

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 11

Special Issue: 2

Month: March

Year: 2024

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Impact Factor: 3.025

Received: 26.02.2024

Accepted: 25.03.2024

Published: 30.03.2024

Citation:

Karthik Raja, P., and E. Sukumar. "A Reconsideration of the Human Condition through Tagore's *Red Oleanders: Slavery and the Prospect of Freedom*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 11, no. S2, 2024, pp. 103–06.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v11iS2-March.7523>

# A Reconsideration of the Human Condition through Tagore's *Red Oleanders: Slavery and the Prospect of Freedom*

**P. Karthik Raja**

*II MA English, Department of English  
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore*

**Dr. E. Sukumar**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English  
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore*

## Abstract

*The aim of this study is to examine how Rabindranath Tagore's 1925 play Red Oleanders presents the human situation. Yaksha Town, a made-up community where everyone is a slave to the system, serves as the backdrop for the play. Through a thorough examination of Yaksha Town's circumstances, the article first highlights how a totalitarian society robs each character of freedom and happiness before looking at how each character bears personal responsibility for their imprisonment within the system. The play's protagonists' story of captivity is also a story of humanity as a whole, since Tagore wants to depict the real world through the town's condition. This essay additionally aims to clarify the playwright's assertion that nature, not the propinquity of a materialistic system, is the means by which humanity might be freed from all forms of societal and personal bonds. Marxist and Existentialism theories are used to frame the entire conversation.*

## Introduction

Yaksha Town, which Tagore uses to illustrate the evil of slavery in the human race, has characteristics of both a contemporary industrial town and a mining region. Similar to most totalitarian societies, Yaksha Town's system is based on the exploitation of the working class and common people by a small group of materialistic individuals who belong to the ruling class in the area. Standing at the pinnacle of the next class is an enigmatic King who, in both its material and immaterial forms, is the founder of Yaksha Town. The workplace is like a prison for the employees. When "no open sky, no leisure"(13) is permitted. They suffer from forced labour, denial of freedom, and "denial of pure joy,"(Citation Kundu xiii) just like prisoners do. Together, they work for hours in the town's mines, digging up gold nuggets and ensuring their safe delivery to the King, who is driven by an unquenchable desire for wealth. Bishu tells Chandra that the "nuggets [of gold] are the drink - the solid drink - for our Gold King."(15) The lack of names completes the prisoner-like condition of the common people. According to the system, Phagulal is "47 V" (14) and Bishu is "69 Ng" (16). As a result, every employee

loses their unique identity and only exists as a number, much like a prisoner. Yaksha Town's atmosphere may remind one of Coketown, an industrial town that Dickens vividly described in his novel *Hard Times* (1854) as being lifeless, dirty, and monotonous; it encouraged endless repetition of labour for the benefit of some unscrupulous materialists and guaranteed the loss of the workers' individuality in order to transform them into impersonal tools to operate the machines. Similar to Tagore's Yaksha Town, Dickens' Coketown highlights the depraved condition of contemporary humanity. Its jaws "shut fast" when a person "enters the maw of Yaksha Town," (14) lost in the illusion of money. There is no way out that would justify giving up one's freedom permanently: "Coming here, the men 'go to the dogs' and the women wither away, as the simple charms of life recede forever" (Citation Kundu xiv). Despite being the absolute ruler of the realm, the King does not impose the system on the populace. He has a well-functioning government run by a governor who is the only person in position to rule from every viewpoint. The governor lacks compassion and is a vicious materialist. He uses all of his resources to make sure that "the Yaksha Town smoothly rolls along to unbroken prosperity," (Citation Kundu xlv) with the primary goal of his life being to maintain the autocratic system. Bishu tells Nandini, "This place is dark with the Governor's shadow, it is everywhere," (23) demonstrating his constant vigilance in keeping the machine operating. He does not only block "the way," but also "the will" (14) of the occupants to flee.

However, he is smart enough to see that using force alone won't help him succeed in his endeavour. As a result, his initial goal is to shape public ideology. Ideology is "the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs, and values in social life," according to Eagleton in *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991) (qtd. in Citation Hawthorn 163). Additionally, according to Citation Hawthorn (163), it may refer to "ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the ideas of a ruling group or class specifically through distortion and dissimulation." Gokul makes it clear that the Governor is completely successful in his endeavour. The man has been so ingrained in Yaksha Town's world view that he is unable to even envision a life in which those of the location is unable to recite. He appears to be somewhat disturbed by Nandini's presence since she represents a totally other way of being-one that is beyond his comprehension and seeks liberation with joy and hope. Feeling outrage, he says to Nandini:

Turn this way, woman! Who are you? I've never been able to understand you ...

I don't trust what I can't understand ...

I don't believe you one bit ... Oh, you terrible, terrible witch! (7)

More than anything else, Gokul's betrayal of the rebels at the play's conclusion demonstrates his loyalty to the system. Phagugal correctly surmises this man's incorrigibility when he remarks, "I fear Gokul is attempting to join the Governor's staff. He'll betray us" (49). Gokul is a representation of every single person who is dependent on the comfort of the system in which they live. As Nandini correctly surmises, "Gokul..." Digging will kill you (7). Regretfully, the majority of people in today's world seek to understand their purpose in life in connection to the society they are a part of, much like Gokul. They are incapable of accepting a different perspective on life. The viewer is reminded of the anonymous citizen by Gokul's character, whom Citation Auden depicts poignantly and clearly in his 1940 poetry "The Unknown Citizen." It is utterly ridiculous to inquire about his freedom or happiness, just like with the nameless citizen. The core of his existence is his captivity to the system. Ideological influence, however, is noticeable not only in Gokul but also in Chandra. Her apparent satisfaction with the system is demonstrated by how readily she accepts the governor's guarantee that he cares about the workers: My dear child, surely you know of our constant anxiety for their [the workers'] welfare" (16).

She is enthusiastic about the "gorgeous array" of the "grand procession" (19) of the "Governors and their wives on the occasion of Flag Worship" (Citation Kundu liv). Her response to the parade

clearly demonstrates her preference for the town's flimsy grandeur. More significantly though, as the purpose of the procession is to support the system's philosophy, it is an expression of her loyalty to it. The flag represents the current system, to which the common people are expected to be committed. However, the Governor enlists the assistance of the Gosain as well as the other members of the Town's Governing Body in order to guarantee the common people's adherence to the autocratic regime. Among them are the Assistant Governor, the Headman, and the Doctor, who are all skilled in carrying out their given responsibilities with a pure sense of regret. At the Governor's instigation, the Headman assigns Ranjan "to work" as a digger "in the tunnels of Vajragarh" in order to "make him yield" (29) to the system, so lessening the spirit of liberty in his heart.

The Doctor, a fellow Machiavellian materialist, has completely abandoned the moral principles of his honourable line of work. He never makes an effort to treat the illness completely. Rather, he only uses his knowledge and abilities to "keep one as much alive as it is necessary" (36) for Yaksha Town's continuous operations. Going one step further, observing the Deputy Governor's hesitation to apprehend Ranjan, the Assistant Governor voluntarily assumes the responsibility of doing so. The governor's allies are all powerful tools at his disposal for maintaining the general populace's enslavement to the system.

The abominable master and his allies would hardly ever hesitate to resort to outright lies or even use brute force when necessary to maintain the immoral system that justifies the rulers' terrene privilege. After the Governor issues an order, his "men" (43) shrewdly notify Ranjan about Nandini's transformation into the King's concubine. With the young man's rebout, the governor's clear goal is to destroy the people's sense of liberty. The Deputy Governor quickly dismisses "the whole business" regarding Ranjan and Nandini, almost horrified by the Governor's despicable plan:

Deputy Governor: Some lie told by our men has geared Ranjan to frenzy, and he is rushing to the usual fate of – I desert the whole business ...

Governor: ... that girl must be

Deputy Governor: Don't talk of all that to me. The Headman ... is the right man. He doesn't shrink at any dirtiness whatever. (43)

The Wrestler's physical and mental strength is taken away from him by the Governor using the identical trick. The Governor challenges the Wrestler to a fight with the King, knowing well that the Wrestler would lose. He then places the blame for the entire situation on the Wrestler, who complains, "Now after egging me on, he goes about saying it's my fault" (35). Sadly, the Wrestler loses not just his strength but also all chance of ever regaining it. He gets lost in the muck of hopelessness. Anything in the Town that could prove ineffective or detrimental to the system would not be permitted by the Governor and his friends. Then, they return to an even larger atrocity upon realising that the workers are about to rebel for their freedom. Kishore, an innocent teenager, is killed, and Bishu is put in jail. Nandini is not even spared. To quell the workers' uprising for freedom, they use all of their military might.

## Conclusion

"Red Oleanders" by Tagore is "a moving parable of contemporary civilization, a drama of real life" (Citation Sanyal 259). The modern world is depicted in a bleak way as something that is gradually turning into Yaksha Town. In such a world, the majority of people are destined for a life of servitude with no chance of rescue from a small group of ruthless materialists who would stop at nothing to achieve worldly privilege. A shift in the circumstances appears unattainable, and the ideal of liberty and fraternity, extolled for centuries by poets, is but a fantastic potential. Tagore appears terrified at the thought of such a world. It is not with this hopeful tone that Tagore ends his

drama. He strikes a balance between the side in the town that opposes the dictatorial system and the other that sticks with it through to the very end. The individuals in the second group are those who are only relevant to the system, such as the Governor, the Assistant Governor, the Headman, and the Doctor. Since these administrators value worldly advantages more than anything else, they will never experience what it's like to be free. Because of this, they view Nandini and Ranjan as enemies of Yaksha Town and therefore use all available military might to guarantee a strong defence against the uprising. They are still held captive by the system they support indefinitely.

Ironically, people like Gokul, who are part of the working class-the class they exploit-help them in their goal to preserve the system because they share their dedication to it. Unlike their fellow workers who are taking part in the uprising, these workers prefer servitude to the system since, like their masters, they live entirely within it. Furthermore, as previously implied, they do not want freedom because freedom entails accountability for every action. It suits them to live just as employees, to do as their bosses say and never make decisions for themselves. Furthermore, they are astute enough to realise that supporting the system in times of need will elevate them to higher social status down the road. They never, very visibly, "turn up" (50) to back the rebels. Those who are pragmatic, wise in the world, and inclined to evaluate life's accomplishments in terms of material gain and loss are precisely the ones who back the town's authoritarian regime. All of these people lack empathy for the joys of freedom. They therefore continue to be ignorant of the purpose of life eternally, in contrast to the King and the other rebels.

## References

1. Auden, W. H. *The Unknown Citizen*, 1940. <https://poets.org/poem/unknown-citizen>.
2. Das, Biswarup. "Enslavement and the Possibility of Freedom: A Rethinking About the Human Condition Through Tagore's Red Oleanders." *Comparative literature--East & West*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2021, pp. 137–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2021.2001727>.
3. Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester, 1980.
4. Ghosh, Sisir Kumar. *Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986.
5. Kundu, Rama. "Introduction." *Red Oleanders: A Drama in One Act*. New Delhi: Peacock Books, vii- lxxxvi, 2017.