

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

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Synopsis

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Owing to his sensuous aesthetics, spiritual insight and political perspicacity, Rabindranath Tagore became 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. Despite this, his 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 embarked on the present research.

By way of defining the scope of my dissertation, I seek to state that I have specifically dealt with thematic textual analysis of the authorised printed versions of Tagore's plays through the lens of sight and visibility. However, although the performance-related aspects of seeing and sight naturally intrinsic to the medium of theatre have been 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."¹ As a result, by way of establishing my arguments, I have substantiated the textual citations with occasional references to Tagore's unique dramaturgical innovations and his negotiations with the idioms of the stage.

My work, which consists of four chapters, addresses 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, seeks to understand the extent to which he could further the potentiality of this conventional or even clichéd dramatic tool.² Starting with plays where the treatment of this form of visual concealment is comparatively traditional, the discussion, following a chronological track, touches upon the plays where it has been used with particularly innovative freshness. I have naturally had occasions to comment on aspects of metatheatricity, 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

¹ Abhijit Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage* (London: Routledge, 2022), 4.

² Playwrights like Shakespeare and Moliere have used the tool of disguise quite often.

again a tried and conventional visual dramatic tool.³ Although the chapter is primarily about 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 locates 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 his plays composed in the twentieth century. This also provides us scope to probe deeply into Tagore's new ideas and idioms of theatre, the dramaturgy that he conceived, theorised and practised in the "alternative space"⁴ 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. As a natural continuation of this discussion on (in)visibility, in the fourth chapter I step into the 'play' of light which is a prerequisite for sight; and obviously, discussion of light is accompanied by a thorough consideration of its lack, or darkness. Here I delve into some of the most crucial moments in Tagore's career as a dramatist and theatrician, which also gave me 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 is to trace the evolution of Tagore's iridescent journey in the form of drama through the prism of sight and visibility. Although my research takes into account the entire body of his 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 are considered within the purview of detailed discussion.

³ Tagore's usage of blind characters on stage finds eminent precedents in Sophocles' Oedipus and Tiresias, Shakespeare's Gloucester, Milton's Samson, among others.

⁴ Sen, 87.

It is important to note that during the first part of his playwriting career, the pre-Santiniketan period, Tagore 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, and one of the aims of this dissertation is to delineate its stages and understand its theatrical significance.

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 were, for him, complementary and not contradictory in nature. It is through a thorough exploration of the complex mesh of these complementary ideas that he arrived 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.⁵

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, which I conclude with.

I must clarify that since my dissertation deals mainly with texts, primary and secondary, originally written in Bengali, it involved a significant amount of translation. All English translations of the passages in the Bengali texts used in this dissertation are by me, unless otherwise indicated. While translating, my sole aim is to be as faithful as possible to the original language and its cultural and figurative nuances, and I do not lay any claim to literary value. Despite the enormous scale of scholarly attention that Tagore has garnered over the years, most of the texts cited by me have not been translated into English, and most of those that are available, including those done by Tagore himself, are either inaccurate or insufficient to suit my purpose, excepting a few that I acknowledge dutifully in the relevant places.

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⁵ Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 9 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthanvibhag, 1988), 523-34. Translation mine.