Enslavement and the Possibility of Freedom: A Rethinking about the Human Condition through Tagore’s Red Oleanders

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ABSTRACT
The present study takes as its objective the enunciation of the human condition as presented in Rabindranath Tagore’s 1925 play Red Oleanders. The play is set in the fictional backdrop of Yaksha Town, a place where every person is a slave of the system. Through a detailed analysis of the situation of Yaksha Town, the article first brings to light how a totalitarian society deprives every character of liberty and joy and then examines how all the characters are personally accountable for their confinement in the system. As Tagore intends to present the situation of the real world through that of the town, the story of the enslavement of the characters in the play is also that of humanity in general. For Tagore, the malady of the modern world is rooted in its preoccupation with worldly privileges that detaches a person from the ebullience of nature. So, this article also strives to elaborate from the playwright that it is not the propinquity of a materialistic system but that of nature that can liberate humanity from all social and personal confinement. The whole discussion is put forth in light of the theories of Existentialism and Marxism.

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.

– Rousseau, SC.

“Who wishes to live without liberty?” asks the celebrated Bengali poet of the 19th century, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay in his Song of Freedom (Swādhīñatā Sāṅgēt). The poet in the line attaches momentous importance to freedom. It seems that in his thoughts a life devoid of freedom is worse than death. It is, however, not the Bengali poet alone for
whom liberty carries such transcendental significance. Liberty or freedom which means exemption “from slavery or imprisonment,” “from arbitrary control,” or even “independence” or “the power of self-determination” (SOED 748), has been extolled effusively through the ages, in speeches, in poetry, in songs, in stories, as well as in social and political pamphlets. Many have even sacrificed their lives for its sake. The contrary state of liberty, which is enslavement or confinement, or dependence on external factors (as, on a particular person, the social system, a community, etc.), naturally deprives one of the privileges of “self-determination.” Because in this state a person’s “self-determination” is no longer operative, the person’s entity as an individual is consumed by the factors deciding the person’s enterprise. It is basically those factors in relation to which the person now exists. But a person without an individual entity or the prerogative of self-determination can scarcely be called happy.

However, when liberty is so valuable for life, is its attainment ever possible in the absolute sense? Is there any likelihood that life would be free from all social or moral constraints? Is it possible that one’s entity would remain the least influenced by external factors? The present study, in light of the theories of Existentialism and Marxism, seeks rejoinders to these questions through Red Oleanders (1925), a symbolic play by the illustrious Bengali playwright, poet, and storyteller Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who was also the first Nobel Laureate of Asia. The play, which is the English translation of Tagore’s 1924 Bengali drama Roktôkorôbî, is set in the fictionalized backdrop of Yaksha Town, a place bearing the endowments of the real world and delineated with the purpose to disclose how enslavement becomes an almost inescapable attribute, an essence of modern humanity. The curse of the modern world in the forms of class division, of social exploitation, of the loss of individual identity, as well as of the domination of “machine [over] life” (Ghosh 64) has been beautifully reflected in the life of Yaksha Town. This article will elucidate how every character in the play, irrespective of that character’s power, position or possession, is deprived of the felicity of liberty. This article will bring to light how a totalitarian system engulfs freedom, individuality and joy from the lives of the characters to transmute their being into its utilitarian units. But it will concomitantly examine how the captives of the system are accountable for their situation themselves. Tagore, however, believed that the spirit of liberty can never be diminished utterly from the human soul. He was also aware of the fact that the predicament of the world is embedded in its fascination for material privileges which dissociates one from the vivacity of nature. The article will, accordingly, also attempt to convey how the playwright discovers the salvation of Yaksha Town, and as such, of the human world, in the urge of the characters to seek the value of life not in the human-oriented system, but in nature.

1. Social enslavement

you see, evil men, the like of whom have sought to enslave their fellow-men since the dawn of creation . . .

– Martindale, 2009, KM.
Yaksha Town, the place Tagore delineates to convey the malady of enslavement in the human world, bears the traits of a modern industrial town as well as a mining area. Like that of any totalitarian society, the system of Yaksha Town is fostered on the exploitation of the common people, the working class, by a handful of coveting materialists belonging to the ruling class of the place. On the apex of the succeeding class is placed a mysterious King who is the founding figure of Yaksha Town in both its physical and conceptual dimensions. For the workers, the place is akin to a prison house where they are allowed “no open sky, no leisure” (13). Like a prisoner, they are afflicted with forced labor, deprivation of liberty, and “denial of pure joy” (Kundu xiii). They toil for hours together in the mines of the town to excavate gold-nuggets and safely transport those to the King to quench his insatiable lust for riches. The “nuggets [of gold] are the drink – the solid drink – for our Gold King,” Bishu says to Chandra (15). The prisoner-like existence of the common people is complete with the loss of their names. Bishu is “69 Ng” (16) and Phagulal is “47 V” (14) in the eyes of the system. As such every worker, like a prisoner, exists solely as a number losing their individual entity. The ambience of Yaksha Town might make one reminiscent of that of Coketown, an industrial town delineated vividly by Dickens in the novel Hard Times (1854) – dull, polluted and monotonous, encouraging endless repetitive labor for the profit of some unscrupulous materialists, and ensuring the loss of the individual entity of the workers to transmute them to impersonal tools to run the machines. Dickens’s Coketown, like Tagore’s Yaksha Town, draws attention to the debased state of modern humanity. Once a person “enters the maw of Yaksha Town” being lost in the mirage of gold, “its jaws shut fast” (14). There is no exit route warranting the permanent loss of one’s freedom: “Coming here, the men ‘go to the dogs’ while the women wither up, as the simple charms of life recede forever” (Kundu xiv).

Though the King is the supreme ruler of the place, he does not harness the system directly on the people. He has a well-organized governing body operated by a Governor who is a ruler from every angle and in position next only to him. The Governor is a ruthless materialist devoid of any humanitarian impulse. The sole aim of his life being to uphold the autocratic system, he strives by every means to ensure that “the Yaksha Town smoothly rolls along to unbroken prosperity” (Kundu xlv). He is ever vigilant in keeping the machine running: “This place is dark with the Governor’s shadow, it is everywhere,” Bishu says to Nandini (23). Not only does he close “the way” but even “the will” (14) of the inhabitants to retreat to the green fields, the open-air fragrant with flowers and resounding with the warble of birds, where the soul savors freedom. But he is astute enough to apprehend that force alone is quite inadequate to make him successful in his venture. Accordingly, he first aims at molding the ideology of the people. Ideology, as Eagleton says in Ideology: An Introduction (1991), signifies “the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life” (qtd. in Hawthorn 163). It can also indicate “ideas and beliefs which help to legitimize the ideas of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation” (Hawthorn 163). That the Governor is utterly successful in his enterprise becomes evident when one looks at Gökul. The man has internalized the ideology of Yaksha Town to such an extent that he cannot even imagine a way of life which those of the place cannot exemplify. He looks quite perturbed at Nandini’s presence as she embodies a completely different mode of being, one seeking freedom with joy and hope, which is beyond his comprehension. With indignation he utters 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)

Gôkul’s probable betrayal of the rebels at the end of the play manifests once again, more than anything else, his fidelity to the system. Phagulal rightly speculates the incorrigibility of this man when he says, “I am afraid Gôkul is seeking to take up service with the Governor. He will betray us” (49). Gôkul is a manifestation of any and every human being who is addicted to the familiarity of the system he or she is a part of. Nandini rightly speculates, “Gôkul . . . You’ll die digging” (7). Unfortunately, most people in the present world resemble Gôkul, pursuing the meaning of their being in its relation to the society they belong to. Neither do they ever question the system, nor are they able to welcome a new way of looking at life. Gokul’s character invokes in the reader’s mind the image of the nameless citizen whom Auden portrays with lucidity and pathos in his 1940 poem “The Unknown Citizen.” The question of his being free or happy, like that of the unknown citizen, is completely absurd. Captivity to the system is the essence of his being. The impact of ideology, however, is perceptible not merely in Gôkul, but Chandrá as well. Her contentment with the system is revealed when she is easily taken in by the assurance of the Governor about his concern for the workers: “My dear child, surely you know of our constant anxiety for their [the workers’] welfare” (16). The “gorgeous array” of the “grand procession” (19) of the “Governors and their wives on the occasion of Flag Worship” (Kundu liv) makes her ecstatic. Her reaction at the procession exhibits quite evidently her predilection for the superficial splendor the town offers. But more importantly, it is a manifestation of her devotion to the system, as the occasion for the procession is intended at upholding its ideology. The flag is symbolic of the prevailing system to which the commitment of every common person is expected.

But whenever the Governor’s attempts at preserving the people’s allegiance to the system seem inoperative, he sends for the Gosain “to give moral talks to the men” who “feel disturbed in their weak minds” (17). The Gosain, who is “another Governor in disguise” (Kundu xlvii), is even shrewder than the Governor himself in respect of manipulating the workers’ minds. Being a man of religion, his primary duty is professedly the spiritual well-being of the workers of the town. But what he preaches instead intends “to serve the interest of the autocratic establishment” (Kundu xlvii). So, his teachings verge more on “creed” (Jung 14) than religion. For Jung religion degenerates to creed when it compromises “with the State” (Jung 14). Whereas true religion aims at the liberty of the soul through kinship with God, creed advocates adherence to the collective belief or the system. “To be adherent to creed,” is, therefore “not always a religious matter but more often a social one” (Jung 15). As such, what Yaksha Town acknowledges for religion is a creed, intended to uphold the totalitarian system of the place. The Gosain shrewdly uses the names and prayers of God to keep the common people sympathetic to the system, so that they never think of revolting against it and go on performing the assigned duties mutely. As Chandrá expresses her ardent wish to let
her and Phágulal “go . . . for once” to see the “waving fields of barleycorn” and the “ample shade of [the] banyan tree with its hanging roots” (16) to the Governor, the Gosain says,

These people [the workers] . . . Because they meekly suppress themselves underneath their burden, the upper world can keep its head aloft. The very thought sends a thrill through my body!

. . . yours is the duty of supplying food to this mouth which chants the holy name. With the sweat of your brow have you woven this wrap painted with the holy name, which exalts this devoted body. Surely that is no mean privilege. May you remain forever undisturbed, in my benediction, for then the grace of God will abide with you likewise. (17)

Very subtly in a pseudo-religious tone, he reassures Chandrá that people like her must serve the ruling class, that they need not be concerned about liberty. It is because their work, rather than depriving them of something valuable, endows them with glory. He assigns himself with the responsibility of affecting the minds of the common people in such a way that they feel an urge to “play up” the “facticity” (Spade 140) of their being workers in Yaksha Town by playing down their freedom themselves, that is, an urge to be an ideal worker with the belief that their whole entity pivots on their work. In other words, his effort is to interpolate in the minds of the common people the belief that they are workers “and nothing else” (Spade 140). In this way, the Gosain attempts to ensure that the autocratic system effortlessly rolls on, and people like the Governor and himself can sustain themselves on the fruits of others’ toil. Chandrá is so much captivated by the Gosain’s words, his charming etiquette and his chanting of the “holy name of Hari,” (17) that she immediately forsakes her desire of retreat to nature, that is, savoring freedom, and asks fervently for “a little dust off” (17) his feet. She even reprimands Phágulal for his harsh words to the Governor. The Deputy Governor unmistakably identifies the Gosain as a “Priest on the skin, Governor at the marrow” (43). In the verbal exchanges between Chandrá, the Governor and the Gosain, Tagore beautifully epitomizes the mechanisms of a materialistic society focused on exploiting the common people who unfortunately never become, or even wish to be, aware of this exploitation. They lose the capacity for free-thinking eventually, and their acquired belief about the system makes them devote their entire energy to it. Tagore implies that this is how slavery becomes an essence of the common people. Getting used to their enslavement, they forsake the effort to seek the savor of a contrary mode of life. They stop “fighting the system” like Bracken’s rabbits, finding it “easier to take the loss of freedom, to forget what it was like before the fence kept them in . . .” (DM). In this way, they contribute to perpetuating the very system that deprives them of their liberty.

To ensure the adhesion of the common people to the despotic system, the Governor seeks the aid, however, not only of the Gosain but also of the other members of the Governing body of the Town. Significant among them are the Assistant Governor, the Headman and the Doctor, each an adroit in executing the duty assigned with an attitude of unadulterated remorselessness. Following the Governor’s direction, the Headman puts Rañjan “to work” as a digger “in the tunnels of Vajragarh” so that “the pressure [of digging] would make him yield” (29) to the system, and in this way, the spirit of liberty in his heart gets diminished. The Doctor, another Machiavellian materialist, has sacrificed altogether the ethics of his noble profession. He never attempts at the comprehensive remedy of the ailing. Instead, he uses his knowledge and skills merely to keep one “as much alive as it is necessary” (36) for the uninterrupted workflow of Yaksha Town. Ascending a degree further, the Assistant
Governor willingly takes upon himself the task of arresting Ranjan when he notices the Deputy Governor’s reluctance in doing so. The allies of the Governor are all effective instruments in his hands to perpetuate the subjugation of the common people to the system. To sustain the unethical system that warrants the rulers terrene privilege, the unconscionable master and his associates would scarcely ever hesitate to take shelter of absolute lies or even sheer brute force when necessary. Following the Governor’s decree, his “men” (43) cannily informs Rañjan about Nandini’s degeneration to a concubine of the King. The Governor’s obvious intention is the annihilation of the spirit of liberty among the people with the young man’s rubout. Being almost repulsed at the Governor’s ignoble design, the Deputy Governor readily abjures “the whole business” about Rañjan and Nandini he has been entrusted with:

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 Governor uses an almost identical artifice to rip the Wrestler off his strength, not only somatic but mental also. Despite being aware of the Wrestler’s inevitable rout, the Governor instigates him to challenge the King to a duel, and afterward even thrusts the liability of the whole affair on him – “Now after egging me on, he goes about saying it’s my fault,” the Wrestler grumbles (35). Tragically, the Wrestler is robbed not only of his strength but also the hope to regain it. He loses himself in the murk of despondency. The Governor and his allies would not allow anything in the Town that might prove unfruitful or parlous for the system. Then, on sensing the impending rebellion of the workers for freedom, they regress to a greater atrocity. Bishu is imprisoned and the innocent adolescent, Kishôr, is killed. They do not even spare Nandini. They employ the whole of the military power to throttle the upsurge of the workers for liberty.

Tagore’s Red Oleanders is “a drama of real life, a moving parable of contemporary civilization” (Sanyal 259). It is a gloomy portrayal of the modern world as a place that is crescively deteriorating to a Yaksha Town. The greater part of humanity in such a world is doomed to a lifelong servitude without the hope of deliverance by a handful of unscrupulous materialists who would scarcely waver to descend to the worst possible level to attain worldly privilege. A change in the situation seems an impossibility, the dream of liberty and fraternity which poets have eulogized for ages, only a fabulous possibility. Tagore seems petrified to think about a world like this.

2. Is society wholly responsible?

In the long run, we shape our lives … the choice we make is ultimately our own responsibility.

– Roosevelt (Sharpe, INS).

Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.

– Shaw, Man and Superman, 1903 (OCDQ).
In his *Existentialism is a Humanism* (*Lexistentialisme est in humanisme*, 1946) Sartre puts forth two interrelated concepts concerning the human condition—the constitution of the self through choice (“Man makes himself . . . in choosing his ethics,” EHE 43) and personal responsibility of an action or situation (“[man] is responsible for everything he does,” EHE 23). These two ideas illustrate the fact that a person’s being at a particular point of time or a particular situation is the constitution of that person’s actions decided through his or her choice. If Sartre is right, it would become quite impossible to thrust the whole responsibility of the thralldom of Tagore’s workers on the system, or more particularly, the ruling class of Yaksha Town. Their suffering in one way or the other is of their own “choosing” (EHE 43). Tagore presents in the play the stories of Bishu, of Chandrá and Phágulal, and that of Gókul to convey how each character becomes as much accountable for the loss of his or her liberty as the system the character is a part of. Bishu’s account makes it crystal clear that none had ever compelled him to renounce his freedom, symbolized by his early life amidst the resplendent beauty of the countryside, to work as a spy in Yaksha Town. He recounts to Nandini:

One day, while I was gazing at the sunset clouds, she had her eyes upon the golden spire of the Governor’s palace. Her glance challenged me to take her over there. In my foolish pride, I vowed to do so. (22)

So, his act of descending to Yaksha Town where his life becomes miserable with his “spell” being “broken” (22) is wholly his choice. He is responsible for his affliction himself. In making this choice he reveals merely his preference for, what Sartre says in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* (*Lettre et le neant*, 1943), “certain values [most importantly, maintaining his high esteem in his beloved’s eyes] to the value of the refusal” to be a part of the place (EHE 54). Whatever follows is the evident outcome of his choice. However, it is also because of the choice that the reader finds Bishu as the multifarious person he is—a disillusioned escapist who can abnegate his “comfortable job” (14) with ease but concurrently aware of the impossibility to repossess liberty (“Your Governor has closed the way as well as the will to return,” 14), a lover whose “mind scorns to be cautious” (24) with his beloved’s proximity, a melancholy bard who discovers in the beauty of the woman of desire “the charm of sorrow” (20). In other words, a Bishu would be unimaginable but for his primary choice. Bishu’s story gains universality in this regard, for each person is the sum of that person’s previous actions determined through his or her choice.

Again, the enslavement of Phágulal and Chandrá is primarily the outcome of their preference for material wealth to a humble life in the lap of nature offering freedom. Before getting engaged in Yaksha Town as workers, they possessed ample opportunity to not be a part of the place. That they opt for slavery for gold and abandon their village is absolutely their choice. No one else can be made responsible for that. Bishu is right when he says that people like them are “all slaving for gold” (14). The reason that Chandrá so easily falls prey to the hypocrisy of the Governor and the Goasin is that her wish to relish the beauty of nature, and as such, liberty, is only half-hearted. It would have simply been impossible for her to forsake her yearning to retreat to her village with such readiness had she already not possessed the stronger contrary desire for riches. She is the slave of her preference before being a slave of the system. As for Phágulal, “his existence” is determined “with reference to” (EHE 39) his toiling “for hours over and above the twelve” (14) for the fulfillment of Chandrá’s “dream of gold” (14), which is his as well. The dream, Bishu detects correctly, “lashes him on to work, more severely than the foreman’s whip”
The same dream negates his, as Chandra’s, escape from Yaksha Town. Bishu manifests this truth when he says, “If you go there today you will fly back here tomorrow, like a caged bird in its cage, hankering for its drugged food” (14). In the story of the couple Tagore actually narrates the story of the modern world where people are prone to apprise life in conformity with one’s material possessions, and as such miserably remain divorced from the savors of freedom and carefree happiness. The subjugating society they reside in is only a macroeconomic conveyance of their private world of slavery.

Gokul’s story of enslavement is somewhat different, for unlike the other workers he seems fully content with his position in Yaksha Town and never feels an urge for a life of liberty. Being a person whose salvation rests in the system, he maintains his allegiance to it throughout the play. His entity is solely system-oriented, and so his evaluation of a person, including himself, is determined in the same context. His detest for Nandini stems from the fact that her being cannot be brought to a state which is free from direct oppositions or conflicts of interest with the ideology he believes in. To execute the works assigned to him by his superiors in the social hierarchy with earnest dedication is his highest desire. He is seemingly the worst victim of the system, for he slaves away without an awareness of it. His character has been delineated, as has been disclosed earlier, with the obvious intention to reveal how much social ideology can delude a person. As such, his character might evoke compassion in the reader’s mind.

All this is true but at the same time not the whole truth. There is another side of the story, which quite intriguingly conveys Gokul’s choice of his subjugation to the system, that is, his deliberate renunciation of liberty. One might be intrigued to ask why he chooses that. The answer is thought-provoking enough to relate Gokul’s story to humanity in general. Gokul renounces his liberty because like “most people” he does not “really want freedom” (Magee 87). If the statement is true, another obvious question is evoked: Why is it that “most people” (as also Gokul) do not “really” want to be free? The answer is that freedom is frightening. Frightening because being free in a world devoid of a priori values one is barely able to thrust the responsibility of one’s actions on external factors like the society or the community one belongs to. Whatever might be the outcome of an action, it is, after all, the inevitable consequence of that person’s choice. Being “condemned to be free” (EHE 52) one is always privileged with what to choose, but not with not to choose. One’s situation in life is one’s own making. This is the ultimate reality of life. A realization of this truth, which in essence is inescapable, fills one with “anguish” (EHE 19), which for Sartre is:

> the reflective apprehension of the Self as freedom, the realization that a nothingness slips in between my Self and my past and future so that nothing relieves me from the necessity of continually choosing myself and nothing guarantees the validity of the values which I choose. (Sartre: 799 - 800)

As it is very hard to withstand anguish, “most people” prefer to escape it. One of the most convenient ways of escaping anguish is to take refuge in what Sartre calls, “bad faith” (Spade 133). Bad faith involves self-deception by playing down one’s “transcendence” (Spade 140), that is, deliberately renouncing one’s freedom (to choose), and playing up one’s “facticity” (Spade 140). It is to play a definite role assigned by the community, the society, the family, etc. whole-heartedly with the intention of gaining “a definition, an essence” through it (Spade 140). In other words, bad faith furnishes one
with the belief of being identical with the role one plays as if he or she were nothing else other than the person represented by that role. So, bad faith is a choice to confine oneself in a particular role to escape the afflictions of choosing every time and be responsible for one’s actions.

Gôkul’s renunciation of liberty can best be explicated with the idea expounded above. Like any other person, there are two facets in Gôkul’s being – “his facticity and his transcendence” (Spade 140). The first one is “his context” (his being a worker in Yaksha Town) and the second “his freedom [to be able to choose every time] that will be exercised in that context” (Spade 140). Gôkul “play(s) down his transcendence and . . . play(s) up his facticity” (Spade 140) to epitomize himself as an ideal figure of what is expected from the working class of the Town. In this way, he feels,

he wouldn’t have to face the risks and anguish of freedom . . . He would be secure. He would know exactly what was expected of him, what he could do and what he could not do. (Spade 140)

So, Gôkul takes refuge in bad faith, which in his case is to become, what can be claimed, just a worker, a role which he believes would provide him with an essence permanently. He denies his freedom willingly in order to “turn himself into a being-in-itself” (Spade 140) as a worker in Yaksha Town (and nothing else). He would then, like Santiago’s sheep in The Alchemist (1988) “never have to make any decisions” on his own (Coelho 6), and so never be accountable for his actions. Overall, Gôkul’s story conveys that more than anything else, he is responsible for his enslavement to the system as a worker personally.

The three stories discussed here evince the primary cause of enslavement to the system not merely of the four characters concerned, but also of the working class of Yaksha Town as a whole, as well as of humanity in general. In the vein of an existentialist, Tagore refuses to allege the society of being wholly responsible for the victimization of a person belonging to it and conveys with acute brilliance how everyone deprives himself or herself of liberty through choosing that state of existence personally. In other words, Tagore relates to the play humanity’s responsibility for the loss of freedom.

3. Are the rulers free?

Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves. — Lincoln, LHP.

It would, however, be misleading to assume that Tagore’s play delineates the loss of freedom of the working class to accentuate its possession by the rulers. Tagore believed that whenever the desire for worldly privileges becomes the controlling factor of life, there inevitably emerges an irremediable rift between life and liberty. With this belief, he delineates in the play the story of the rulers. He fetches resemblance between the situations of the rulers and those they rule by showing how even the former sect of the Town suffers enslavement despite being the regulators of the system.

The loss of liberty of the ruling class is best indicated by the fact that their proper names have been superseded by their vocational or system-oriented designations – the King, the Governor, the Assistant Governor, the Deputy Governor, the Gosain, the
Headman, the Professor and the Doctor. A proper name is culturally believed to indicate the entity of a person as an individual, and designation the role he or she is to play in the society. The "perilously maintained lack of name[s]” (Barthes 102) of the rulers indicates their dependence on the system for subsistence. A person whose entity is almost wholly system-determined can hardly be claimed to be a free individual. He or she is known only by the role played in society. In short, the selfhood and liberty of the person get imbibed by the system he or she belongs to. The dependence of the ruling class on the system is intensified by the fact that even the designations of some of them have degenerated further to numbers, something by which they prefer to indicate the workers. The Headman is known as 71 T – “71 T is the headman there,” the Governor says to the Gosain (18). However, only the Gosain has been assigned a name: Kenārām. But that has been done deliberately to manifest once again the influence of the society in forming a person’s identity. The Bengali word “Kenārām” signifies “a person who can be purchased.” The system has purchased his identity, which ought to be formed by his relation to God and his independence from the economic or the socio-political milieu of the place he belongs to, in exchange of temporal gains. Thus, none among the ruling class can be claimed to be a free individual.

There is then the King’s story which reflects beautifully how the ruler loses freedom by becoming a victim of the self-oriented system. From the outset, the King remains alienated from the rest of the world inside his symbolic stronghold surrounded by an impenetrable iron net. As Yaksha Town has wholly been conceptualized by him, his act of remaining inside the net is deliberate, his plan seemingly to be in the center of the systemic framework of the place from where each worker would be “uninterruptedly available to [his] surveillance” (Hawthorn 252). His design, in other words, has been to be sentient about the workflow of the Town all the time. The effectiveness of his design is ascertained by the fact that the system’s network becomes too strong with time to escape. As the Antiquarian makes an effort to flee from the system’s grip, the Professor anticipates the futility of his enterprise with the following words:

You see how the Antiquarian has quietly slipped off, thinking he’ll fly and save himself. After going a few steps, he’ll soon discover that there’s a wired network stretched from post to post, from country to country. (33–34)

Though the King’s design carries Yaksha Town to the apex of power and prosperity, ironically it also ensures his imprisonment inside the symbolic fortress of the “panoptic,” (Foucault 1986: 213) system to such an extent that the real power slips away eventually from his hands to those exercising it directly on the dwellers of the Town. The Governor becomes all-powerful while the King degenerates to a mere name used to carry out the entire system-related operation in the town. Thus, there is virtually a downfall in his position from the supreme ruler to an object of the system. Tragically, however, he remains unaware of the whole situation until he discovers the Governor’s evil scheme against him at the end. He roars with indignation at the shocking discovery: “Deceived! These traitors have deceived me, – perdition take them! My own machine refuses my sway! Call the Governor – bring him to me handcuffed” (47). “But the Governor has his hand on the machine button; so even before the King can set out . . . the Governor’s troop can be heard approaching” (Kundu xlvi). Herein lies the greatest
irony of the play – the victimization of the ruler. The King’s story serves as a warning to the totalitarians devoted to Mammon worship – accumulation of prosperity through oppression begets catastrophe.

The world surrounded by the iron net is the King’s confinement also because he suffers here alone from the ever-amplifying workload without the hope of respite. He is left with no breathing spell to indulge in experiencing the “love . . . and beauty” (8) that life can offer. He declines Nandini’s invitation to get out of his enclosure “into the fields” (7) to relish “the September sun . . . spreading the glow of the ripening corn in the air” (7), because he has “no time” (8) for that. This mode of confinement is, however, the inevitable outcome of the choice of his youth. He had chosen at that time to employ his energy in acquiring material prosperity and terrestrial power while he had bounteous opportunity to adore a life of freedom like Rañjan. But once he made his choice, he became its victim, as one becomes the prey of addiction. Liberty and joy retreated for him to the sphere of the unattainable memory of the past, life became insipid with an appended anxiety for safeguarding his possessions. All this is reflected in his helpless lamentation to Nandini,

All I possess is so much dead weight. No increase of gold can create a particle of a touchstone, no increase of power can come up to youth. I can only guard by force. If I had Rañjan’s youth I could leave you free and yet hold you fast. My time is spent in knitting and binding rope, but, alas, everything else can be kept tied, except joy. (9)

His primary choice eventually complicates his being in such a manner that he loses the ability to savor the simple charms of life despite his greatest effort. As Nandini appeals to him to work amidst the joy of the green “Fields” (8), a work assuredly “much simpler than [his] work in Yaksha Town” (8), the King painfully concedes that “It’s the simple which is impossible for” him (8). This loss is probably the greatest curse of his life. The King is a facsimile of every modern man whose assiduous enterprise throughout life for material success imparts the final realization of futility.

It is quite alarming that even the most enthusiastic devotee of the totalitarian system, the Governor, is bereft of liberty. As the Governor enjoys the real power in the Town, he is putatively not a victim of the system. But a closer look at his situation unbosoms the contrary truth. The system that bestows on him power and prosperity demands his entire energy and time in return. In this way, he becomes its slave. One can discern with ease how his entire thought process is captivated by the system to be redirected to its end. The Governor’s entity as an individual has long since been eroded by his social-role, and he is left with “no leaves, no roots, no sap in the veins” (23). Completely “Cut off from life” (23), his only kinship is with the system. The reader would, however, admire the Governor on espying how masterfully he maintains the whole system of the Town. Had he not wasted his unparalleled aptitude of governance in slaving the system, he could emerge as a great leader of the people, a leader possessing the ability to direct his followers to a brighter future. But, after all, it was his choice that he became a dictator and not a leader of the common folk. His dominant passion seems to be acquiring a position that would enable him to regulate the fate of his fellow human beings. However, the process that paves the path of accomplishment of his desire also deprives him of liberty by wresting his whole dedication to the system. Tagore seems to present in the Governor a dehumanized power monger who values worldly privileges above everything else. It would not be hard to find his real-life counterparts.
The Assistant Governor and the Headman are equally dedicated to the system of Yaksha Town as the Governor, and have, as inferred earlier, no identity outside the one constituted by their role in the society. Tragically, the same is true about the Gosain and the Doctor. The latter two have vitiated their noble enterprise for material privileges. The condition of the first two is, however, worse because they live as the sycophants of the Governor carrying out his decree and aiding him in every possible way to carry on the totalitarian system. They have chosen this mode of living to satisfy their narrow selfish ends. The Headman, for instance, is found to request the Governor’s favor ceaselessly:

... there’s one No. 95, a distant connection of mine by marriage, ever ready to make sandals for the feet of Your Lordship’s sweeper out of his own ribs ... and yet up to now –

...

Just a word for another person ... my own brother-in-law ... yet for my master’s sake –

...

There comes His Honor the Deputy Governor. Please speak a word to him on my behalf.

(41)

The Headman and the Deputy Governor are Tagore’s representation of those people in the real world who for their personal interests have willingly vended themselves to a powerful politician and exist solely as useful tools in the latter’s hands. Any question related to their freedom or happiness would once again evoke in the reader’s mind the same answer that Auden gave concerning identical interrogations about the unknown citizen in his 1940 poem – “The question is absurd” (l. 65). However, it is also “with the eager service of such people that an oppressive system thrives” (Kundu li).

The Deputy Governor and the Professor are, however, exceptions among the ruling class, for the totalitarian system has not yet succeeded in squelching altogether the humanitarian impulse from them. The whole operation of the system is quite unpleasant for them. Still, however, they have conceded to it as its coerced participants, and their reluctant service has ensured their enslavement to the system. Nandini is correct in identifying the Professor as a slave when she fetches resemblance between his situation and that of the workers – “You who burrow day and night in a mass of yellow pages, like your diggers in the bowels of the earth” (4). However, being a man of wisdom the Professor himself is quite aware of his loss of freedom, something that gets revealed as he relates to her his compulsion for role-playing – “it is the made-up clothes that define us” (4). His strong disapproval of the system is expressed when he says: “Yaksha Town is a city under eclipse” (6). The same disapproval is noticed in the Deputy Governor’s reluctance to arrest Rañjan. He says to the Governor, “That kind of work is not in my line” (43). Both the Professor and the Deputy Governor are victims of the system, as they need to serve it despite their hatred for a totalitarian system. But at the same time, the responsibility for their victimization is primarily their own. They wish to relish freedom but fear to live their ideas that invite direct conflict with the system. They convey inclinations for a peaceful social existence that compels them to undertake an unpleasant business mutely, or at best eschew on possibility. They represent those people in the real world “who,” as famously described by the 19th-century American orator Frederick Douglass in his West Indian Emancipation speech
delivered at Canandaigua, New York in 1857, “profess to favor freedom, and yet
depreciate agitation.” Their fear at rebellion against despotism attests to their subjuga-
tion to it.

4. Conclusion: is there a possibility of freedom?

Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.  
– Washington, LJ M.

Make us your slaves, but feed us.  
– Dostoevsky, GI.

The above exposition relates the story of how every person in Yaksha Town becomes
dispossessed of liberty. Such a story is a clear revelation of Tagore’s pessimism about the
human condition. However, with this haunting clime of enchainment that pervades almost
the entire length of the play, there is also a healthy optimism in the work which finds
expression in the hope of freedom among the workers and, quite intriguingly, even some
among the rulers toward the end. The hope at first penetrates the town in the shape of the
“mystery of beauty,” Nandini (8). She enkindles the yearning of freedom in everyone’s heart
with her rendering of the “perfumed wine of wind” (7), the bright sky, the “shivering corn”
(7), with her wild call to “come out . . . into the fields” (7), with her anticipation of the advent
of Rañjan, the spirit of liberty personified, on Yaksha Town. Nandini’s influence becomes
operative in the town right from the beginning of the play, though none at the early stage is
able to be fully optimistic about a better future. The Professor is candid in extolling Nandini’s
presence in Yaksha Town–

The sunlight gleaming through the forest thickets surprises nobody, but the light that breaks
through a cracked wall is quite a different thing. In Yaksha Town, you are this light that
startles. (4)

But he also adjoins a cold rejoinder to her propitious declaration that “Rañjan will
bring God’s own laughter in their [the inhabitants of Yaksha Town] midst and startle
them into life” (5) with the words, “Divine laughter is the sunlight that melts ice but not stone”
(5). Very soon, however, the town grows hopeful about being unshackled from the
bondage of the totalitarian system. The hope that pierces the walls of Yaksha Town with
Nandini, blooms to its fullness with the arrival of Rañjan, the messenger of liberty. Hope
fetches joy. The Governor is reported about the workers’ “getting frisky” (30) being
infected by the “boisterousness” (30) of Rañjan. Their frisky behavior is an obvious
indication of the felicity that the awakening of the long-forgotten spirit of liberty brings
in them. It is also an anticipation of the emerging upsurge against the totalitarian system.
The advent of Rañjan has an almost cognate effect on the Deputy Governor. Rañjan’s
“infectious” boisterousness makes him “so much amused . . . that he doesn’t want to lay
hands on him” (30). The Deputy Governor’s attitude toward Rañjan is symptomatic of
the dawning of the spirit of liberty in him. In his present mental state, he expresses strong
disapproval at the Governor’s attempts at harming Nandini. He interrupts the Governor
in the middle of his “the girl must be – ” with “Don’t talk of all that to me” (43).
The spirit of liberty makes its emergence even in the King. Initially conveying preference for gold and power, the King subsequently becomes fully aware of his enslaved condition in the “web of panoptic” (Foucault 1986: 213) system, the network he had designed in the past to administer Yaksha Town. The proximity of Nandini and the portrayal of Rañjan’s free spirit by her make him realize that he has lost the invaluable in him – his liberty, his youth, his energy – in his quest for worldly possessions. He also realizes that the life in him has faded away long since to transmute him to a King amidst his lifeless wealth, that he has gained the strength to “extract gold from the fearsome depths of secrecy,” but has lost the ability “to wrest . . . magic [like Rañjan] from the near at hand” (9) in the process. His realization paves the path for his liberty. To delineate the awakened sense of freedom in the King, Tagore invites the dichotomy of living and existing through the frog symbol. The King stretches out his hands with a dead frog from within his network and tells Nandini,

Once upon a time, this frog got into a hole in a stone, and in that shelter, it existed for three hundred years. I have learnt from it the secret of continuing to exist, but to live it does not know. To-day I felt bored and smashed its shelter. I have thus saved it for existing forever. (25)

To live for Tagore seems to signify the state of being in which a person seeks meaning in the self, which according to Kierkegaard signifies a relation that “relates itself to its own self” and in turn also relates “itself to that which constituted the whole relation” (Kierkegaard, 1941: 9, 10). “[T]hat which constituted the whole relation” is for Kierkegaard nothing but God. This relationship, that is, the self is a “positive third term” (9). It is a “third term” because “the relation is constituted by another [God]” (10) and “positive” because it is the relation to that which has founded it. For Tagore, this positive relation enables one to be free. One truly lives when one is free, and when one is free, one is happy. However, what Kierkegaard epithets God is for Tagore nature. So, it is the relationship with nature that according to Tagore endows one with freedom. One becomes free because one arrives at the self, being liberated from every bondage of the human world. When Nandini finds the King entangled in his network, she calls him to come out to the “fields” glowing in the “September sun” under the “sky that seems to sway among the shivering corn” (7). She intends to enable him to savor freedom by leading him to his self, that is, a relationship that would relate itself to its foundation, which is nature.

Contrarily, existing for Tagore implies that mode of being in which the relationship does not relate itself to its own self, or its founding factor (God or nature), but rather to the human world. The relationship here is negative as the thing to which the relation is established is not the founding factor of that relation. Unlike the positive relation, the source of freedom and joy, this negative relation deprives one of those two possessions by constraining him or her to the system regulating the human world, a system constituted by the “many” (Kierkegaard 2013: 17) thinking, believing and subsisting in relation to that system. The “many” is also called the “crowd” (8) which lacks credibility because the units constituting it are devoid of individual traits. Each unit is meaningful only with reference to the whole or the role(s) assigned by the system. That is why Kierkegaard says, “The crowd is untruth” (8). So, when one exists, one’s plausibility of being is abraded by
a negative relation that also seizes one’s liberty, and as such, one’s joy. A mode of being that is devoid of credibility and freedom is evidently meaningless. So, existing for Tagore is absurd.

The frog symbol is used to indicate the King’s movement from the absurdity of existing to the vivacity of living, from confinement in the self-oriented social system to the liberty in the self. The frog is the King, its shelter his network. As the frog had chosen the aperture of the stone as its shelter, so the King is the network of the totalitarian system as his. The frog’s survival in its shelter for long “three hundred years” signifies the King’s impregnability within his network. So long as his entity bears relation only to the totalitarian system, his subsistence in Yaksha Town is ineluctable – this is the secret of his “continuing to exist” as a king. He remains endowed with power and prosperity all along, and in these possessions, he has been seeking contentment. But his being a king, that is, his existence in relation to the system is threatened with Nandini’s arrival. The proximity of Nandini, the “beautiful one . . . the light which never owns any bond” (4), stirs in him a consciousness of his enslavement as well as of his entity lacking in plausibleness. The consciousness leads him to boredom (with existing), and out of boredom, he smashes the frog’s shelter. With this action, he disentangles himself symbolically from the negative relation that had until now enchain his being to the system of the human world, that is, the totalitarian system of Yaksha Town, and sets out on his way to living, to be free and happy. Because he is the supreme ruler of Yaksha Town, the same act also symbolizes the liberty of the whole town from the bondage to the oppressive system.

The paramount importance of Nandini and Rañjan in ushering the spirit of liberty in Yaksha Town is undeniable. The reader can imagine well how Yaksha Town would remain enchain in the murk of a system-oriented existence had Nandini and her lover not arrived there. But it would be quite misleading to interpret their role as the founding factor of the concept of freedom in the town, as though none living there had an idea about it before they appear. Prior to the advent of Rañjan in Yaksha Town, or even before being influenced by Nandini, Chandrá had expressed her longing to “go just for once, and see [the] waving fields barleycorn” and savor “the ample shade of [their] banyan tree with its hanging roots” to the Governor (16). She sought leave for her and Phágulal from the Governor to be in their village for some days and experience the felicity of liberty in the lap of nature. What Rañjan and Nandini actually do is to introduce in the town a positive energy that would enable every person to become aware of the absurdity of existing in relation to the system for worldly ends, so that one reckons a life of freedom neither as a momentary repose concerning his or her being primarily involved in the material enterprise (like Chandrá and Phágulal), nor even as an unattainable possibility (like the King, the Professor, the Deputy Governor, or Bishu), but as something for the attainment of which one is born. The presence of the two inspires Yaksha Town to get liberated from the desire of material privileges or the fear of despotism. They route the town to a dream of the ecstasy in the bosom of nature as a permanent possibility.

Once the heart of Yaksha Town is stirred with the spirit of liberty, the place is transmuted to a front of rebellion against the totalitarian system that has until the present kept every person a prisoner of it. The “conquering call” of Rañjan that he “leaves behind him in death” (49) exerts a tremendous influence on the workers, at least, on most of them, and they assemble to put an end to their prisoner-like existence with robust
optimism. Rañjan becomes a martyr, whose reign for Kierkegaard begins with death – “the martyr dies and his rule begins” (qtd. in; Vries 169). Like Nandini, the rebels “cast away all fear” (47), even that of death, to become ready to “break the prison gate” (49), that is, the gate meant to close the exit route of Yaksha Town. They would not “fall back” (49) even though they die. Their resolution indicates that they have already acquired liberty in the personal sphere, that is, liberty not only from fear but also from all those “deceptions” (49) which had bound them to the system. They are ardently desirous of stepping out on the soft grass under the radiant sun in the lap of nature to experience the felicity of living. In other words, they are determined in establishing a relation of their being to the foundation of that relation, nature, and attain freedom thusly.

The conviction of the rebels in being triumphant in their struggle for liberty is concretized when they are united with the King, who being equally enthusiastic in savoring liberty as they, gets engaged in upsetting the very system that has made him the supreme ruler. He shatters the “Flagstaff” (48) that stands to ascertain the subjugation of the common people to him, and assures the insurgents about his comradeship in demolishing the “prison gate,” as they would fail to “to break it alone” (49). Then at last, on experiencing the “tidings of the secret of Life [in his heart], he [goes] off in quest of it” (50) calling after the name of Nandini. He conquers death like Rañjan and his beloved in having discovered its meaning at last. He asserts with contentment: “At last I have found the meaning of death. I am saved!” (50). The King’s footsteps are followed by the Professor who like the rebels finally wins over fear. He says to Phágulal: “I have thrown away my books to follow him [the King]” (50). The books had constituted his private world in which he sought momentary refuge (“shelter,” 6) from the unpleasant enterprise assigned by the system he used to serve. His act of throwing away his books signifies that in place of eschewing his unsavory business time and again, he is prepared to upset the very root of it, and experience freedom as a perpetual asset of life.

Thus the reader can readily infer that the workers, the King and the Professor (implicitly, also the Deputy Governor) embrace the spirit of liberty wholeheartedly, and only because of that are they able to overcome all “deceptions” (49) and fear, even the greatest fear one might experience, the fear of death. Once they know what liberty is, they comprehend the meaning of life, as also “the meaning of death” (50). In this way, they are emancipated from all the associations that tangled them to the system. The hope of a life that comes with Nandini, or the “news of . . . spring” (5) that Rañjan brings to Yaksha Town has a positive effect on them. Because Yaksha Town is a microcosmic representation of the modern world, the craving of the rebels for liberty for the sake of which they refuse even to waver from a direct confrontation with the totalitarian system conveys Tagore’s belief that there is still hope for humanity from being engulfed in the gloom of material existence.

But it is to be remembered concomitantly that Tagore does not draw a conclusion to his play with this optimistic note. He counterbalances the rebelling faction of the town with the other that retains allegiance to the totalitarian system till the end. The second group includes the Governor, the Assistant Governor, the Headman, and the Doctor, persons who exist solely in relation to the system. These administrators would never know the taste of freedom as they prefer worldly privileges above everything else. That is why they consider Nandini and Rañjan as the foe of Yaksha Town, and later on, deploy full military force to ensure a stalwart defense against the upsurge. They remain forever
enslaved by the system they uphold. In their mission of upholding the system, they are ironically aided by persons like Gökul, who though belong to the working class, the class they exploit, are as much dedicated to the system as they are. These workers, unlike their fellow workers participating in the rebellion, prefer slavery to the system, as like their masters their lives are fully system-oriented. Besides, as inferred earlier, they do not wish to be free also because freedom fetches responsibility for every action. They find it convenient to exist only as workers, to follow the directions of their masters and never deciding anything on their own. Moreover, they are shrewd enough to comprehend that their act of succoring the system during a crisis would secure a loftier position for them in society in the future. Quite obviously, they never “turn up” (50) to support the rebels. The supporters of the totalitarian system of the town are precisely those people who are worldly-wise, who think practically, and who are prone to measure the achievements of life by the scale of profit and loss in the material sense. These persons are all insensitive to the felicity of liberty. Consequently, unlike the King or the other rebels, they remain ignorant of the meaning of life forever.

As Tagore looks at the human world, he finds it easier to relate people to the second coalition of Yaksha Town than the first one. Probably that is why he cannot grow very hopeful about the possibility of freedom in this world. He restraints himself from portraying the triumph of the rebels in Red Oleanders, as in his Yaksha Town he aspires to delineate the situation of the real world. But the reader can still discover hope in the play, as Tagore does not even declare the complete defeat of the questers of liberty. The inconclusive ending of the play serves as a question to modern humanity about what it really longs for – material privileges necessitating the loss of human liberty with the ineluctable emergence of a totalitarian system or the felicity of freedom that for Tagore claims for propinquity with nature and detachment from the human-fabricated worldly systems? Tagore seems to wish ardently through the play that humanity grows sensible enough to choose the second option. Otherwise, the day is not far that the whole world would be transmuted to a “city under eclipse.”

Notes

1. The poem Swâdhíñatâ Sâñgeêt is from Rangalal Bandyopadhyay’s (1827-87) historical romance Pâdmiñi Upâkhyân, which was published in 1858. The work is considered to be his masterpiece. The quoted line is my translation. It is the opening line of the poem.
2. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for Gîtâñjâli (Song Offerings in English), a collection of devotional poems. He is, in fact, the first non-European to receive the award.
3. The term was used by Foucault in his Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (first published in 1975 in French). The word appears in a chapter entitled “Panopticism.” By “Panoptism” [or, panopticism], says Foucault “I have in mind an ensemble of mechanisms brought into play in all the clusters of procedures used by power. Panoptism was a technological invention in the order of power, comparable with the system engine in the order of production. This invention had the peculiarity of being utilized first of all on a local level, in schools, barracks and hospitals. This was where the experiment of integral surveillance was carried out” (Foucault 1980: 71). So, the term is actually related to “integral surveillance.” Foucault’s concept of panopticism is based on the idea of “panopticon,” designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). “The
Panopticon is a type of institutional building and a system of control . . . The concept of the design is to allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single security guard, without the inmates being able to tell whether they are being watched” (“Panopticon,” Wikipedia).

4. All the quotations from Tagore’s play have been extracted from Red Oleanders: A Drama in One Act. New Delhi: Peacock Books, 2017: 1-51.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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