



Power, Humanity, and Moral Resistance: An Extended Critical Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Raktakarabi

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's *Raktakarabi* (1926), translated as *Red Oleanders*, stands as one of the most philosophically complex and politically charged plays in modern Indian drama. Through dense symbolism, allegory, and poetic dialogue, Tagore critiques authoritarian power, industrial capitalism, and the moral emptiness of mechanized civilization. Set in the oppressive mining state of Yaksha Town, the play dramatizes the conflict between lifeless authority and living human values. This paper undertakes an in-depth study of *Raktakarabi*, focusing on its symbolism, characterization, political implications, philosophical humanism, and contemporary relevance. It argues that Tagore's vision of resistance is fundamentally ethical and spiritual rather than violent or revolutionary, rooted in love, freedom, and the restoration of human dignity.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore occupies a unique position in Indian and world literature as a poet, philosopher, dramatist, and social thinker. While he is widely celebrated for his lyrical poetry and songs, his dramatic works often reveal a darker and more critical engagement with social and political realities. *Raktakarabi*, written in 1926, marks a decisive shift in Tagore's dramatic vision. It is a symbolic political drama that interrogates the nature of power, wealth, and dehumanization in modern civilization.

Written during the late colonial period, *Raktakarabi* reflects Tagore's growing disillusionment with both imperial authority and the blind pursuit of industrial progress. The play emerges at a time when the world



was witnessing the rise of authoritarian regimes, unchecked capitalism, and mechanized warfare. Against this backdrop, Tagore constructs a fictional world that mirrors the moral crisis of modern society.

Unlike conventional realist drama, *Raktakarabi* employs allegory and symbolism to communicate its themes. The play is less concerned with plot than with ideas, emotions, and ethical conflicts. At its core, it asks a fundamental question: What happens to humanity when power becomes detached from moral responsibility?

Historical and Intellectual Context

To fully appreciate *Raktakarabi*, it is essential to situate it within its historical and intellectual context. The 1920s were marked by political unrest in India, including the Non-Cooperation Movement and debates over nationalism and freedom. Although Tagore supported India's independence, he was deeply critical of aggressive nationalism and any form of blind political dogma.

Internationally, the aftermath of World War I had exposed the destructive potential of industrial modernity. Machines, bureaucratic systems, and centralized power structures had transformed human beings into expendable units. Tagore, who consistently advocated a balance between science, art, and spirituality, perceived modern civilization as spiritually bankrupt.

Raktakarabi can thus be read as a response to colonial exploitation, industrial capitalism, and emerging totalitarian ideologies. The play does not target a single political system; instead, it critiques power itself when it becomes absolute and inhuman.

Synopsis of *Raktakarabi*

The play is set in Yaksha Town, a prosperous yet oppressive kingdom obsessed with gold mining. The city is ruled by a powerful King who remains largely invisible, communicating through commands and regulations. The citizens, particularly the miners, are forced to work relentlessly underground, losing their individuality, freedom, and joy.

The arrival of Nandini, a vibrant and fearless young woman, disrupts the rigid order of Yaksha Town. Unlike others, she does not fear authority and freely expresses compassion, love, and curiosity. Her presence awakens suppressed humanity among the workers and unsettles the King himself.

As the play progresses, tensions rise between mechanical authority and living human values. The suffering of characters like Bishu exposes the cruelty of the system. Ultimately, the play moves toward a



symbolic dismantling of tyranny, achieved not through violence but through moral awakening and self-realization.

Symbolism and Allegory

Symbolism is central to the structure and meaning of *Raktakarabi*. Every element in the play functions on both literal and metaphorical levels.

Yaksha Town

Yaksha Town represents a mechanized, authoritarian society driven by greed and control. Despite its immense wealth, the city lacks warmth, creativity, and compassion. It symbolizes modern industrial civilization, where economic productivity is prioritized over human welfare.

The underground mines reflect moral darkness and spiritual suffocation. The workers' confinement below the surface suggests the suppression of human freedom and individuality.

The King

The King is one of Tagore's most powerful symbolic creations. His invisibility signifies the abstract nature of modern power—bureaucratic, faceless, and omnipresent. He is less a human ruler than a system.

Though immensely powerful, the King is emotionally isolated and spiritually empty. His authority is sustained by fear rather than respect. Through him, Tagore illustrates how absolute power ultimately imprisons the ruler as much as the ruled.

Gold

Gold functions as a symbol of material wealth and obsession. It is the foundation of Yaksha Town's economy and authority, yet it destroys human lives. Gold, in Tagore's vision, represents the moral corruption inherent in unchecked materialism.

Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)

The red oleander flowers symbolize life, love, beauty, and rebellion. Their vibrant color contrasts sharply with the grey, lifeless environment of Yaksha Town. They stand for nature's vitality and the human spirit's refusal to be suppressed.



Character Analysis

Nandini: The Spirit of Freedom

Nandini is the emotional and philosophical heart of the play. She embodies life, fearlessness, and compassion. Unlike traditional political rebels, Nandini does not organize protests or challenge authority through violence. Her resistance lies in her humanity.

She speaks freely, befriends workers, and refuses to recognize the King's authority as absolute. Through her presence, characters rediscover joy, empathy, and self-worth. Nandini represents Tagore's belief that true freedom is internal and moral rather than merely political.

The King: Power Without Humanity

The King is portrayed as a tragic figure. Despite his absolute authority, he is deeply insecure and isolated. His desire for control stems from fear—fear of losing power, fear of human connection, and fear of vulnerability.

When confronted by Nandini, the King is forced to recognize his own emptiness. His authority collapses not because of rebellion, but because it lacks moral legitimacy.

Bishu and the Workers

Bishu represents the innocent victim of authoritarian cruelty. His suffering highlights the inhumanity of the system. The workers as a collective symbolize humanity reduced to mechanical labor, stripped of joy and individuality.

Themes in Raktakarabi

Power and Dehumanization

The play exposes how absolute power dehumanizes both rulers and subjects. The workers are treated as tools, while the King becomes emotionally numb. Tagore suggests that power detached from ethical responsibility leads to spiritual decay.

Freedom and Individuality

Freedom in Raktakarabi is not merely political independence. It is the freedom to feel, to love, and to express oneself. Nandini's presence restores individuality to a society that has erased personal identity.



Humanism and Moral Resistance

Tagore rejects violent revolution as a solution. Instead, he advocates moral resistance grounded in love, compassion, and courage. This humanist philosophy aligns with his broader worldview and distinguishes him from many political thinkers of his time.

Philosophical Dimensions

Philosophically, *Raktakarabi* reflects Tagore's synthesis of Eastern spiritual thought and modern humanism. The play echoes Upanishadic ideas of inner freedom while engaging with contemporary critiques of industrial society.

Tagore anticipates later thinkers who warned against the alienation caused by modern systems. Yet, unlike Marxist or existentialist approaches, Tagore offers hope through ethical renewal rather than structural revolution.

Contemporary Relevance

Even today, *Raktakarabi* remains profoundly relevant. In an era dominated by corporate power, surveillance, and technological control, the play's warning against dehumanization resonates strongly. The invisible King can be seen as modern bureaucratic systems, multinational corporations, or authoritarian states.

The play urges contemporary readers to question systems that prioritize profit and efficiency over human dignity.

Conclusion

Raktakarabi is one of Rabindranath Tagore's most visionary and challenging works. Through rich symbolism and philosophical depth, the play critiques the moral failures of power-driven societies while affirming faith in human values. Tagore's vision of resistance—rooted in love, courage, and humanity—offers a timeless alternative to violence and domination.

Ultimately, *Raktakarabi* reminds us that the greatest threat to civilization is not poverty or weakness, but the loss of humanity itself.



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