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THE *STAGE* THROUGH THE BARD'S EYE:  
A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861 in Calcutta in a Brahmin (Pirali Brahmin) family. He wrote a number of novels, essays, short stories, travelogues, dramas, and thousands of songs but he earned his fame mostly for his poems winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Beginning his dramatic works at the age of nineteen, Tagore wrote more than forty plays of which the most relevant plays are available in English translation. His genius as a poet, music composer and choreographer found a shared experience and expression in his dramas. The art of theatre lies in representation which is the result of a collaborative effort of the various theatrical units like actors, stage, audience etc. The focus of the present paper lies on the 'stage' as a space of performance and the art of staging instrumental in producing the ultimate aesthetic effect.

To begin with, Tagore's plays characterize a unique style of playwriting since they largely use poetic language. His plays are lyrical, symbolic, imaginative and highly suggestive and also written with 'inner reality'. His early plays were too realistic and illusionistic while the later ones were driven towards a non-realistic form. This sudden change, appearing in the form of an essay "The Stage", was quite unexpected and revolutionary in terms of Tagore's thoughts on dramaturgy. Referring to one production of *Valmiki- Pratibha*, Abanindranath Tagore mentions that this production featured stuffed deer, birds made of cotton perched on real branches, and a painted backdrop of a forest scene with a boar hidden behind the trees. Eventually for the premiere of *Kal-mrigaya* a pet deer was let loose on stage (Lal 28). During this phase of writing Tagore mainly followed British practices of the time striving for a naturalistic setting. But an abrupt change came with the essay declaring and justifying his rejection of the painted [concrete] scenes. This paper is therefore a study of this change in Tagore's dramaturgy and an analysis of the quality of representation achieved by the same.

In “The Stage”<sup>1</sup> Tagore puts forth his views on staging / stagecraft that marks a shift from his earlier modes of staging. Taking clue from *Natya Sastra*, he denounced the use of painted scenes. As such the responsibility of conveying the message and effect of performance completely rested on the shoulders of the actor and audience. The actor had to match his skill to the demands of the role he had to play and even the audience had to be alert to take hint from the performance and visualise the background. He had no faith in the contention that the playwright should curb his play according to the given space on stage but that the actors can cross those limits while being on stage (431). For example, the stage in *Red Oleanders* is simple with very limited use of props. As such the audience’s focus rested completely on the actor to understand the nuances of the play. The stage in the mind of the poet<sup>2</sup> has no lack of space unlike the stage in the theatre house. The stage is no doubt a platform for the play to be performed; a space for the poet to express his ideas but it shouldn’t limit the space in the poet’s mind. Tagore believed that the stage in poet’s mind has immense space that needs to keep free of the artificial scenery and that the poet can create his own scene. The Histrionic Art of India doesn’t need the scenes to support the audience’s imagination. It can do without scenes with the idea of ‘suspension of disbelief’ between actors and audience: “They have not surely left their imaginations at home under lock and key. They have come to co-operate, not quarrel, with the interpretation of the drama” (“The Stage” 432).

Tagore’s firm belief in the receptive capacity of the audience didn’t encourage the use of any stage sets or scenes in his [later] plays which would create fixed spaces of action. He believed that the use of pictorial scenes makes the actor complacent without realising his responsibility in the process of representation. He, therefore, led the actor use his acting skills to convey a larger space than the physical dimension of the stage. Gesture is definitely one of those skills used to signify beyond the obvious. However in the *Natyasastra* Bharata mentions about a certain movement in circles named *parikramana* which can be a technique of using the given space to signify the virtual space as conceived by the poet (Rangacharya 47). The same can also be found in one of the productions of Tagore’s play *Red Oleanders* where the peasants are seen running across the stage to signify a greater chase. The atmosphere of war or rage against the power is represented not by the use of any painted scenes but by the restless movements of the workers and the hue and cry of the mass.

According to Tagore, the adornment of the stage is a barrier because frequent change of scenes and moving of curtain prevent inner truth from emerging (Lahiri 168). Although stage properties are devices to inform the locale to the audience but Tagore’s dramatic technique of limited scenes adds a new dimension to theatricality. For instance, the text of his 1892 poetic drama *Chitrangada*, divided into

<sup>1</sup> The original is titled *Rangamancha* that appeared in 1902. The translation is done by Surendranath Tagore that appeared in 1913.

<sup>2</sup> Here the idea of a poet and a playwright is used interchangeably as referred by Tagore himself.

nine scenes, doesn't provide any concrete information about the location of the scenes apart from the name of the state i.e, Manipur. The 1936 dance-drama is no different than an opening song about Chitrangada going on a hunt or Arjuna sleeping on a village track. This tedious attitude towards the setting of the action points out at the futility of having concrete scenes. The following opening lines of *Red Oleanders* is a display of Tagore's unique staging:

The town in which these dramatic events are set in named Yakshapuri... Its Raja lives behind an extremely complex screen. That netted screen of the palace is the only scene in this play. The entire action occurs on the outer portion of that screen (135).

The use of single scene brings the focus of the audience directly on the actors since their actions become the only source of understanding the play. It also results in strengthening their acting skills and an alternate scene is created in the mind of the audience through the words and movements of the actor bodies. It is interesting to see that while certain playwrights like Girish Karnad or Mahesh Dattani are using a variety of props or painted scenes for an equally non-realistic depiction, Tagore employs a single scene to create the same effect. Definitely they belong to a different generation with widely varying influences; nevertheless the comparison throws light on the modes of representation to be ultimately comprehended by the audience. On his part Tagore was influenced by the *Jatra* plays of Bengal, an open-air drama performed on a bare stage open on all sides with the audience sitting all around. In the beginning, a *Jatra* took its story from some myth<sup>3</sup> or legend and was performed in an open space, field or market-place after trading hours were over with minimal or no furniture at all. Under the influence of western theatre it began to be held on proscenium stage with modern makeup, lighting and other devices (Rubin 102). However, Tagore's admiration of the *Jatra* was in relation to this openness of theatrical communication where the distance between the stage and audience was minimal so that they could jointly carry out the business of interpretation and enjoyment. At the same time the theatrical communication from player to spectator and spectator to player was delightfully experienced.

The humanist concern of Tagore seems to affect his concept of stagecraft as well. His use of limited scenes is a marker of his respect for the artist's craft and skill. He explains that the theatres of the West are not suitable for people of all class in India. Since life in the orient is easy and simple so a representation of the same also should be simple and effective. Unlike in Indian drama, the "creative richness of poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist" that eventually closes the stage ("The Stage" 434). To widen the scope of theatrical interpretation Tagore chose

<sup>3</sup> The form has its origin in the devotional singing and dancing by the followers of the Krishna Bhakti movement of the fifteenth century. Over the course of centuries, jatra became secular and started dealing with contemporary social and political themes. Music is the main element in the *Jatra* where the singing is done by the actors (Rubin 168).

a simplistic adoration of the stage but with a plethora of acting skills including dance and music.

Initially, he relied on the actors' speech ability to present the inner truth before the audience. But later on, realizing the limitations of the spoken word, he wrote nuanced dance dramas that contributed to not only dramatic action but also effective self-expression. Dance made it possible to express many such ideas through non-verbal medium, which otherwise could not have been conveyed through the verbal. Dance and music was not only a visual treat but an effective medium of communication also. The rhythm of music touched the chord with every audience enabling them to feel the emotion of the actor on stage. For instance, the famous *Chandalika* song *Phool Bole Dhonno Ami* translated as "Blessed am I, blessed am I, on this earth: says the bloom" (Scene two 144) is a song of the untouchable girl expressing her reverence for God and the inner truth of her existence. She acclaims that, though born in dust; her heart isn't polluted with dust. These lines accompanied by the graceful dance introduce the audience to the disdainful position of an untouchable in an orthodox Hindu society. The effect achieved is more spectacular than that expressed by words. It therefore justifies Tagore's abandoning the pictorial scenes and establishes faith in the actor's skills.

Adya Rangacharya's book *Introduction to Bharata's Natyasastra* is a comprehensive account of Bharata Muni's views on dramatics. In this there is a detailed description of the types of theatre-houses on the basis of shapes and sizes which is nonetheless quite confusing and conflicting. The stage is referred to as a raised platform supported by pillars on corners (15-23). However, for the indigenous theatres of India this raised platform has never been the prerequisite to dramatic performances. Often open spaces were used for performance bringing the actors and audience on a same level. Tagore has also experimented, especially in the beginning of Santiniketan, with the performance space using sometimes a "ramshackle shed behind the Library" and at other times a garden or a veranda (Lal 31). Tagore mentions in his memoirs that his father insisted on holding the rehearsals in an open place that were of great educative value not only to the participants but also to the whole community who had gathered to watch. The educative value was even greater for the myriad socio-political elements that became the subject matter in his plays. The overall response of the audience to this style of staging can be understood in the words of Ajit Kumar Chakravarty that the playgoers of Calcutta were convinced that a play without any stage preparations, without that 'tawdry overdressing', could be interestingly represented and enjoyed (Lal 33). This remark therefore can be considered as a testimony of the success of Tagore's simplistic stage technique for the theatrical representation.

To conclude, the *stage* through the bard's eye is an open flexible space free from barriers where the actor gains prime importance in the successful completion of

the play. In the hands of Tagore the stage not only became a platform for new talent but also a space of learning and open discussion on the myriad socio-political debates of all times.

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