Episteme: an online interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary & multi-cultural journal
Bharat College of Arts and Commerce, Badlapur, MMR, India
Volume 8, Issue 4 **March 2020**

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S RED OLEANDERS AND WILLIAM BLAKE

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The two poets lived thousands of miles and a century apart. One belonged to a poor family, the eldest son of a hosier in London. The other hailed from a blue-blooded family in India, the youngest son of a wealthy cultured illustrious father. Yet they had a lot in common. Both William Blake (1757-1827) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) were multi-faceted artists who not only wrote in verse and prose but were well-known painters too. They were 'myriad- minded' men who shared a common platform; they lived and wrote during the two most crucial periods in world history. While the late eighteenth century saw one of the greatest revolutions till date and the rise of industrialism and capitalism, identified early by the visionary Blake as a terrifying future threat to humanity, the era in which Tagore lived witnessed the steep ascent of capitalism and mechanization, and the staggering fall of humanity into its clutches, and, two world wars. The two sensitive minds reacted to their environment in much the same way, voicing their alarm and disapproval in their writings and drawings, their creative output in general being a critique of contemporary global society. They did not confine themselves to their country and nation, both expressing grave concern for the future of humanity. And both were Romantic poets. Imagination, the most significant feature of Romanticism, particularly in its utopian revolutionary spirit, seems to occupy the foremost position in the ideology of both Blake and Tagore.

William Blake was ignored in his age by fellow-poets and contemporary critics. He was first 'discovered' as a genius in as late as the twentieth century with the publication of a substantial edition of his work by E.J.Ellis and W.B.Yeats. While Tagore's admiration of the English romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, is today known to all, there seems to be hardly any Tagore critic mentioning Blake with reference to Tagore. Yeats was the first to compare Tagore to Blake in his introduction to the English *Gitanjali*. Tagore himself seems nowhere to have mentioned Blake. But that he had read Blake and admired the English visionary poet's creative

genius is clear from his essay 'Religion of an Artist' (a lecture delivered at the University of Dacca in 1926).[1] Speaking of poetry as being 'a creation of a uniquely personal and yet universal character', Tagore quotes a poem of Blake as an illustration for his argument. It is interesting to note here that Tagore quotes not from a well-known poem of Blake but from a lesser known fragment from his Notebook, 'Never seek to tell thy love', preferring the deleted word 'seek' to Blake's final choice 'pain'.[2] Long before Derrida wrote *Of Grammatology* (1967), in his lecture Tagore seems to have adopted a post-structuralist view of reading a poem :'…directly a poem is fashioned, it is eternally freed from its genesis, it minimizes its history and emphasizes its independence.' He finds Blake's poem a perfect specimen of poetic unity: 'It has its grammar, its vocabulary. When we divide them part by part…, the poem which is *one* departs like the gentle wind…The poem is a creation, which is something more than as an idea, inevitably conquers our attention; and any meaning which we feel in its words is like the feeling in a beautiful face of a smile that is inscrutable, elusive and profoundly satisfactory.'

Born in colonized India, more than hundred years after William Blake Rabindranath Tagore shared an affinity with the English poet in more ways than the obvious that both were painter-poets. There have been poets who also painted occasionally, painters who also produced literary works, and poets who wrote in picturesque vivid language. But Blake and Tagore remain till date unique as artists who simultaneously pursued both arts with equal passion and acclaim. Both of them wrote in verse and prose, singing simple songs containing, however, serious thoughts which developed into a rich philosophical system in their works. Tagore's *Shishu* and *Shishu Bholanath* are comparable to Blake's *Songs of Innocence* in their portrayal of the world of innocence, while his satires like *Tasher Desh* and *Achalayatan* may be studied parallelly with Blake's *An Island in the Moon* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as Menippean satires. A rich and extensive use of symbolism characterizes both the poets. Tagore was widely read in western literature and speaks of his inspiration by Wordsworth and Shelley. Though his nature poetry exudes the same Wordsworthian charm of simplicity and innocence, and his lectures and *swadeshi* poems, strike an occasional

Shelleyan chord, his entire creative output taken together reveals a mind with more semblance to Blake than anybody else. In his preoccupation with Innocence, his faith in the human imagination divine, in his mysticism, in his visionary qualities, and above all, in his concern for man's well-being, he seems to be taking up from where Blake had left off a hundred years earlier. Blake was a revolutionary with very personal, at times eccentric and exclusive opinions of his own. But he was quite outspoken and forthright in his conviction that man alone could save man from the doom he has inflicted upon himself in the name of industrialization and scientification of society. Rabindranath Tagore, in his writings, spoke of *Viswamanav*, the eternal, elemental man whose identity was at stake in the modern materialistic utilitarian world. What binds these two minds together is their painful awareness of the 'real', while guiding man to the ideal.

An inter-textual study of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* and Blake's prophetic poems *The Book of Thel* and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* may provide insight into the two poets' response to the crises faced by man, and their treatment of the same. The narratives in Tagore's play and Blake's poems are of course different, but we may begin with the protagonists of the works as a take-off point. Thel is Blake's delicate, beautiful heroine who dwells in the world of unmitigated innocence. It is true that at the end of the poem she sees 'the secrets of land unknown' and frightened, flees back to her home with a shriek. But in *Visions* we find a mature version of Thel in Oothoon who, retaining her spirit of innocence, has encountered experience and emerges unchanged. Nandini, the principal female character in *Red Oleanders,* is a beautiful, charming innocent girl who discovers the world of experience in the course of the play, but rather than being disillusioned and defeated, emerges victorious, helping all around her to be reborn.

In his commentary on his play, *Raktakarabi*, Tagore has advised his readers not to attempt any exegesis on his work, simply stating that it is the story of Nandini. He denies it is a symbolic play, though explaining in his commentary on the later English version named *Red Oleanders* (1925) that it is a tirade against industrialism. In his letter to the American radical Upton Sinclair, in September 1923, commenting on Sinclair's book *The Brass Check* Tagore reveals his repugnance for commercialism and the

dehumanizing effects of machines, the theme of the American novelist's book. He speaks of 'the humiliation that worship of money brings, its stifling quality, its empty arrogance, its insidious undermining of self-respect, its valuelessness, all the attributes which are its curse when dollars own the man;…For years I have thought over these things, this especial phase of our modern civilisation, and only a few weeks ago I have myself finished a drama on the same subject.' [3] During the summer of 1923, while staying in Shillong, he wrote *Yakshapuri*, the first version of the final *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)*. His change in the title of the play from *Yakshapur*i to *Nandini* to *Raktakarabi*, however, indicates that it is indeed a symbolic play. Nandini's 'red oleanders' is a symbol of the spirit of joy and beauty. Blake's Thel stands for incomplete innocence while Oothoon signifies the mature woman's response to exploitation. Nandini, in her journey from innocence to experience embodies the development of innocent Thel to a mature Oothoon.

Thel, the shepherdess, the youngest daughter of Mne Seraphim, lived in the sunny vales of Har before rejecting the sun to set forth in search of the mortal world. Not only is she unaware of sorrow, she is dissatisfied with her easy life. She wishes to know how to lead a meaningful life and questions non-human creatures, a Lilly (a virgin), a cloud (a lover), and a clod of clay (a matron), each of which preaches the unity of life, the integration of one another's 'use' into a life cycle. She complains to them: 'Without a use this shining woman lived/ Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms?' Tagore seems to take off from this complaint of Thel's. Since very early in life Tagore concerned himself with the philosophy of selflessness as being the basis of the religion of man. In 1883 he had written an essay 'Religion' in *Bharati*, where as an illustration to his theory of the religion of the world, he says: 'The primary religion of the world is beneficence. Selfishness is against the religion of the world. Hence there is no one selfish in this world. One has to work for others whether one wills or not. Every atom in this world is for the one next to it or near to it.' [4]. Nandini does not belong to the utilitarian world of Yakshapuri. She hails from a rural home, and, before being brought to Yakshapuri, she had enjoyed a blissful life with her lover Ranjan, ferrying across the stormy waters with him, watching him frolicking joyously in the river Nagai, riding with him in the woods,

applauding him when he shot an arrow between the eyebrows of the tiger on the spring. In Yakshapuri she asks the characters she meets – the professor, Gokul - 'What need have you of me?' She apparently serves no purpose in the kingdom of dead wealth and that, Tagore suggests, is the purpose of her summons from her rural homeland. She challenges the lives of all she encounters by apparently doing nothing. 'She does nothing, that's the rub. I don't understand the way she goes on,' Gokul admits to Bishu.

Red Oleanders is about the overthrowing of a system that is governed by material wealth used exploitatively and purposefully by the power-wielding fathers of society. Nandini's role in this society is to disenchant the wealth-hungry, power-hungry out of their passive stupor and charm them to the world of joy and energy. Nandini's spirit is of dynamic energy posited against the acquiescence of the professor, the Governor, the Gossain, the Antiquarian, the King and minor characters like Gokul and Chandra. To Blake, an advocate of energy as being the basis of creative life, dynamic energy, at its most elemental form, is sexual energy and completeness of man lies in healthy total sexuality. Judged from this premise Tagore's Nandini seems to score above Blake's Thel. Nandini does not shy away from sexuality as Thel does.

The sexual undertones and overtones in the two works cannot be overlooked. The title-page of *The Book of Thel* shows a young woman, probably Thel, looking on at a couple, the male arising directly out of a flower and the woman partially away from another flower.[5] It seems an interesting coincidence that the flowers painted by Blake are red and the leaves on the accompanying stalks are pointed like those of an oleander tree. The male, in Blake's drawing, is nude, nakedness symbolizing for Blake primal energy, reaching out his arms to embrace the woman who throws up her hands probably in dismay. She is, however, clothed, suggesting opacity of vision. She is again Thel, the illustration thus showing an objective and distanced observation of Thel's encounters in the world of experience by herself. This objectivity is found in the text of the poem too where Thel refers to herself by her name rather than using the first person pronoun. Flowers, conventionally, are a symbol of sex and passion, and the illustration clearly tells us that the story narrated is about concerns that are sexual. Thel, the name probably

derived from the Greek *thelos* – 'will' or *thelus* – 'female' or the Hebrew *thal* meaning dew, then signifies a delicate woman with a closed view of selfhood in her unwillingness to partake in the sexual acts of union, marriage, procreation and nursing, pictures of which are presented by the non-human creatures she meets.

Neither for Blake nor Tagore, however, does female sexuality stand for the erotic. While Blake speaks of sexuality as the basic, elemental form of dynamic energy leading to creation, for Tagore it is the woman's *shakti* , the 'joy giving power of woman as the Beloved' that 'infuse(s) life into all the aspirations of man.' 'This ineffable emanation of woman's nature has', Tagore says,'…played its part in the creations of man, unobtrusively but inevitably. Had man's mind not been energised by the inner working of woman's vital charm, he would never have attained his successes.' Tagore goes on to elaborate on woman's vital charm, the basis of man's spiritual civilization, as being 'a combination of several qualities, -- patience, self-abnegation, sensitive intelligence, grace in thought, word and behaviour, -- the reticent expression of rhythmic life, the tenderness and terribleness of love; at its core, moreover, is that self-radiant Spirit of Delight which ever gives itself up.' [6] This is Nandini, an embodiment of woman's *shakt*i. She exudes an aggressive femininity which affects all she comes in contact with. She seems to jolt them out of their passivity through her innate female sexuality, no character in the play being able to be indifferent to her 'vital charm'. Kishor insists that she accept the red flowers every morning from him alone. Bishu, her partner in music, eventually sacrifices his life for associating with Nandini and her dissenting ways. The fathers of society, the Governor, Gossain, the professor, each representing the different institutions are all disturbed by her presence. Chandra, the only other female character in the play, is only too aware of the threat she holds – Nandini's beauty and her ways make her 'sick'. She seems to echo the feelings of Blake's nurse in *Songs of Experience* who, envious of the young lovers 'whispering in the dale', calls them back home in the evening probably because she can no longer partake in the joys of love. The nurse's husband or lover is non-existent and Chandra, married to Phagulal, one of the 'tunnel-diggers' in Yakshapuri, is possessed by the lust for wealth.

Oothoon is an extension of Thel. *The Book of Thel* ends with Thel, frightened at the visions of sensuality and mortality, fleeing back to the vales of Har. The Argument of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* presents Oothoon trembling in 'virgin fears' as she 'rose up from the vale'. In the poem we find her wandering woefully like Thel, her first encounter being like Thel's with a flower. The Marygold preaches to Oothoon the same lesson of selflessness as did the Lilly to Thel but Oothoon's response is different and she plucks the flower suggesting her willingness to be initiated to the mature world of experience. It is interesting to note that both Blake's poems and Tagore's play begin with the principal female characters' association with flowers. Blake's spelling of 'Marygold' seems to suggest both a human image in Mary, and in 'gold' probably the myth of Aeneas plucking the golden bough as a gift for Proserpina when he descended to the underworld. Thel visits the underworld at the Clod's request and Tagore's *Red Oleanders* is about the dead wealth buried in the underworld, relentlessly delved into by the gold-diggers. Flowers being conventionally a symbol of sex, by plucking the Marygold Oothoon seems to be ready for the world of sexuality. [7] Nandini accepts the red flowers from Kishor ; they are a symbol to her of Ranjan, her love. She wears them in her hair, round her neck, on her wrists, thus accentuating her beauty, and her sexuality, in her alliance with Ranjan embodying the primal energy that motivates sex. Each wants a flower from her ornaments suggesting their willingness to surrender to her sexual charm. Gokul voices their predicament when he tells her; 'You know some spell, I'm sure. You're snaring everybody here. You're a witch! Those who are bewitched by your beauty will come to their death.' Towards the end of *Visions* Oothoon tells Urizen that she is determined to spread 'silken nets and traps of adamant' to 'catch for thee girls of mild silver or of furious gold', thus freeing them from the bonds of restraint and kindling the spirit of love in them. She advocates free love: 'I cry Love! Love! Love! Happy happy Love! Free as the mountain wind!' Nandini sings to the King on two occasions: '"I love, I love" is the cry that breaks out from / The bosom of earth and water.'

Nandini is, like Oothoon, torn between two males, one representing love and passion, the other strength and physical energy. While she rejoices in the youthful energy

of Ranjan, she is awed by the strength of the King's arms in amassing the gold nuggets. The King is drawn to the female sexuality in Nandini and there are clear hints of physical union in his stroking her hand, burying his hands in her hair, in his wish to break her into pieces and again in his desperation in driving her away, for his ardent desire is to crush her with his hands as one crushes grapes to extract juice. These images suggest the King's aroused libido but the King is not Blake's Bromion. He does not rape her as Bromion rapes Oothoon to increase her market value as a slave by impregnating her.[8] Rather, in a reversal of situation, the human worth of the King is increased by Nandini who finally succeeds in liberating the King from his self-created prison nettings. After her rape Oothoon calls out to Theotormon, her lover, but 'Theotormon hears me not'. Rejected she turns to Bromion for 'none but Bromion can hear my lamentations'. Even while waiting for Ranjan, Nandini repeatedly approaches the King to call him out into the open and not only gives in to his sexual advances but also admits to Bishu candidly, 'I liked it'.

The King seems to be an embodiment of Bromion and Urizen rolled into one. Urizen, the central character in Blake's prophetic books, stands for cold reason, the eighteenth century rationality seen by Blake as being instrumental in binding and restraining man. He is seen as an elderly bearded figure, blind, bound by fetters with heavy brass-bound books and an iron pen, evil in his despotic commands. In her speech to Urizen, Oothoon addresses the jealous, infernal god as 'Creator of Men! mistaken Demon of Heaven.' The King in *Red Oleanders* is entrapped in his self-created prison, languishing in the dark in an inert passive pleasure behind the nettings. He is half-man, half-demon, possessing immense strength and steeped in crude materiality. His face is never seen and the only visible part of his body `is his hand, a symbol of command of execution, which frightens his subjects. The King seems to assume Urizenic proportions when Nandini accuses him of rending the bosom of the earth and bringing up together with the booty 'the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious.' His powerful urge to know and understand everything, from Nandini to her red oleanders, is a Urizenic desire, the passion of reason. When Nandini speaks to him of Ranjan and arouses his jealousy, and acknowledges quite unashamedly how she is drawn to both of them, she

is suggesting what Oothoon tells Urizen:'Thy joys are tears ! thy labour vain, to form men to thy image./ How can one joy absorb another? Are not different joys/ Holy, eternal, infinite? And each joy is a love.' In trying to bring the two loves, or two modes of creativity together, or opening a confined, limited reason or science to the entirety to nature, the call of autumn, Nandini is seeking the coalescence of the Blakean 'four zoas' as a wholesome civilizational principle.

Urizen, the father god, to Blake is one of the Eternals or the Immortals, the unfallen Man until he is banished to the 'obscure, shadowy void' to lead a solitary life. Dividing, partitioning, dropping his plummet line, Urizen is an architect of the skeletal abstractions he calls science. Tagore calls his play 'a tirade against industrialism'. His King resides alone in a dark, dead, vacant world. In his dominion the tunnel-diggers, relentlessly raising gold-nuggets from the underworld, who were once farmers in their idyllic rural homeland, are not only reduced to dehumanized numbers but the less fortunate ones like Anup and Upamanyu, once tall robust young men, are reduced to abstractions, 'the King's leavings' as they are called, beings sucked out of their 'flesh and marrow, life and soul.' When Nandini, aghast, wishes to know how they have lost it all, the Governor commands the Antiquarian who is also called the man of science to 'explain it if you can.' The king in *Red Oleanders*, in his Urizenic exile, seems to have realized the inadequacy and futility of his power, and whether with the frog or with Nandini, he seeks the principle of life, which seems to have been crushed by the dead weight of industrial lust, the lust for accumulation, projected in so many powerful images in *Red Oleanders*. 'These dark satanic mills', as Blake describes them in *Milton*, could be a perfect substitute for Yakshapuri, where we see youth crushed, warped and squeezed dry, and the vistas of the autumn pastures, rich with crops, envision Blake's new Jerusalem 'In England's green and pleasant land.'

William Blake began with the concerns of England and her men. He went on to explore Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and finally into the soul of man, for the history of the individual is but a scaled-down version of the history of the universe. His thoughts culminate in *The Four Zoas*, his magnum opus where he narrates the story of the fall of

the Eternal Man and his redemption. Man, now fallen into disunity may only be redeemed if the 'four mighty ones' in him – Reason, Wisdom, Love, and Imagination – are reunited in harmony. *The Four Zoas* ends with a picture of bliss, a mood of unqualified serenity in an ideal environment promising an ideal world where the four zoas are united and man is reborn. At the end of *Red Oleanders* the King and all his men are reborn when eternal love and beauty in Nandini is united with both the eternal energy and passion in Ranjan, the other half of her self, and with the elemental eternal strength in the King. *The Four Zoas* ends with a picture of bliss, in a mood of unqualified serenity, an ideal environment in an ideal world that Blake prophesies:

'The sun arises from his dewy bed & fresh airs
Play in his smiling beams giving the seeds of life to grow,
And the fresh Earth beams forth ten thousand thousand springs of life'—when
'The war of swords departed now
The dark Religions are departed and sweet science reigns.'

'Sweet science' is Reason (scientia), restored to its essential sweetness drawing on emotion, imagination and passion. The last plate of the epic shows a joyous figure dancing on the top of the world. *Red Oleanders* ends with a similar picture of well-being, the Reason embodied by the king uniting with the love and beauty in Nandini, and with imagination and passion in Ranjan, who, though dead, emerges victorious, leaving 'behind him in death his conquering call. He will live again, he cannot die.' The play closes with the victory of Nandini who leads the King to his salvation leaving her gift of red oleanders for all and the autumn song of harvest in the background:

'Hark it's autumn calling, --
Come, O come away!
The earth's mantle of dust is filled with ripe corn!
O the joy! The joy!'

Blake wrote a prose essay in 1804, *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, the title, however, being supplied by D.G.Rossetti when he transcribed the essay for Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake,* 1863.[9] The essay may be seen as Blake's summing up of

his entire work and philosophy, the characters in the painting and the expository essay no longer appearing as personages of Blake's pantheon, but characters from the Bible and the States of the Human Mind. The conception of the Last Judgement appealed to Blake, both as an artist and a mystic because he believed that error must define itself before it could be cast out, and evil must take shape to be identified and transformed into good. Blake believed in progression through contraries and thus at the end of his career, in the midst of all the evil in society and the universe, he cherished the comforting thought that an essential development was taking place whereby Albion, England, will be united and thus identified with Jerusalem, or Blake's Eden – the ideal, perfect world. The work is Blake's final statement on the war between Imagination and Reason.

While in Munich, in1930, Tagore wrote a long prose-poem *The Child*, inspired by a passion-play, enacting the birth of Christ, that he had seen in the village of Oberammergau. Published the following year in London, this is his only major poem written originally in English, later translated into Bengali as 'Sishutirtha' in 1932, included in *Punascha*. The poem, epical in its grand style, proclaims Tagore's ultimate faith in man. A few months after the composition of the poem, in December 1930, Tagore said in a lecture addressed in New York: 'The babe who was born centuries ago, brought exaltation to man. Not machinery, not associations, not organizations, but a human babe, and people were amazed. And when all the machinery will be rusted, he will live.' [10] A few months after 'Sishutirtha' was published in the monthly magazine *Bichitra*, Tagore wrote in a commentary on the poem on the dual nature of man, the beastly and the divine. The beast in him rules when he is possessed by his greed for material gains, his pride in power and his delirious obsession with reason and intellect, and humanity is threatened. Salvation comes to man in this crisis in the form of the eternal man – 'sanatan manab' – who is reborn again and again.[11] *The Child* begins:

'What of the night?' they ask.
No answer comes.
For the blind Time gropes in a maze and knows not its path or purpose.
The darkness in the valley stares like the dead eye-sockets of a giant,

the clouds like a nightmare oppress the sky,
and the massive shadows lie scattered like the torn limbs of the night.

Like Blake, Tagore believed in a future golden age when the 'mahamanab' will be born, a distant future when man will have conquered his animal nature. *The Child* ends with the mother sitting on a straw bed with the newborn babe on her lap and the pilgrims hailing – 'Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.' The mother is Mother Earth, and the babe is the Eternal Man, the saviour of mankind. For Tagore too believed, as did Blake, that man alone could save man.

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