou shalt preserve a relation of unlimited love without any animosity or without a desire to kill. To live in such a consciousness while standing or walking, sitting or lying down till you are asleep, is *Brahma vihara*, or, in other words, is living and moving and having your joy in the spirit of Brahma.'" Tagore, *Sādhanā: The Realisation of Life* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1921), 42.

[44] Lal, 20.

[45] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 434. Translation mine.

of the palace, and wants to live a simple life untouched by luxury and excess. Her parents, the king and the queen, are worried about her adoption of the new faith, and they attempt to convince her to come away from this path. The orthodox Brahmins of the state are enraged by Malini's act of accepting Buddhism and they want her to be banished from the kingdom. When the queen comes to know about this heartless demand of the Brahmins, her motherly affection makes her stand beside her daughter; she sees Malini as a "bright flame of fire"[46], an incarnation of some divine spirit. However, the king's attitude is somewhat different from that of his wife; he wants his daughter to keep her acceptance of the new religion secret for political reasons.

Kshemankar is the leader of the agitated Brahmins who strongly want Malini to be banished. On the other hand, Supriya, his childhood friend who knows that truth cannot be determined by the force of numbers, does not approve of this idea of banishment in the name of religion. When the Brahmins come to know that the army of the state is also in support of the agitation they step back, for they see this as a rebellion, an insurrection at its extreme. They believe that it is their faith and not the force of arms that would bring them victory. When they start praying to their goddess, invoking her grace and power, Malini appears in front of them and announces that she has banished herself from the palace. The Brahmins are impressed and even enchanted by her words and appearance, and she having received honour from the ordinary citizens returns to her parents. Kshemankar is the only one who is not particularly impressed by Malini and remains firm in his decision. His friend Supriya, out of his loyalty for Kshemankar, does not join the other Brahmins and agrees to stay back with him. Kshemankar, being alone in this fight, in order to rekindle the fire of rebellion

[46] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 434. Translation mine.

plans to go to some foreign land to take the help of foreign soldiers, and asks Supriya to remain in Kashi and keep him informed.

In the third scene Malini is brought back to her parents and palace by the Brahmins, citizens and soldiers with great honour and reverence. Tired of the sudden excitement and exertion of the day, she seeks refuge in her mother's lap, and soon falls asleep. The goddess, the bright flame of fire, becomes the ordinary daughter of her parents.

In the last part of the play which takes place after a significant lapse of narrative time, we come to know from a conversation between Malini and Supriya that he, out of her love for her, has betrayed Kshemankar by divulging his secret plans of rebellion to the king of Kashi. We further learn that Kshemankar has been captured by the soldiers and is about to be killed. His last wish is to meet Supriya for he wants to know from him the reasons behind his betrayal. Then ensues a lengthy conversation between the two friends from which we come to know their conflicting positions vis-a-vis religion, faith and truth most clearly. Kshemankar wants both of them to be judged by Death and he strikes Supriya with his shackles, thereby killing him. Following this he calls for his executioner, though the play ends with Malini's request to her father to forgive him.

Despite the final melodrama and a few unconvincing plot points, about which Soumitra Basu has commented in his discussion[47], *Mālini* is better knit than the two five Act tragedies mentioned earlier. This play occupies a particularly significant position in the context of the present discussion on light and darkness. By way of dealing with a complex mesh of contentious ideas like love, faith, friendship, betrayal, duty and religion, *Mālini* explores various layers of subtle conflicts which are expressed

[47] Soumitra Basu, *Rabindra-Nātaker Nirmān-Shaili: Unish Shatak* (Calcutta: Sera Prakashak Pvt. Ltd., 1993), 327. Translation mine.

through the usage of a range of metaphors and images pertaining to light. To have a detailed understanding of this unique dramatic treatment I wish to embark on a scene-by-scene analysis where the crux of each scene would be traced through the patterns of the light metaphors. The references to light in the first scene are itemised below:

> (a) Kashyap: Let the tranquil, immaculate light of knowledge constantly illuminate your heart. Let it defeat all the scriptural illusions.[48]
>
> (b) Malini: O revered one, I feel confined; I am unable to see with my eyes. Just like a bee in a lotus bud, confined by its golden pollen, I feel inert and sluggish.
>
> Kashyap: ... The sunlight of your knowledge will free you from this flower prison.[49]
>
> (c) Queen: Where are your precious clothes and ornaments? My golden dawn looks pale and devoid of its golden hue.[50]
>
> (d) Queen: Dharma, like the sun, is ever bright and luminous.[51]
>
> (e) She is not an ordinary girl. She is a bright flame of fire.[52]
>
> (f) Malini: I am not your daughter; nor am I a princess! I am the embodiment of the blazing message of the One who is in my soul.[53]
>
> (g) King: ...Your bright luminous daughter belongs to the world ...[54]

[48] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 431. Translation mine.
[49] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 431. Translation mine.
[50] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 432. Translation mine.
[51] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 433. Translation mine.
[52] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 434. Translation mine.
[53] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 436. Translation mine.
[54] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 436. Translation mine.

> (h) Queen: Find out the shackle of attachment which will be able to bind this image of light.[55]

On the one hand we see the light of knowledge that Malini has newly discovered in her heart and which she herself begins to personify (or that is how it is perceived by her mother and herself), and on the other hand there are the images related to gold that represent luxury and excess. Thus, we note the first level of conflict in the play – between Malini, the princess brought up amidst the comfort of the royal confines, and Malini, the woman who has assimilated in herself the Buddhist principles of universal love and simple living. However, for the resolution of this conflict, we will have to wait till the third scene where she, on returning to the palace, falls asleep in the lap of her mother.

The light metaphors in the second scene, set on the premises of a temple outside the palace, have a tone significantly different from the vivid and even loud shades of "flame" and "gold" in the first scene.

> (a) Malini: Behold, in the blue sky the moon has come out of those clouds. What a vast city! What a tranquil sky! It seems someone has gathered all the world in its heart, under the cover of one vast moonlight .... My body is experiencing some strange sensation of thrill! My eyes are getting filled with tears! I know not from where I have descended today in this moonlight into the vast world of men.[56]

> (b) Kshemankar: Alas, my friend, it is a dangerous moment when a man is deluded by his own heart. Irrational desire becomes his scriptures and fancy

[55] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 436. Translation mine.
[56] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 441. Translation mine.

> usurps the revered seat of his religion. Is this enchanting night illuminated by the all-pervading light of that moon, the constant emblem of eternal reality? Won't the starkness of the day come tomorrow? Won't the hunger of the day with its thousand nets entrap the sea of life? Won't the struggle for existence produce a tumult of din and clamour in the world? And then this night of moonlight made of the thin film of unreality, will appear as a mere dreamy shadow – a delusion. The enchantment of beauty that enraptures your heart is just as ephemeral and delusive as that moonlight. Do you call that your religion? For once look at the innumerable scenes of sorrow, pain and despair that surround us. Is that faint delusion going to quench the thirst of this world on a scorching day? ... Will you remain in this drowsy slumber even while being on the battlefield in the blazing sunlight? Will you still remain enchanted by this dream of dharma? ...[57]

Evidently, both Malini and Kshemankar use the metaphor of moonlight to express and explain their views about religion, but with very different purports and connotations. While for Malini the moonlight is a metaphor of tranquillity, all-pervasive love, gentleness and the beauty of the vast world, Kshemankar, in his series of rhetorical questions, uses the same image of moonlight but to convince Supriya of what he believes to be the falsity, transience and the delusion of the "new creed". In addition, Kshemankar uses images of fire to counter the "enchanting" effect that he thinks the moonlight of Malini has cast on his friend Supriya, and also to impress on him the gravity of the danger that their traditional religion is threatened by –

[57] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 442-43. Translation mine.

> Kshemankar: My friend, look before you! There is no escape, no way out! The tall ancient house that had nurtured the land of India in its various spacious rooms is now on fire ... During the burning of the Khandava forest, innumerable helpless birds cried bitterly over their perishing nests and nestlings – just like that, the anxious and impatient spirits of our ancestors coming down from various celestial realms are hovering in the skies, wailing over the impending ruin of India ... There is no hope here! The entire house has been engulfed by fire. Streams of blood will have to be brought from outside to extinguish this incendiary. I must go and bring soldiers from foreign lands. The soldiers of this land like swarms of enchanted insects have already singed themselves in the flames of the same fire … Tonight the intoxicated city is celebrating by burning the pyre of its religion.[58]

Malini's idea of dharma is based on the principles of love, kindness and sacrifice, and Kshemankar's dogmatic understanding of religion is associated with the scorching daylight of struggle for existence, the dreary habits of mundane life, and the narrow, base desires and demands of the majority. Thus, we see another level of conflict, and it constitutes the core essence of this play. Interestingly, this scene ends with an image of a lamp – Kshemankar, before going out to foreign lands, bids farewell to Supriya with these words: "I go out into the dark, and in darkness I shall come back to the gate of your house. I shall see with what lamp lit in your heart you await my return, my friend!"[59] Ironically, this reference to a lamp suggesting the theme of friendship and loyalty will come back in the fourth scene when Supriya uses it to refer to Malini and his love for her.

---

[58] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 443-44. Translation mine.
[59] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 445. Translation mine.

In the third scene, Malini returns to the interior of the palace and resumes her metaphorical embodiment of immaculate purity. Although in terms of her imagistic portrayal she ("the goddess", "the mother of her subjects"[60]) has moved quite far from her associations with "the enchanting moonlight", she nevertheless remains significantly distant from her people, the citizens. They turn her into an abstract idea of "the pole-star"[61] of their life, and the shakiness of this foundation of mere abstraction would be exposed in the final scene. The most crucial moment of this part arrives when Malini, tired of the sudden excitement, with "the bright flames of her eyes burning all her rest"[62], returns to her mother's lap to ask for sleep. Ironically, she who at the beginning of the play, being tired of the inertness, the sluggishness of the predictable luxurious palace life, wanted to sever her ties of attachments, now returns to the chambers of the same palace[63] to seek rest. From here begins the character's journey from being a mere abstraction of light and ideas to becoming a woman of flesh and blood, of human emotions – a journey that reaches its culmination in the last part of the play.

In the final scene we have the return of more than one image attaining their climax. Right at the outset Supriya in her conversation with Malini uses the image of the lamp:

> I debate with the scriptures, and not with you. I might be a scholar in the court, but at your feet I am a mere child. O goddess of mine, take my responsibility.

[60] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 446-47. Translation mine.
[61] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 446. Translation mine.
[62] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 447. Translation mine.
[63] She is hailed by one of the Brahmins as "*prāsād-lakshmi*" or the goddess of the royal palace. What is more, she now wants "the vast world" to be brought into the confines of the palace.

> This life of mine shall follow your path, abandoning all doubts and debates, just like a silent shadow following the flame of a lamp.[64]

As indicated earlier, the lamp of loyalty between two friends has changed into a lamp suggesting absolute devotion and perhaps even love of a man for a woman. Contrasted against the image of the lamp and its shadow are Supriya's references to himself as "the Rahu[65] of the sun" and "the dark marks on the moon"[66], while he comments on his relationship with Kshemankar and his 'betrayal' of his friend.

Although throughout this scene Supriya hails Malini as the lamp of his life, "the blazing flame of light"[67], "the pious flame of his inner self",[68] she herself seems to have lost the light of the divine inspiration within herself that had driven her out into the world and made her want to break free from the "golden pollen" of her palace life. She says, "Where is the god who by striking my heart with a bolt of thunder[69] had once revealed to me the fiery message of lightning?"[70] The character who perhaps most perceptibly understands the change in Malini and expresses it is her father, the king:

> You [Supriya] have won the king's heart, and you are free to take up its most precious gem. – Daughter, where was this shyness of yours before now? The bright blazing immaculate light used to dazzle in you in place of a girl's usual tints of fear, shyness and sorrow. But from where has come this tender hue of shyness wet with the mist of tears? It seems as if the tenderly beautiful daughter

---

[64] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 449. Translation mine.
[65] A demon, said to be the cause of eclipses.
[66] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 450. Translation mine.
[67] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 457. Translation mine.
[68] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 458. Translation mine.
[69] The Sanskrit word *vajra* means diamond and thunderbolt. Interestingly, both these meanings unite optically in giving off a flash of light, which in turn spiritually signifies enlightenment. *Vajra* in Buddhist iconography stands for "the absolutely real and the indestructible in a human being, as opposed to the fictions an individual entertains about himself and his nature." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Vajrayana", https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vajrayana, accessed on 21.05.2023.
[70] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 449. Translation mine.

> of Drupad[71] has just emerged out of the burning flames of the sacrificial fire ... After many days I see my Malini's cheeks reddened by the hue of shyness. When the cheeks of dawn redden, it becomes evident that its sun is going to rise soon. Seeing this red hue my heart is filled with joy. I think our dear daughter has finally blossomed. She is neither a goddess, nor an abstraction of kindness, she is the daughter of our house, our heart.[72]

The effective usage of the various shades of light in this dialogue succeeds in encapsulating the conflict between Malini, the human being, the daughter of her parents, and Malini, the personification of an abstraction of love, light and forgiveness. However, the play does not end with this transformation of Malini into an 'ordinary' woman, but closes with her plea to the king to forgive Kshemankar. By appreciating the fearless, upright, dauntless strength of the character of the rebel who most ardently wanted her banishment, she herself emerges glorious. We note that the language in which she expresses her respect for him also bears connotations of light: "I respect the uprightness of this life. I respect this Indra-like image of his."[73] Obviously, Indra, the king of gods, the wielder of the thunderbolt, carries the visual connotation of dazzling light. This becomes evident when we hear her saying, "There is some great terrifying power and force resembling a bolt of thunder in his face"[74].

Thus, it is remarkable to discover that *Mālini* is a play where the development of its central themes, ideas and conflicts can also be traced exclusively through the exploration of the astute use of various images and shades of light. It can be further asserted that the conceptualisation and creation of such a play is not only uniquely

---

[71] Alluding to the myth of the extraordinary birth of Draupadi in the *Mahābhārata*.
[72] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 454-55. Translation mine.
[73] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 455. Translation mine.
[74] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 456. Translation mine.

innovative, but even avant-garde when applied in terms of theatrical representation. In fact, it seems that Tagore anticipated and foresaw through his words what the pioneering light designer, Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), practised and theorised in scenography[75].

Before concluding this section, I wish to briefly dwell upon the engagement of the celebrated poetic play *Karna-Kunti-Samvād*[76] with the motif of darkness, completely different from what we have witnessed so far in Tagore's plays of the nineteenth century. In the *Mahābhārata* there are two distinct but contiguous sections in the "*Udyoga Parva*" – a dialogue between Krishna and Karna (sections 140-143) and another between Kunti and Karna (sections 144-146). For his *Karna-Kunti-Samvād*, Tagore takes details from both sections and combines them to create a "new composite story"[77] of an encounter between an abandoned son and his long-lost biological mother. He departs from his source on various crucial points, one of them being the time of the event and its associated references to light and specifically darkness. In the *Mahābhārata*, Kunti meets her first-born when he is finishing his late morning prayers by the Ganga. She waits in the scorching sun till he finishes his prayers at noon:

> ... the lady of Vrishni's race, that wife of Kuru's house, afflicted by the heat of the sun began to look like a faded garland of lotuses. And, at last, she stood in the shade afforded by the upper garments of Karna. And Karna, of regulated

[75] Through his control of the intensity, colour and movement of light, Adolphe Appia created a novel perspective of stage lighting and scene design. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Adolphe Appia," https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adolphe-Appia, accessed on 21.05.23.
[76] Anthologised in *Kāhini*, originally published in 1900.
[77] Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Translator's Note to "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti", http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/RT_Karnakunti.html, accessed 1 January, 2017.

> vows, said his prayers until his back became heated by the rays of the sun. Then turning behind, he behold [sic] Kunti and was filled with surprise ...[78]

However, the opening lines of *Karna-Kunti-Samvād* reveal that Tagore transferred the meeting to "the glow of twilight deepening into a starlit night"[79]. Karna says, "On sacred Jahnavi's shore I say my prayers/ to the evening sun."[80] In her "Translator's Note" Ketaki Kushari Dyson points out that "The softer setting is more appropriate for Tagore's purpose of highlighting the human emotions."[81]

When Kunti in the play, before unravelling her true identity to her son, says, "Oh, be patient,/ child, for a moment! let the sun-god first/ slide to his rest, and let evening's darkness/ thicken round us"[82], we get another layer of interpretation. Given the sensibilities of the age, perhaps Tagore felt that for a mother like Kunti, it could not be possible in broad daylight to reveal her secret, embarrassing past[83] to her son born before her marriage, and whom she herself had discarded so ingloriously, and left nameless, homeless, to the mercy of the river. What is more, Kunti hesitates to disclose her identity in the presence of Karna's true father, the sun-god, who must "rest"/disappear before she speaks. The following words of Karna uttered at a climactic moment of the dialogue may serve to confirm this observation, "Mother, you have no

---

[78] K. M. Ganguli, trans., "Udyoga Parva", *Mahābhārata* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008). https://www.mahabharataonline.com/translation/mahabharata_05144.php
[79] Dyson, Translator's Note to "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".
[80] Rabindranath Tagore, "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti", trans. Ketaki Kushari Dyson, http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/RT_Karnakunti.html, accessed 1 January, 2017.
[81] Dyson, Translator's Note to "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".
[82] Tagore, "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".
[83] "Child, in the first dawn of your life / It was I who introduced you to this wide world./ That's me, and today I've cast aside/ All embarrassment, to tell you who I am." Tagore, "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".

answer?/ I sense your embarrassment piercing these dark layers/ and touching all my limbs without any words, /closing my eyes"[84].

Tagore, by setting this meeting in near-darkness, also succeeds in creating an eerie sense of mystery, thereby producing an effective theatrical impact:

> As if in a dream
>
> I hear your voice, honoured lady. Look, darkness has
>
> engulfed the entire horizon, swallowed the four quarters,
>
> and the river has fallen silent. You have whisked me off
>
> to some enchanted world, some forgotten home,
>
> to the very dawn of awareness. Your words
>
> like age-old truths touch my fascinated heart.
>
> It's as if my own inchoate infancy, the very obscurity[85]
>
> of my mother's womb was [sic] encircling me today.[86]

We do not fail to mark how twilight and darkness in this play is repeatedly being associated with Karna's birth, ironically enough, whose true father, Surya the Sun-god, is the source of light and life. Here it needs to be pointed out that in the *Mahābhārata*, the dialogue between Karna and Kunti is interrupted by a third voice, that of the sun-god, who not only remains a witness to this encounter, but also attempts to persuade his son to follow the words of Kunti: "... Karna heard an affectionate voice issued out of the solar circle. Coming from a great distance, that voice was uttered by Surya himself

[84] Tagore, "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".
[85] The word used in the original Bengali text is "*āndhār*", which literally means darkness.
[86] Tagore, "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti".

with paternal affection. (And it said) – The words said by Pritha are true. O Karna, act according to the words of thy mother. O tiger among men, great good will result to thee if thou fully followest those words."[87]

However, Tagore's play is a duologue exclusively between the two eponymous characters, and by excluding the presence of any witness to this encounter, he succeeds in intensifying the emotional impact on the characters and readers alike. In addition, though divine or supernatural interventions and oracular voices are quite commonplace in the world of epics, they would have surely appeared unnatural and out of place in a work where the main intention is to deal with the subtleties of human emotions. It is both the generic and temporal differences between the two works which necessitated the exclusion of the voice of the sun-god. Thus, in this section we note that although Tagore in his nineteenth-century plays starts off with a somewhat conventional treatment of the binary of light and darkness, his understanding and usage of the related imagery gradually evolves into unique innovations and even cutting-edge experimentation. This in turn paves the path for his unconventional envisioning of the meanings of light, darkness and seeing in his twentieth-century plays.

Section 4.2

I now move on to the Santiniketan period. Although the plays *Rājā* (1910) and *Tapati* (1929) would be emphasized in this section, I shall have occasion to touch upon some of the other works of this period as well. While *Rājā* is the first of "three of his finest plays" composed and published during "a most productive period in Tagore's dramatic career [1910-1912]"[88], *Tapati*, as described by Ananda Lal, is "perhaps [Tagore's] most

[87] *Mahābhārata*, trans. K.M. Ganguly. https://www.mahabharataonline.com/translation/mahabharata_05146.php
[88] Lal, 21.

ambitious project of revision, completely recasting his old tragedy *Rājā o Rāni* into a more typically Tagorean play"[89]. However, I begin with *Shāradotsav*, for it is not only the first play of the Santiniketan phase but will also help me in shaping the contours of my analysis of the treatment of light and darkness in the subsequent plays.

At the outset it may be stated with little hesitation that *Shāradotsav* is a play of light. However, although this phrase will immediately remind us of our discussion on *Mālini*, the treatment and significance of light and light imagery in the two plays are markedly different. In *Shāradotsav*, not only are its actions set on an autumn morning, dazzling with sunlight[90], but the entire text is permeated with the repeated usage of images of bright light and clear vision. There are ten songs in the play, and of them eight contain explicit mentions of light. In order to have a clear understanding of the pattern of these images and their association with 'seeing', it may be useful to consider some of the phrases and sections of these songs in an itemised manner:

(a) Having torn aside the cover from its bosom

Today stands this morning.

Its message is spread all across the sky,

In golden light.

O my soul open up yourself!

Lift all that is there immersed in your depths

Towards that light ...

[89] Lal, 24.
[90] *Dākghar* also opens with the mention of the breeze and sunlight of autumn from which, according to the directive of the pedantic physician, the ailing child Amal must be kept away.

Do not keep the *veil of indolence on your eyes*.[91] (emphasis mine)

(b) Sunlight smiles from the lap of clouds.

The clouds of monsoon have scattered away.[92]

(c) Today sunlight and shadow play a game of hide and seek

On the paddy fields.

Who has set afloat the rafts of white clouds

In the blue sky!

Today the wasps have forgotten to sip nectar.

They are flying about merrily

Being intoxicated by light.[93]

(d) I shall adorn your golden tray with my streams of tears.

O Mother, [with my tears] I shall string your necklace of pearls.

The sun and the moon have made garlands

To deck your feet.

But my jewel of sorrow will gloriously hang upon your breast.[94]

(e) The one who is as soothing and gentle as the white petals of the new *kunda*[95] flowers,

[91] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 639. Translation mine.
[92] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 641. Translation mine.
[93] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 643. Translation mine.
[94] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 647. Translation mine.
[95] A species of jasmine.

The one who is immaculate and extremely pure,

The one who is bright and blissful,

The one who sits unwaveringly on the auspicious golden seat!

The one who is adorned by the rays, the smiles of the rising sun,

The one who is illuminated by the light of the full moon ...[96]

(f) We have tied bunches of *kāsh* flowers

We have woven garlands of *shephāli*[97] flowers ...

O Sharad-lakshmi,

Do come on your chariot of white clouds! ...

Come to the verdant forests and mountains,

Clean and dazzling with light!

Come wearing your diadem

Adorned with white lotus, wet with cold dewdrops ...

Let your golden vina produce mild and gentle melody ...

All thoughts will be turned into gold,

And *darkness will be replaced with bright light*.[98] (emphasis mine)

(g) Immaculately white sails are pushed

---

[96] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 657. Translation mine. This description of Sharada or Sharad-lakshmi reminds us of the luminous image of Sarasvati in *Vālmiki-pratibhā*.
[97] *Kāsh* is the inflorescence of a species of tall cane; and *shephāli*, a fragrant night flower. Both *kāsh* and *shephāli* are white in colour.
[98] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 658. Translation mine.

By gentle and sweet breeze ...

In the backdrop thunder rumbles,

Pouring heavy rain –

Rays of the rising sun

Coming through scrambled clouds,

Fall on the face.[99]

(h) The *ānchal* of light and shade

Falls on the forest glades ...[100]

Evidently, light in the cited sections has conventional associations with the ideas of purity, natural vibrancy and joy which constitute the dominant (though not the only) tone of this play, wherein a band of young boys are rejoicing in their autumnal holidays. However, the images of light here are not restricted to the idea and atmosphere of festivity and frolic, but also encompass connotations of spirituality, enlightenment and clarity of vision. In addition, it is to be pointed out that Tagore's conception of *sharat* contains a duality: on the one hand there is revelry, merriment, plenitude, and brightness, and on the other the sadhana of suffering, and "the glorious beauty of sorrow"[101], and sacrifice. Of course, as is usual with Tagore, these aspects are not contradictory but complementary in nature, and this is most succinctly captured in the words of the sanyasi, "When Lakshmi[102] descends to this world, she takes up the form

[99] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 659. Translation mine.
[100] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 663. Translation mine.
[101] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1009. Translation mine.
[102] The goddess of prosperity and beauty.

of a suffering and destitute woman. The Almighty[103] is enchanted by this form of hers which is a result of her intense sadhana of suffering. Her golden lotus blossoms in this world with its hundred petals of sorrow."[104]

Interestingly, this image is subtly blended with the idea of the "repayment of debt" (that forms the core of *Rinshodh*, the revised edition of *Shāradotsav*) which in turn is etched out using the play's treatment of light. The sanyasi says, "How beautiful is this scene – He [Upananda], the blessed child of *shārad*, with his brightness has occupied her lap. She, having wrapped him with all the golden light of the firmament, holds him close to her bosom. Ah, nowhere in this world has a flower as immaculate as this boy bloomed!"[105]

Here it should be pointed out that the colour "golden" is mentioned repeatedly in the play, particularly with the connotations of purity, brightness and effulgence. Saroj Bandyopadhyay (in *Ālo-Āndhārer Setu: Rabindra-Chitrakalpa*), by way of analysing Tagore's use of images in the poems of the *Sonār Tari–Chitrā* period,[106] offers an insightful interpretation of "golden hue" which may be considered with importance in the present context as well. For him the golden light/colour symbolizes "the immeasurable and invaluable potential of life", and "the radiance of sorrow and suffering"[107]. These interpretations are useful in understanding the golden light of *Shāradotsav* and *Rinshodh*.

---

[103] The word "*bhagavān*" has been used in the original text, which also refers to Vishnu, the consort of Lakshmi.
[104] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 654. Translation mine.
[105] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 645. Translation mine.
[106] *Sonār Tari* was published in 1894 and *Chitrā* in 1896, and this period is referred to as the Shilaidaha phase of Tagore's career.
[107] Saroj Bandyopadhyay, *Ālo-Āndhārer Setu: Rabindra-Chitrakalpa* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1984), 18- 19.

Before moving on to the next play I wish to cite a song from *Rinshodh* in which is congealed the spirit of Tagore's multifaceted idea of *sharat* and its expressions. In this song Tagore deftly deploys a set of visual images, particularly those pertaining to light and seeing:

Giving and taking and giving back –

This exchange between you and me

Is continuing life after life.

Can death ever stop this flow?

When your song wakes me up,

I look at the sky in search of you.

Again, my song and my *ektārā*[108]

Bring you down to this earth.

O I am indebted to

Your stream of golden light.

I repay this debt

Through the blossoming flowers of my black earth.

When the *shephāli* forest of my autumn night

Becomes overwhelmed with fragrance,

Then a reverse melody flows

[108] One-stringed musical instrument, usually associated with Bauls and folk songs of Bengal.

From the shower

Of love of monsoon night.[109]

From a play of light, we come to *Rājā*, which the celebrated theatre director Sombhu Mitra described as "a play of darkness"[110]. In this play Tagore's experimentation with light and particularly darkness reaches an impressive climax. In fact, the setting of the dark chamber, the visual and sensory experience of lightlessness, and the imagery of darkness, together create such a thematic and theatrical impact that this play not only becomes unique within Tagore's own oeuvre[111], but also has no precedent in the entire realm of world drama. No playwright or director dares to envisage scenes on stage occurring in full darkness, like Tagore has here in his explicit stage directions, because a modicum of light is thought of as obligatory for viewers to see what is happening. Tagore actually challenges theatre crew to perform these scenes in pitch black, the audience only hearing the dialogue between the Raja and Sudrashana taking place in absolute darkness.[112] It is significant that he titled the English translation of the play *The King of the Dark Chamber*, thereby making the symbol of the dark chamber central to its understanding.

The theatrical and thematic unconventionality (or even 'unintelligibility')[113] baffled contemporary critics and commentators, who often ended up producing gross misinterpretations. For instance, on 15 June 1914, the British periodical *The Globe*, in

---

[109] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 1008-09. Translation mine.
[110] Shaoli Mitra, *Āmār Anubhave Rabindra-Nātak Rājā o Sombhu Mitra-r Manchāyan* (Calcutta: M C Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 3. Translation mine.
[111] According to Krishna Kripalani, *Rājā* is Tagore's "most symbolic", and "in a sense his most characteristic" play. Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department, 1980), 211.
[112] I am indebted to my supervisor, Prof. Ananda Lal, for this theatrical insight.
[113] Hirankumar Sanyal, in his essay "The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore", informs us that the symbolic plays of Tagore, particularly *Rājā*, were often tagged by contemporary critics as "unintelligible". Hirankumar Sanyal, *Rabindranath Tagore, A Centenary Volume, 1861 -1961* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961), 236.

an article titled "Mr. Tagore's Allegory", commented that "The dark chamber is the prison that all vain longing and ambition, fear and ignorance and selfishness make for the soul."[114] Of course this is wholly unacceptable, for the nuptial chamber built by the Raja "at the core of the world"[115] in order to be united with his Rani in solitude can be anything but a dark prison, be it literal or metaphorical. In passing it may be stated that the dark chamber of Tagore's play has nothing in common with the dark nuptial room prepared as a ploy by Alinda for her deformed son Kusa and Sudarshana as found in the tale of *Kusa Jātaka*.[116]

Tagore, perhaps perturbed by the misleading interpretations of the play, sought to explain its inner meaning on several occasions. In an article published in 1925, he commented rather elaborately on the significance of the darkness of the Raja's chamber:

> God has to be perceived in our experience, otherwise it would be all meaningless. The highway of scriptures lies before us. But the Lord of darkness does not want us to take that ordinary public highway of hired labours to reach His shrine. In the light of scriptures He emerges as a public property, and does not appear as my personal God[117]. Through an individual's ceaseless pursuit of efforts[118], love and service He, in this dark chamber, truly becomes one's personal. One who has completed one's sadhana of darkness is capable of seeing

---

[114] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān,* Vol. 10 (Kolkata: Publishing Plus, 2010), 69.
[115] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 745. Translation mine.
[116] "... Alinda was apprehensive lest her fair daughter-in-law would commit suicide at the sight of so deformed a husband. She, therefore, prepared rooms underground where, under the plea of family customs, she placed the young couple. No light was admitted in the room. The couple enjoyed their honey-moon in the dark." Quoted in Lal, 266.
[117] We ought to remember that Tagore's *jivan devatā*, an idea that permeates the *Gitānjali* period, is not a religious God; He is the poet's personal God.
[118] In the play when Sudarshana expresses her ardent desire of seeing her Raja in "the world of eyesight", the Raja says, "All right, see me. You yourself will have to identify me." Translated by Lal, 279.

> the Raja everywhere. S/he never makes any mistakes. Thakurda and Surangama have completed their Sadhana; their possibilities of making mistakes are negligible ...
>
> The Rani had made a mistake, but her freedom, the way out of her trouble, was within her own self ... When her sadhana of the dark chamber gets over, she goes out on the dusty streets to reach her lord of the dark chamber, and to offer her puja to Him in the palace of light ...
>
> In this play, on the one hand we have the Rani who dwells in her dark chamber, and on the other there is a thickly populated city revelling in the merriments of the spring festival. Sudarshana is in her dark chamber. First, she must realise/ understand her Raja in this chamber, only then would she be able to perceive Him in the light of the outside world.[119]

Despite such detailed explanations, many later critics continued to confuse and be confused regarding the connotations of the play and its symbols. Ashutosh Bhattacharya, for instance, by way of commenting on Sudarshana's journey from the dark room to the outside world of light, goes to the extent of drawing a parallel with one's "passage from mortality to the realm of eternity"[120]. Of course, as discussed in an earlier chapter, one of the layers of the symbolism of the invisible Raja does take us to Tagore's idea of death, but this does not suggest that the dark chamber in the play merely and only stands for death and mortality. From the somewhat enigmatic verbal exchange (among the Raja, Sudarshana, and Surangama)[121] with which the play opens, we learn that the intense darkness of the Raja's chamber is juxtaposed against the world

---

[119] Tagore's essay, "*Rājā Nātaker Ālochanā*", came out in the *Sāntiniketan Patrikā* (Sravan 1332). Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 10, 65-66. Translation mine?
[120] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 10, 107.
[121] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 745.

of myriad objects visible in light, the world where plants and animals, trees and mountains can be seen with the eyes. In other words, the dark chamber, far from being a mere symbol of mortality, is the "interior secret chamber[122] where He comes Himself and summons"[123].

In a lecture titled "*Nitya Dhām*" (literally, "The Eternal Abode") delivered at Santiniketan in 1909, Tagore says:

> Where can we see and perceive that Bliss of Brahman? It is to be found within the interior of the soul. For once see the soul in your interior chamber, in its own eternal abode. Perceive it, realise it in your innermost secret cave[124] where the soul is beyond the realm of all external emotions of happiness and sadness, and where it is beyond all the dazzling restlessness of samsara ... You will be able to realise the Bliss of Brahman in your own heart, in your own soul, if you enter into that private chamber where the eternal union of love takes place.[125]

The crux of this idea is lyrically packed into the last line of the song "I sit here with all that I own", a song that appears in both *Rājā* and *Arūp Ratan*: "My mind's drowned in the secret love/ Of that intense, dark depth."[126]

This brings us to the respected scholar Pramathanath Bisi's understanding of the dark room. For him it stands for "a phase of sadhana" for which "solitude or privacy is a pre-requisite."[127] So far this appears quite convincing and acceptable; but then Bisi stretches the interpretation to the tale of Siddhartha, his meditation on the bank of the

---

[122] According to a theatre critic of New York, whom Sankha Ghosh cites but leaves unnamed, this play may be seen an attempt to "reconcile man to himself." Sankha Ghosh, *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra-Nātak* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2009), 102.
[123] From Tagore's Preface to *Arup Ratan*, translated by Lal, 269.
[124] In the original Bengali text, the word "*guha*" has been used, which also means "interior".
[125] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 7, 608-09. Translation mine.
[126] Translated by Lal, 312.
[127] Pramathanath Bisi, *Rabindra Nātya Prabāha* (Kolkata: Orient Book Company, 2014), 197.

river Nairanjana and the temptations of Mara.[128] Although the tale can be fitted into the allegorical Buddhist source of the play, it must be clarified that the spiritual journey of Sudarshana is nothing akin to the Buddhist pursuit of Nirvana, literally "to be extinguished or blown out". What is more, although words like solitude, darkness, cave and sadhana, which I am repeatedly using in this discussion, might tempt us to read them along the lines of the sadhana of the sanyasi in *Prakritir Pratishodh*, in actuality the dark chamber of the Raja has nothing in common with the dark cave of the earlier play. In other words, I suggest that Sudarshana's sadhana of darkness is not one that demands a renunciation of this physical world, but attempts to perceive the Truth/ the Formless that is within and beyond all worldly physical forms, an idea that I have already analysed in section 3.1 of this dissertation. Her journey is towards the light that "springs from the source of darkness itself".[129]

However, the understanding of darkness in this play does not end here. Tagore uses the concept and image of darkness here in two senses. This is most effectively captured in the following song:

> Drown this darkness of mine within your depthless darkness,
>
> O Lord of darkness!
>
> Come, tIntense One, Deep One
>
> On the shore of my life!
>
> Come down into my soul!

[128] Mara is the Buddhist lord of the senses. He "was the Buddha's tempter on several occasions." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Mara", https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mara-Buddhist-demon, accessed on 21.04.2023.
[129] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 6, 223. Translation mine.

Let this body, this mind, be faded, be lost,

O Lord of darkness.

May my desires, my longings, my distortions

Stop at those feet of yours.

My evil desires have kept me in exile,

O Lord of Darkness!

With all ties bind me to you.

Oh, I am desirous of shackles!

O Lord of darkness,

You are my beloved, you are the Benevolent One,

You are the Supreme!

Let the all-pervading finality come

And let this I of mine be destroyed.[130]

The paronomasia used in the first line of the song is quite evocative. The word "darkness" has been used twice, but with different connotations. As is evident from the song itself, the first "darkness" refers to the distortions of desires, shackles of longings and barriers of pride and vanity. This is what Tagore in another song of *Arūp Ratan* ("The darkness hasn't still gone") calls one's "own shadow [that]/ Creates so much maya."[131] This is redolent of the sense of darkness evoked in many of the Upanishadic mantras, including the famous one – "I [Rishi Svetasvatara] have realised this Great

[130] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 784-85. Translation mine.
[131] Translated by Lal, 308.

Being who shines effulgent like the sun beyond all darkness"[132] – that Tagore quotes in many of his essays and lectures. For Tagore, in order to transcend this darkness of ignorance, one must drown his/her eyes/vision within the depthless darkness of "the formless-*rasa*-ocean", "the shoreless nectar-sea."[133] At the end of the play (and her journey) it is the Lord of this darkness to whom Sudarshana offers her *pranām* before moving outside, into the realm of light:

> Raja: I'll open wide the door of this dark room today – the game here is over. Come, now come with me, come move outside – into the light.
>
> Sudarshana: Before going, I must *pranām* my lord of darkness, my cruel one, my terrible one.[134]

This brings me to the treatment of light, which, like that of darkness, is complex and multi-layered. The play opens[135] with Sudarshana's desperate cry of "Light, where is light?"[136] In her description of the 1964 Bohurupee production of *Rājā*, Shaoli Mitra[137] comments on the theatrical unconventionality of the play and observes that this

---

[132] Darkness "stands for ignorance which is the cause of Samsara", *Svetasvataropanisad*, edited and translated by Swami Tyagisananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1949), 66-67.
[133] Translated by Lal, 273.
[134] Translated by Lal, 318.
[135] "What has been identified as the earliest draft is manuscript 143 at the Rabindra Bhavana archives at Santiniketan. Recent textual scholarship has revealed that '(t)he complexity of textual changes in ms 143 is such that at places one can find four to five different layers of deletion and insertion. The restlessness in the process of creation revealed through these changes suggests that this manuscript is the first draft.' Yet, this first draft (ms 143) was Rabindranath as theatre-practitioner quickly revised, and the revised version has been identified as ms 148 (also available in Rabindra Bhavana archives). A major change was the transposition of the order of the first two scenes: the first draft (ms 143) begins with the Dark Chamber, while Thakurda, with his followers, appears in the second scene; in the second draft (ms 148), the order has been reversed, so that Thakurda comes in the first scene and the Dark Chamber becomes the second scene. The revised version (identified as ms 148) went into print in 1911, being published on 6 January 1911 in Calcutta by the Indian Publishing House, the Calcutta branch of the Indian Press, Allahabad. However, he went back to the earlier draft and incorporated elements from the first manuscript – in particular, he transposed the order of the first two scenes (having reversed them once already from the first to the second draft). With the original scene order (of ms 143) restored (so, the first scene was the Dark Chamber; the second scene had Thakurda's entry with his followers), this later revised version became the text for the second edition that appeared in print first in Kavyagrantha, volume IX, in 1916, from Indian Press, Allahabad." Sen, 104-5.
[136] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 745. Translation mine.
[137] Mitra, 3.

is not only the cry of Sudarshana, but also of the audience, for indeed the opening scene,[138] according to the stage direction of the playwright, is literally set in "a dark chamber". For Sudarshana, it is a cry for light that enables the sensual experience of physical vision that illuminates the pleasure grove, the Rani's chamber, where even the lowest among the Raja's servants seem "more beautiful"[139] to the eyes than him. To establish this observation of mine, I cite a dialogue between Sudarshana and Surangama that appears right at the beginning:

> Surangama: This room is at the core of the world ... The Raja has built it specifically for you.
>
> Sudarshana: Why? There is no dearth of rooms! What was the need of creating this specific dark room?
>
> Surangama: Everybody can come and go into the rooms of light. His union with you takes place in the solitude of this darkness.
>
> Sudarshana: No, no, I want light! For light I am restless. I shall give you this necklace of mine if you can bring light here.[140]

Clearly, "the rooms of light" that can be accessed by one and sundry stand for dreary convenience, mundane inanity, desperate restlessness, and the mere "curiosity"[141] of the physical eye.

What is more, when Sudarshana expresses her desire to get light in exchange for her necklace, we understand that the light she wants is only the light of the material

---

[138] The eighth and the final scenes are also set in the dark chamber.
[139] Translated by Lal, 318.
[140] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 745. Translation mine.
[141] Translated by Lal, 279-280.

world, the light that can make *suvarna*[142] dazzle. The experience of seeing in such a light of impatience and desperation is bound to result in mistakes; and Sudarshana makes her mistake when she, in "the intoxicating light of the full moon that overflows like the froth of alcohol"[143], assumes the handsome impostor, a delusion, to be her Raja: "The full-moon night is filled with the desperate thirst caused by *adarshan*,[144] and it conjures pathetic scenes of delusion."[145]

This is but one aspect of light in the play. Sudarshana, having traversed her path of sorrow lit by the flaming "flash of lightning"[146], transcends the light of delusion and the darkness of ignorance, and at the end realises the light of Truth and Bliss:

> The darkness that I had,
>
> You made it disappear,
>
> Your love came in the form of fire
>
> Illuminating it.[147]

Before moving on to the fire imagery in the play, without a discussion of which the analysis of light and darkness in *Rājā*/ *Arūp Ratan* would remain incomplete, I wish to fleetingly mention that in *Sāpmochan* too we find this movement from the "scorching"[148] light of desire and curiosity to the illumination of "the lamp of the soul"[149]. While the former makes Aruneshvar appear ugly to Kamalika, the latter makes him beautiful; and of course, it is implied that what lights up this lamp of the soul is the

---

[142] Suvarna is the name of the handsome impostor, but it also means gold.
[143] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 766. Translation mine.
[144] 'Darshan' means seeing and also knowledge. The prefix 'a' suggests negation, lack or absence. Here, "*adarshan*" signifies lack of physical visibility and also absence of knowledge.
[145] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 766. Translation mine.
[146] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 975. Translation mine.
[147] Translated by Lal, 314.
[148] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 551. Translation mine.
[149] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 547. Translation mine.

fire of "sorrow"[150]. What is more, keeping in mind the dramaturgical experimentation that Tagore was embarking on with this dance-drama, light has significances which are restricted not merely to the theme/content of the play, but also to its form, its performative dimension – aspects which I have already discussed in section 3.4 of this dissertation.

Now I turn to the idea of fire in *Rājā*. On the surface level, fire has an important role in its narrative. It is right in the middle of the conflagration that Sudarshana's mistake is corrected and her desire to "see" the Raja is fulfilled; and she finds him "terrible". In fear, disgust and shame she exclaims, "Terrible, it's terrible. I am afraid to even remember it. Black, black ...".[151] After this she abandons her Raja and goes back to her father's kingdom. Here we find an echo of the original Buddhist tale:

> On one occasion when walking in the royal park she fled from him as from a monster.
>
> But in a short time, her mistake was corrected. At a great conflagration of the city the elephant park was saved, simply by the activity of the king [Kusa]. ... Sudarsana then found out her error. She learned, to her great surprise and grief, that the monster at the park was her real husband. She instantly begged the permission of her mother-in-law to proceed to Kanyakubja [her father's kingdom].[152]

However, the significance of fire in the play is obviously not confined only to its role in the plot or the narrative, but is extended to form a symbolic matrix of multiple layers. When Sudarshana says, "My shame like this fire has come with me. It has reddened my

[150] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 2, 544. Translation mine.
[151] Translated by Lal, 301.
[152] Quoted by Lal, 266.

eyes, my face and my whole heart ... I have been intoxicated by the beauty of forms. I won't get rid of this intoxication. It has set my eyes ablaze. My dreams are also dazzling ...",[153] fire stands for her lust, her inordinate desire for sensual and physical beauty, and the intense sense of shame and frustration that accompanies them. But the conflagration that burns down all her false ideations about the Raja, and that shows/reveals the harsh truth, stands for the flames of sorrow, the sadhana of pain and suffering through which one must pass in order to emerge purified, freed, and illuminated.[154]

Here the words of Vimala in Tagore's novel *Ghare Bāire* (1916) can be anticipated, for they might have been the utterance of Sudarshana as well: "I have passed through fire, and emerged out of it. All that was perishable in me has burnt down to ashes. Whatever remains is beyond death and destruction. I offer that indestructible self of mine to the feet of that One who has received all my mistakes, all my faults in His deep and intense feelings."[155]

The complex journey of *Rājā* from darkness to light may be succinctly summarised in two images, which would also serve to offer a visual depiction of the abstract idea of the inner drama of the human soul. The play begins with the description of an evening melting into night: "The ferrying of the light is done/ Across the sunset sea ... And all the paths that crossed the world/ In darkness have been lost."[156] But when the play ends it is dawn[157]: "The night becomes the dawn, the path comes to an end./ Listen to every region raise the song of light ... Shed are the shame and fears,/ Vanity is destroyed."[158]

---

[153] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1, 773-74. Translation mine.
[154] The crux of this idea is captured through a series of fire metaphors in the song "All is fiery, caused by fire" in *Arūp Ratan*. Translated by Lal, 300.
[155] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanavāli*, Vol. 4, 591.
[156] Translated by Lal, 278.
[157] However, the time covered in the narrative of the play is not that of a single night breaking into dawn.
[158] Translated by Lal, 317.

Again, in *Achalāyatan* (1911) we see a journey, to be specific a transcendence, from darkness to light. The closed doors and windows of the institution of inertness and the inhumanity of the *mahātāmas vrata*, literally "the vow of extreme darkness" (about which we learn in the very first scene of the play), signify the prison of inane scriptural dicta, the immobility of hackneyed traditions and dreary, dead habits, and the cruelty of irrational rituals. The fact that social evils in the name of religious practices thrive to occlude vision and always assume the form of oppression and violence, has been poignantly depicted by Tagore through the usage of a contrast of light and darkness in the following conversation:

> Upadhyay: Acharyadev, Shubhadra has opened the institution's window in the north and looked outside.
>
> Acharya: Oh, but the north belongs to the goddess Ekjata.
>
> Upadhyay: Exactly! And that is what worries us. One can never say how far the wind from that direction has polluted and desecrated the closed, sanctified[159] air of our institution.
>
> Upacharya: Now the question is – what is the penance for this sin?
>
> Acharya: Well, I can't recall any ... Perhaps Upadhyay might …
>
> Upadhyay: I can't either. For three hundred years the need for this penance never arose. We all have completely forgotten it. There comes Mahapanchak – if anybody in this institution knows it, it is surely he.
>
> (Enter Mahapanchak)

[159] In the original Bengali text, the word "*mantra-puta*" has been used, which literally means purified or sanctified by mantras.

Upadhyay: Mahapanchak, I reckon you have heard everything.

Mahapanchak: Yes, that is why I have come. Now we all stand impure. The wind from outside has entered into our institution.

Upacharya: None of us remember the penance for this sin. We believe you alone can tell us.

Mahapanchak: Nothing about this has been mentioned in *Kriyakalpataru*. Only in Bhagavan Jananta's *Adhikarmik Barshāyan* it has been stated that the sinner must observe the vow of extreme darkness for six months.

Upacharya: The vow of extreme darkness?

Mahapanchak: Oh yes, he must not be allowed to see even a single ray of light, because the sin that has been committed in light must be expiated through darkness.[160]

However, towards the end of the play we see that this stifling deadly darkness is transcended. The guru with his troupe of Shonpanshus having demolished all the doors and windows, and the walls of stone of the institution, bring in a flood of light that stands for the forces of freedom, life, happiness, openness and beauty. It is significant to mark that the Sanskrit word "guru" is etymologically derived from the two components *gu* ("darkness" of ignorance) and *ru* ("to push/drive away").[161] Therefore the song goes:

Light, my light.

[160] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 811. Translation mine.
[161] *Shri Guru Gita*, edited and annotated by Shri Vrajavallabha Dvivedi (Varanasi: Shaiva Bharati Shodha Pratishthanam, 1999), 30.

Oh, the world is filled with light.

Light that bathes my eyes,

Light that steals my heart.

O bhai, light dances in my soul.

O bhai, light produces melodies from the vina of this heart.

The sky wakes up, the breeze blows,

The whole world smiles ...

Thousands of butterflies have hoisted their sails

On the stream of light.

The waves of light

Make the flowers *mallikā* and *mālati*[162] dance ...[163]

At the end, the metaphor of light is further extended to the connotations of creation, action and union. We heari the guru giving his final order to the Shonpanshus and the dwellers of the institution of Achalayatan: "Make the white foundation of the new sky-scraping mansion stand in the light of the sky. The two groups must get united and start working."[164] Understandably, this is the conventional pattern of the metaphors of light and darkness. However, what makes their treatment in this play unique is not the simplistic/linear transcendence from the negativities of darkness to the positive associations of light as a life force, but the way in which Tagore resolves the dichotomy between the two, which are essentially complementary. In Scene 2, Dadathakur, by way

[162] Significantly, both are white flowers.
[163] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 836. Translation mine.
[164] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 846. Translation mine.

of explaining the nature of his Friend, tells Panchak: "The child that has no confidence cries in the dark for its mother when it finds the bed empty; and the child who has confidence just stretches its hands and finds her to its heart's content. Then the darkness of fear becomes more intensely sweet. If the mother asks him, 'Do you want the light?', the child says, 'Light and darkness are the same if you are near me."[165] This exact sentiment is echoed in a Tagore song where he writes, "I am in love with both your light and darkness."[166]

Next, I come to *Dākghar* (1912) which is set against the backdrop of autumn, and is replete with multiple mentions of the breeze and sunlight of *sharat*. These, obviously signifying freedom of the outside world, are deliberately pitted against the confined condition of Amal, the ailing child who, on the surface level, is moving towards his death. Since the significance of light in the context of autumn has already been discussed in detail earlier, I directly move to the ending, where the treatment of light and darkness is somewhat different from what we have seen so far. For the sake of convenience let us focus on the following sections:

> (a) Amal: I believe by now it's already the fourth *prahar*.[167] There goes the bell – dong, dong, dong – dong dong dong. Fakir, is the evening star up? Why can't I see?
>
> Thakurda: They have shut the windows. I'll open them.[168]
>
> (b) Royal Physician: What's this! It's all closed here! Open, open – open all the doors and windows. (Touching Amal's body) Baba[169], how do you feel now?

[165] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 820. Translation mine.
[166] Tagore, *Gitabitān* (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 2002), 64. Translation mine.
[167] A unit of time, or subdivision of the day, approximately three hours long.
[168] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 864. Translation mine.
[169] Literally means "father", but can also be used to refer to someone dear or respectable.

> Amal: I feel very well, very well, *Kavirāj mashāi*![170] ... I am no longer sick. All my pains are gone. Ah! All doors and windows have been opened! I can see all the stars – all the stars twinkling from the other side of the darkness.
>
> Royal Physician: Will you be able to leave your bed and go out with the Raja when he comes in the midnight?
>
> Amal: Yes, I will be able to ... ! I am desperately waiting to go out! I shall request the Raja to show me the pole-star. I believe I have often seen that star, but I do not know exactly which one it is!
>
> Royal Physician: He will let you know everything.[171]
>
> (c) Royal Physician: Now all of you calm down. Comes, sleep comes over him. I'll sit near the head of the child. He falls asleep! Extinguish the light of the earthen lamp! Now let the light of the star come in. He has fallen asleep.
>
> Madhav Datta (to Thakurda): Thakurda, why do you stand still like a statue with your palms joined? I feel afraid! Are all these that I see signs of anything good? Why are they making my room dark! How will the starlight be of any use to me?
>
> Thakurda: Be quiet, you unbeliever! Do not talk![172]

Of course, the closed doors and windows signify the internal and external forces which work to keep the soul confined. Amal, who has heard the call of the "open road", the "far", languishes in the closed room. However, what particularly draws our attention in the afore-cited sections is the usage of the symbol of the pole-star, *Dhruva-tāra*. The

---

[170] "*Kaviraj*" means Ayurvedic practitioner or physician, and "*mashāi*" is derived from *mahāshay*, used to address someone very respectable.
[171] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 864. Translation mine.
[172] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 865. Translation mine.

Sanskrit word *dhruva* means constant, permanent, eternal. We ought to remember that in Vedantic philosophy these very same adjectives are used to describe Brahman, the Supreme, the Absolute Godhead who is always already present. It is the Raja (of the dark night) who, as informed by the Royal Physician, would show Amal the pole-star, for although he has often seen it, he does not exactly know which one it is. The Truth that is immanent is not easily perceptible; it requires an internal spiritual journey, an insight, a sadhana to realise it. Pitted against the pole-star is the light of the earthen lamp which the Royal Physician wants to be extinguished. The mundane, limited, empirical understanding of reality, the 'puny I' symbolised by the limited light of the earth/en lamp, need to be transcended in order to realise the Vast, the Atman that is nothing but Brahman. I refer to an image of the lamp used in *Rājā*, which may serve to substantiate this interpretation:

> A strike hurts the fragment of the Raja that is present in an individual subject; but the One who is beyond all fragments remains untouched. The energy of the sun that is present in the light of the lamp cannot endure even a soft blow of wind; but even if a thousand men together blow wind at the sun, it remains effulgent as ever.[173]

Admittedly, in several of the subsequent plays the conventional binaristic negative-positive pattern of light and darkness continues to be deployed, and some of them may be fleetingly touched upon before we move on to the detailed discussion of *Tapati*, where Tagore's treatment of light and darkness again takes a novel turn. For instance, in *Phālguni* (1915) the metaphor of the darkness of evening and night evinces

[173] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 754. Translation mine.

a sense of fear, sluggishness, despair, and doubt whereas dawn and morning are related with the spirit of rejuvenation, revelation, hope, and victory over distress:

(a) The day has passed. O bhai, the day has passed.

Let me be frank, as the day passes, fear creeps into the soul.

It feels that we have done some mistake.

The light of dawn whispered into my ears, "Bravo! Go ahead!" The light of dusk is making fun of us.

Probably we are deceived.

Gradually we are becoming respectful of our Dada's quatrains.[174]

Indeed, I am worried that even we might quite soon sit down to compose such quatrains.

And everybody in our neighbourhood would surround us.

And these quatrains would cause such terrible welfare that we would not move a bit.

We, like the rocks, like the cold night, would sit still and stagnant.

And they would gather around us like thick mist.[175]

(b) Oh, victory shall come, victory shall come, victory shall come!

O Valiant One, O Fearless One!

Victorious is life, the eternal life,

[174] "*Chaupadi*" refers to a four-lined verse. Dada's quatrains in *Phālguni* are replete with preachy pedantic messages, which are contrasted against the joyous vibrancy of the young band of boys.
[175] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 899-900. Translation mine.

Oh, victorious is the song of bliss,

Victorious is love and forgiveness,

Oh, victorious is the Effulgent One!

Oh, this darkness shall be destroyed,

O Valiant One, O Fearless One!

Sweep away your slumber, open your eyes.

Let distress be sent far away,

Oh, let the radiance of the dawn of hope be awakened.[176]

Similarly, *Muktadhārā* (1922), the actions of which are set against the backdrop of the stifled light of sunset and the ominous darkness of evening and night, is, as described by Kumar Roy (the famous theatre director), "a play about the tearing of the heart of darkness."[177]Abhijit, the crown prince, its protagonist, is the symbol of light and, by extension, of life force and freedom. Given the political environment of India in which the play was composed, he also stands for revolt and breaking of prisons. Again, in *Rakta-karavi* (1924), phrases like "the dark lid ... [of the] tunnels"[178], "a town eclipsed"[179], "the curse of a blind *rākshas*"[180], and "[the] hopeless lightless belly"[181] are used to refer to the debilitating hopelessness, inhuman torture and exploitation, and lifeless existence in the city of Yakshapuri (run by the sinister forces of organised power); and Nandini, on the contrary, is the symbol of life, love, natural beauty, hope,

[176] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 910. Translation mine.
[177] Quoted in Anuttam Bhattacharya, *Rabindra Rachanāvidhan,* Vol. 10, 416.
[178] Translated by Lal, 136.
[179] Translated by Lal, 138.
[180] Translated by Lal, 141.
[181] Translated by Lal, 148.

freedom, resistance, and reawakening. She has been described as "[a] sudden flash of light"[182], "a torch of red light"[183], "red fire"[184], and "[the] fire of Lord Indra"[185]. In passing it may be noted that the colour red is often associated by Tagore with death. For instance, in a poem collected in *Utsarga*, this association is most overt:

> Won't the banks of the river open their red eyes
>
> In the light of your torch, O Death, my Death ...
>
> I shall not return in baseless fear,
>
> I shall silently cross the red waters of that great shower,
>
> O Death, my Death.[186]

The title of *Rakta-karavi* is just as explicit: *rakta* means "blood", hence here, "blood-red".

Skipping towards the end of Tagore's literary career when he invents a new art form of dance-drama, we see the continued usage of the conventional light-darkness binary. *Sāpmochan* and *Chitrāngadā* have already been discussed in detail; and it might now suffice to briefly touch upon *Chandālikā* (1933)[187]. The low-caste girl Prakriti desires Ananda, the Buddhist monk who, disregarding the "black rock"[188] of caste discrimination, treats her as a human being with inherent dignity and worthy of respect. In order to get him, whose person, according to Prakriti herself, is made of "the bright

---

[182] Translated by Lal, 136.
[183] Translated by Lal, 139.
[184] Translated by Lal, 160.
[185] Translated by Lal, 172.
[186] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 5, 123. Translation mine.
[187] The prose play dates from 1933. The dance-drama version was published in 1938.
[188] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 748. Translation mine.

light of dawn"[189], she urges her mother[190] to use her "infernal"[191] power of dark arts. Ananda's external journey through the paths of fiery pain and dark ignominy, lit by flashes of lightning[192], is paralleled by Prakriti's internal/psychological[193] journey at the end of which she reaches the "morning"[194] of repentance, realisation and truth.[195]

Finally, we come to *Tapati* (1929), which according to Tagore himself, is "a difficult play", although "beautiful in all aspects".[196] It is a completely reworked version of his nineteenth-century five-act verse tragedy *Rājā o Rāni* (1889), where conflict between love and duty is the central theme. In his preface to *Tapati*, by way of explaining the reasons behind his revisioning of the composition of his younger years, Tagore phrases the theme in a slightly different manner:

> There is strife within the relationship between Sumitra and Vikram – that strife is terminated by Sumitra's death. Vikram's severe addiction, which was hindered from possessing Sumitra completely, came to a conclusion with Sumitra's death; only within that peace was it possible for Vikram to truly appreciate Sumitra; this indeed was the basic theme of *Rājā o Rāni*.
>
> Due to faults in composition this idea was not obvious.[197]

We need to note that these faults in composition that he undertook to rectify in *Tapati* are not restricted only to the content, but also encompass its form and presentation. Since any comprehensive comparative analysis of the two plays is beyond the scope of

---

[189] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 615. Translation mine.
[190] In the dance drama she is, significantly enough, named Maya.
[191] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 752. Translation mine.
[192] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 751. Translation mine.
[193] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 959. Translation mine.
[194] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 626. Translation mine.
[195] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 2, 618. Translation mine.
[196] Quoted in Lal, 53.
[197] Translated by Lal, 193.

my dissertation, I shall limit the discussion to the aspects concerning the visual politics and particularly the treatment of light and darkness in them.

To begin, I wish to pay some attention to the idea of the stage which Tagore himself highlights in his preface to *Tapati*. While *Rājā o Rāni* was a product of the pre-"*Rangamancha*"[198] phase of Tagore's career as a theatrician, *Tapati* encapsulates his twentieth-century avant-garde ideas about theatre. In fact, by way of explaining his views on "the arrangements of the stage", Tagore in the prefatory note provides a summary of the essay "*Rangamancha*", reiterates his aversion to the inanity of the usage of concrete scenery in the name of realism, and expresses his reliance on the creative faculties of authors and the power of imagination of the spectators. In other words, he retells the journey of his own evolution from realism to symbolism and suggestion in stage decor. In his essay "*Rup o Arup*", he writes:

> Bliss finds itself expressed outside through beauty; and here lies the pride and worth of beauty. Man sees his own blissful self expressed in his creations of beauty. This is why man is so deeply in love with art and poetry. If man, instead of seeing his own self expressed in art and literature, had seen only the external forms of beauty, then art and literature would have been completely meaningless for him. It is because of this that suggestiveness is valued so highly in art and literature. Since the forms of beauty through this suggestiveness renounce their absolute overtness and explicitness, and diffuse themselves into

[198] '*Rangamancha*" is a crucial essay, published in 1902, and marks a turning point in Tagore's career as a theatrician. In it he expounded his new ideas about the stage, significantly different from the practice of mindless realistic imitation that pervaded the Bengali theatre, a practice that even Tagore had followed in many of his nineteenth-century works, including *Rājā o Rāni*.

> the vast, the imperceptible, they do not obstruct the free movement of man's heart.[199]

Although in the decade following the appearance of *Tapati*, Tagore would mainly engage himself in experimenting with dance-drama, a form that is more obviously dependent on the visuals and the act of seeing, he does continue to deploy the tool of suggestiveness through his exquisite music and lyrics as widely as before. Anything that through its overt/excessive presence restricts/confines and deludes man's vision and diverts him from truth is rejected and even attacked by Tagore, and this is true in every sphere of his expression, be it artistic, philosophical or personal. Expectedly, this idea is also reflected in the theme of *Rājā o Rāni*/*Tapati*. It is Raja Vikram's addiction, his infatuation/excessive attachment to Rani Sumitra, which diverts him from the path of true and beneficent love and takes him away from his true self and his duties as a king, thereby causing the final catastrophe. Let us see how these plays, through the usage of the imagery of light (and darkness) unravel this idea..

In Act I Scene III of *Rājā o Rāni* the crux of the conflict is depicted, rather deftly, through the images of light and darkness:

> (a) Vikram: Dear, slowly comes the silent, enchanting evening in this bower, like a shy and timid bride. The adventing night, extending its endless darkness, is trying to engulf this golden hue. Just like that, I am standing here with my heart and soul extended, to drink that smile, beauty and light of yours.
>
> With your golden feet, come down from the bank of daylight into the ocean of night of this unbounded heart.[200]

---

[199] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 9, 523-34. Translation mine.
[200] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 178-179. Translation mine.

(b) Vikram: Alas, dear! why do those days of pleasure today seem like dreams?

I remember that first moment of our union –

The first rays of love ...

That trembling of the heart with the advent of night ...

Smiles appearing and disappearing on lips like the dim, shivering lamp flame touched by the gentle evening breeze ...

The moon gleefully smiling in the sky;

The stars witnessing the scene secretly from behind the window ... At that time where were your household chores and my worldly worries?[201]

(c) Sumitra: Hearing this I die of shame. *Chhi chhi*, Maharaja, is this love?

This, like clouds, has kept your bright, mid-day glory concealed.[202]

While Vikram, abandoning his court and kingly duties, wallows in his bower of pleasure, in the fantastical images of night and the enchantments of moonlight and darkness, which, in this context, evidently connote unreasonable infatuation, pleasure and lust, Sumitra is an embodiment of the light of benevolence and reason, and the reminder of his royal duties. In the name of love, Vikram wants to possess Sumitra and bind her with his shackles of obsessive desire, and she attempts to bring him out into the world of light, duties and work, where her union with him is pending. Although this night and day imagery is quite effectively deployed in the mentioned scene, it needs to be admitted that its potential does not get explored any further in the rest of the play. However, when Tagore recasts it into *Tapati*, light become the central motif.

[201] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 179. Translation mine.
[202] Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha,* Vol. 1, 180. Translation mine.

In the revised text we note that the conflict between obsessive love and benevolent truth is depicted through (and paralleled with) a conflict between the worships of Minaketu[203] and Rudra-Bhairav.[204] In the play, while Minaketu or Makar-ketan and his associations with moonlight,[205] pleasure groves and spring symbolize illusion, enchantment and fatuous lust, Bhairav and Martanda[206] with their "darkness-cleaving"[207] weapons are explicitly associated with the radiance of truth, purity and courage. What is more, in the play they are virtually synonymous – in Jalandhar he is Bhairav, in Kashmir he is the Sun.[208] Vikram, who intends to replace the worship of Bhairav with that of Minaketu, has kept his "complete appearance, his raj-dharma," and "strength covered in [the] darkness"[209] of distorted love. On the contrary, Sumitra (who is described by Vipasha as the "radiant one")[210] with her uprightness of character symbolizes the brightness of truth, dharma and benevolence. She as Tapati,[211] the worshipper of the Sun-god in the shrine to Martanda, chants the Vedic mantra towards the end of the play, "May Surya's rising, radiant rays today/ Rescue and guard us from sins, blameful deeds",[212] thereby making her association with immaculate light and

[203] Literally "'Fish-bannered', a name of the god of love, Kama, whose flag bears the emblem of the *makar* fish." Lal, 348.
[204] "Rudra, 'The Roarer', was originally the Vedic god of storms, closely associated with Indra and Agni, and later identified with Kala (Time). He was depicted as a terrible destroyer but also had the epithet *siva*, 'benevolent', which in course of time became another name for him, as he gradually lost his link with storms. By the time of the later mythology Rudra had turned into one of Siva's eight commonly recognised forms. Rudra was also associated with fire". Lal, 348. "Bhairav is the name of Siva in his fearsome aspect as the Destroyer. Siva's violent traits are said to be emphasised in this manifestation." Lal, 348.
[205] According to the order of Raja Vikram, a puja to the god Makar-ketan (another name for Kama) would take place in the garden of saffron at the moment of moonrise on "the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight in Phalgun." Translated by Lal, 210.
[206] "Martanda specifically identifies the rising sun (the sun has different phases, each originally personified as a deity). But in general use nowadays the name has become synonymous with the sun." Lal, 354.
[207] Translated by Lal, 228.
[208] Lal, 228.
[209] Translated by Lal, 202.
[210] Translated by Lal, 245.
[211] Lal, in his Introduction to the play, draws our attention to the mythological story of Tapati, the daughter of Surya the Sun-god, in the "Chaitraratha Parva" of the *Adi Parva* in the *Mahābhārata*. Lal, 189.
[212] Translated by Lal, 261. This mantra has been quoted verbatim by Tagore from the *Rigveda*.

moral strength most conspicuous. She, with the effulgence of her character, her presence, counters Vikram's shameful demeanour as a king and his addiction, which he delusively calls his love. Thus, what in the nineteenth-century drama was a mere metaphorical embellishment, a purely lyrical exchange, in the twentieth-century play becomes the central conflict, the sustaining motif around which the narrative revolves.

However, in *Tapati*, the most impactful usage of light appears when Sumitra, through her concluding act of self-immolation, registers her ultimate resistance to Vikram's violent, all-engulfing lust and ruthless selfishness. Having failed to bring the king, possessed by "the intoxication of sin",[213] back to the path of dharma, benevolence and light, the Rani, for the welfare of her subjects, and precisely to rescue them from the depravities of Vikram, embraces death by fire. She knows that Vikram, witnessing this self-sacrifice as he enters to capture her, will be shocked out of the dark force of his passion. By offering herself to fire, she merges her energy with the "supreme energy"[214] of Rudra/Martanda, thereby transforming herself from being a symbol of light/ effulgence into its very 'embodiment'. It may be asserted without hesitation that this immensely tragic, unrelentingly powerful and decisively political ending of *Tapati* forms a spectacular climax to the trajectory of Tagore's treatment of the theme, imagery and visualisation of light in his twentieth-century plays.

Thus, in the plays considered in this section, Tagore does not limit himself to the exploration of the metaphorical potential of light and darkness, but proceeds to experiment with their ocular possibilities to give shape to his avant-garde ideas about theatre and visuality. While some of these experimentations are based on familiar premises, others resist all kinds of expected associations of light and darkness. When

[213] Lal 258.
[214] Lal, 260.

we as readers and spectators engage with these plays through the lens of light and darkness, we end up discovering experiences and meanings which are novel and fresh, not only in literary traditions but also in the performing arts.

From this chapter we conclude that Tagore, in his plays, by thematically, linguistically, and theatrically moving through the vertices of light and darkness, attempted to arrive at a holistic realisation of the two mediums of visual experience. For him these two were not signifiers conventionally and conveniently fixed for mutually exclusive sets of ideas. In fact, in his worldview the concepts of light and darkness which (as mentioned explicitly in his song "The light that springs from the source of darkness is yours")[215] have a common source, are complementary in nature. For him the exclusion of either of the two is bound to lead to incompleteness and error; and therefore, his idea of the 'whole', instead of undermining its constituents, pays equal respect to all of them. In short, his navigation through the apparent dialectics of light and darkness was aimed at an inclusive and syncretic realisation of vision and life.

[215] Tagore, from "*Andhakārer utsa hate*", *Gitabitān,* 128.

Conclusion

Looking back at Tagore's oeuvre, one is compelled to note and recognize his deep interest in the various aspects of seeing, vision and visuality. This dissertation was aimed at tracing the evolution of his complex and multifaceted engagements/negotiations with the politics of sight and visibility in his dramatic works, which he expressed astutely and at times even quite radically, both on page and stage, although my primary focus has been on the former. His experimentations with the ocular expression in the printed texts of his plays have not remained merely confined to the usage of figurative language and imagery, but have also (and perhaps more significantly) been extended to the delineation of his ideas of love, conjugality, dharma, religion, politics, community reconstruction, freedom, spirituality, protest, and the natural world. We have noted that Tagore, being a perceptive theatrician, kept readjusting his concepts of sight and visibility to suit the evolution of these ideas, of which many of his plays are the vehicle.

During the first part of his playwriting career, the pre-Santiniketan period, he worked mostly within the contemporary dramatic and theatrical conventions, thereby adhering to the established norms of visual associations. However, even while staying within the limits of structured expectations he did not fail to try its boundaries. But it is particularly in the twentieth century (when he got the practical chance to revise his vision of theatre and implement it) that he emphatically challenged and reworked the existing dramatic norms and conventions of visual expression. In other words, his dealings with sight and visibility, which had begun by being comparatively

conventional, became increasingly experimental and radical as his career progressed. However, this evolution is not as convenient and straightforward as it may seem.

In our discussion on disguise we have seen that Tagore, who had started out by using an age-old dramatic tool in a somewhat conventional way, was quick to release it of its limited scope. In *Chitrāngadā* the idea of physical transformation was used to raise and address the complex (and even polemical) issues of beauty, conjugality and a woman's negotiations with her own identity. But this physical transformation remained at the level of a faint "idea"[1] in the verse drama (which was never staged by Tagore), and took its 'real', prominent, visual shape only in the much later form of the dance drama. As far as the usage of disguise in his comedies is concerned, we again mark a development: what in *Gorāy Galad* was a mere insignificant, comic element became in *Chirakumār Sabhā* a crucial political tool to comment on the contemporary 'widow question'. In the 'symbolic plays' of the twentieth century, the potential inherent in the element of disguise/physical transformation was further explored; and it emerged as an instrument to probe into a range of issues including leadership, kingship, freedom, education and spirituality. Thus, in his hands an overused, even cliched, dramatic tool was revived and imbued with a vital freshness which in turn 'unveiled' its latent political power. Moreover, disguise for Tagore was not a mere binaristic pairing of concealment and unveiling, but a context to visually address the question of 'identity'.

Again, in his dealings with blindness we have noted an evolution from the delineation of a comparatively simpler sketch of a blind character to the presentation of a figure symbolizing a set of complex artistic, political and philosophical ideas.

---

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), 327. Translation mine.

While in *Kāl-mrigayā* and *Gāndhārir Āvedan* Rabindranath's treatment of blindness largely adhered to their respective classical sources, by the time of *Dākghar* and *Phālguni* it was unprecedentedly original and fresh. But this is not to suggest that Tagore's blind rishi and Dhritarashtra are mere copies of their counterparts in the epics; rather, they carry prominent markers of his modern taste and idealistic purposes. What is more, his treatment of blindness did not remain restricted to the portrayal of a few physically blind characters, but also included his subtle metaphorical engagements with (in)sight and 'sight-lessness'. In *Gāndhārir Āvedan* he explored the idea of sight/vision also through characters who are not blind in the physical/sensual sense of the word, thereby examining its meanings from multiple angles. Also, while in *Dākghar* we do not have any visibly blind character, in *Phālguni* the onstage presence of the blind Baul is overtly visible. But what binds them together is their unconventional commentary on the idea of disability, which was quite different from the contemporary discourses endorsed by the colonial projects. In the case of the blind Baul and his usually black and white associations, Tagore's thoughts about disability merged with his theatrical and spiritual vision to produce a unique polychrome.

In our analysis of Tagore's experimentations with invisibility we have come across such theatrical instances which by virtue of their extraordinariness have compelled us to rethink the very meaning of the experience of 'seeing'. The invisibility in plays considered in the third chapter has not only upheld his unconventional vision of kingship, but has also 'shown' us his insight about man's relation with man and with divinity. His portrayal of invisibility and its astute juxtaposition with sites of visibleness have not remained static or confined within the limits of the practice of repetition, but have undergone various phases of expression.

From experimentations with an unseen character in *Rājā*, Tagore has moved on to explore the potentiality of characters 'absent-present' in *Achalāyatan* and *Dākghar*; and in his *Rakta-karavi* or *Sāpmochan* the binaristic understandings of the absolute categories of visible and invisible themselves are constantly challenged. But this journey through phases cannot be mapped on any track of linear progression of ideas; rather, it shows how tirelessly he kept on trying various avenues, thereby dis-covering them for future practices.

In the discussion of Tagore's negotiations with the concepts and visuals of light and darkness in the final chapter we have noted that he, right from the early phase of his dramatic career, refused to subscribe to their neat, convenient, positive-negative associations. To be specific, although at times he conformed to such simplistic expectations, most often these binaries were invoked only to be purposely ruptured. While in *Prakritir Pratisodh* we have (rather curiously) noted a simultaneous reinforcement and subversion of the conventional positive-negative alignment of light and darkness, in *Mālini* or *Rājā* the effects of chiaroscuro, if I may adopt the word from painting, are used to shape and propel the development of ideas which themselves are quite novel and experimental in the field of Bengali drama. In *Mālini*, light is used to verbally etch out the series of conflicts contained in the play, and in *Rājā* darkness is furthered to the extent of being used even to challenge the normative, sensual experience of theatrical seeing. The climax of the 'play' of light and dark is, of course, reached in *Tapati*, where the usage of metaphor and symbolism gives way to the embodiment of illumination.

Finally, Tagore's conception of ocular expressions has always strived to attain a holistic vision. The purportedly binaristic pairings of concealment and revelation, blindness and sightedness, invisibility and visibility, and light and darkness are, for

him, complementary, and not contradictory in nature. It is through a thorough exploration of the complex mesh of these complementary ideas that he arrives at his integrated, comprehensive view of existence and experience. In "*Rup o Arup*" he wrote:

> The Eternal Truth or the Eternal Stability expresses itself through eternal mobility. This is why all expressions have two aspects – on the one hand they are limited, or else they cannot be expressed; on the other hand they are limitless, or else they cannot express the Eternal ... It is by moving through the forms and transcending the limits of these transient forms that the process of spiritual realisation attempts to reach the Eternal Truth ... We get to perceive the manifestations of the bliss of the Eternal through the ever-changing, infinite expressions of the varied and ever-flowing forms of the world.[2]

Of course, the "two aspects" are actually representative of many sets of duality; and in order to reach the truth or the Truth the apparent contradictions/dialectics contained in them ought to be transcended and thereby resolved.

[2] Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 9, 523-34. Translation mine.

Bibliography

Andrews, C. F. *Letters to a Friend*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926.

Bandyopadhyay, Charuchandra. *Rabi-rashmi*. Vol. 1, *Purba Bhāg*. Calcutta: A Mukherjee & Co. Ltd., 1938.

——. *Rabi-rashmi*. Vol. 2, *Paschim Bhāg*. Calcutta: A Mukherjee & Co. Ltd., 1939.

Bandyopadhyay, Saroj. *Ālo-Āndhārer Setu: Rabindra-Chitrakalpa*. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1984.

Bandyopadhyay, Srikumar. *Rabindra Srishti Samikshā*. Vol. 2. Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1960.

Basu, Soumitra. *Rabindra-Nātaker Nirmān-Shaili: Unish Shatak*. Calcutta: Sera Prakashak Pvt. Ltd., 1993.

——. *Rabindranāther Raktakaravi: Anya Bhāvnāy*. Calcutta: Ratnavali, 2000.

Bhattacharya, Anuttam. *Rabindra Rachanāvidhān.* Vols. 9 and 10. Calcutta: Dip Prakashan, 2010.

Bhattacharya, Ashutosh. *Bānglā Nātyasāhityer Itihās*. Vol. 2. Calcutta: A Mukherjee and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1960.

Bhattacharya, Jagadish. *Kavi-mānasi*. Vol. 2. Calcutta: Bharavi, 2000.

Bhattacharya, Shila. "*Dākghar: Manchāyane Sangit*". In *Dākghar: Ananta Jivan-bikshā,* edited by Devabrata Biswas and Ashutosh Biswas, 201-211. Calcutta: Prajnabikash, 2014.

Bhattacharya, Subandhu. *Rabindranāther Rājā*. Calcutta: Sahitya Prakash, 1988.

——. *Rabindranāther Achalāyatan*. Calcutta: Bama Pustakalaya, 2004.

Bhattacharya, Upendranath. *Rabindra Nātya Parikramā*. New ed. Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2013.

Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorum. School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University. http://bichitra.jdvu.ac.in/index.php. Accessed on 05.07.22.

Bishi, Pramathanath. *Purāno Sei Diner Kathā*. Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh, 1958.

——. *Rabindranāth o Sāntiniketan.* Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1959.

——. *Rabindra Nātya Prabaha*. New ed. Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2014.

Capwell, C. H. "The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal". *Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1974): 255-264.

Chakrabarti, Biharilal. *Shāradāmangal*. Calcutta: Yogendranath Vidyaratna, 1879.

Chakravarti, Ajitkumar. *Kāvya Parikramā*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1933.

Chanda, Rani. *Ālāpchāri Rabindranāth*. Calcutta: Visvabharati Granthan Bibhag, 1942.

Chaudhuri, Sukanta. *Translation and Understanding*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Das, Kashiram. *Mahābhārata*. Reprint. Calcutta: Reflect Publication, 1983.

Dasgupta, Madhusraba. *Samsad Companion to the Mahābhārata*. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1999.

Dasgupta, Shantikumar. *Rabindranāther Rupak-Nātya*. Calcutta: Bookland Private Limited, 1963.

Deb, Chitra. *Thākurbārir Andarmahal*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1980.

Devi, Sita. *Punyasmriti*. Calcutta: Maitri, 1964.

Dimock, Edward C. "Rabindranath Tagore: 'The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal'". *Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (1959): 33-51.

Dwivedi, Shri Vrajavallabha, ed. *Shri Guru Gitā*. Varanasi: Shaiva Bharati Shodha Pratishthanam, 1999.

Gambhirananda, Swami, trans. *Upanishad Granthāvali*. Vol. 1. Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1987.

Ghatak, Kalyanishankar. *Rabindranāth o Sanskrit Sāhitya*. Bardhaman: Bardhaman Viswavidyalaya, 1980.

Ghosh, Ajitkumar. *Banglā Nātaker Itihās*. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2014.

Ghosh, Sankha. *Kāler Mātrā o Rabindra Nātak*. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1969.

Ghosh, Santidev. *Rabindrasangit*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthalay, 1942.

Gosvami, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja. *Sri Caitanya Caritāmrta*. Vol. 1. Translated by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Hong Kong: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983.

Kripalani, Krishna. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department, 1980.

Krittivas. *Rāmāyana*. Edited by Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2011.

Lal, Ananda. “Tagore in Calcutta Theatre: 1986–2010.” In *Towards Tagore*, edited by Sanjukta Dasgupta, Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, and Swati Ganguly, 515-546. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2014.

Lago, Mary M., ed. *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Mani, Vettam. *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Work with Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1975.

Mishra, Ashok Kumar. *Rabindranātye Rup:Arup.* Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, 2011.

Mitra, Shaoli. *Āmār Anubhave Rabindra-Nātak Rājā o Sombhu Mitra-r Manchāyan*. Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd., 2000.

Mitra, Sombhu. *Nātak: Raktakaravi*. Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd., 1992.

Mukhopadhyay, Ladly. “The Eternal Journey of the Bauls”. *Indian Literature* 58, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2014): 8–9.

Mukhopadhyay, Prabhat Kumar. *Rabindra Jivani o Rabindra Sāhitya Prabeshak*. Vol. 3. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhag, 1933.

Nair, Aparna. “They Shall See His Face: Blindness in British India”. *Medical History* 61, no. 2 (2017): 181-199.

Raha, Satanjib. *Rabindra Bhāvnāy Rājā*. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2012.

Ray, Niharranjan. *Rabindra Sāhityer Bhumikā.* Vol. 2. Calcutta: The Book Emporium Limited, 1944.

Samanta, Kanai. *Rabindranātyakalpanā: Anyānya Prasanga*. Santiniketan: Visva Bharati Gaveshana Prakashan Bibhag, 1986.

Sanyal, Hirankumar. "The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore". In *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume*, 233-242. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961.

Sen, Abhijit. *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage*. London: Routledge, 2022.

Sengupta, S. C. *The Great Sentinel: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore*. Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1948.

Sharvananda, Swami, ed. *Kena-Upanishad*. Madras: The Ramakrishna Math Mylapore, 1920.

Tagore, Abanindranath. *Gharoyā*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhag, 1941.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chhinnapatra*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1912.

——. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. London: Macmillan, 1913.

——. "Nationalism in the West". *The Atlantic*, March 1917. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1917/03/nationalism-in-the-west/645914/. Accessed on 31.10.2022.

——. *Sādhanā: The Realisation of Life*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1921.

——. *The Fugitive*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921.

——. *Letters to a Friend*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1926.

——. *Shikshā.* Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, 1945.

——. *Chhinnapatrāvali.* Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960.

——. *Rabindra Rachanāvali*. 18 vols. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1986-2001.

——. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Edited by Sisir Kumar Das. Vols. 1-3. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994–2004.

——. *Rabindra Nātya Sangraha.* 2 vols. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 2000.

——. *Three Plays*. Translated and with an introduction by Ananda Lal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

——. *Gitabitān*. Calcutta: Reflect Publication, 2002.

——. "My Reminiscences". In *Tagore Omnibus*, Vol. 2, 416-602. Calcutta: Rupa, 2003.

——. *Chokher Bāli*. Translated by Radha Chakravarty. Noida: Random House India, 2012.

——. "Dialogue Between Karna and Kunti". Translated by Ketaki Kushari Dyson. http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/RT_Karnakunti.html. Accessed on 01. 05. 2018.

Thompson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist.* New ed. Calcutta: Riddhi, 1979.

Tyagisananda, Swami, ed. and trans. *Svetāsvataropanisad*. Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1949.

Valmiki. *Rāmāyana: Ayodhyā Kāndam*. Translated by M. N. Dutt. Calcutta: Dev Publication, 1891.

Vasu, Sris Chandra, ed. *Kathopanisad*. Allahabad: The Panini Office, Bhuvaneshvari Asram, 1905.

Vyasa. *Mahābhārata.* Translated by K. M. Ganguli. New ed. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, 2008.

Isha Chakraborty.
10/11/2023