

**BEWARE OF IMPOSTERS: A STUDY ON THE COMMUNICATION ASPECT
OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S 'BAIKUNTHEER KHATA'**

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Aristotle felt that comedy should represent imitation of action of man lower than us. It is not conclusive to think that Aristotle is emphatic solely on the aristocratic aspect of the matter and wants to say that it has no business with kings and queens and deals with slaves only. This aspect is not totally irrelevant as Aristotle lived in an age of heroism. But what we have to draw from the shade reflected by this great thinker is the aspect of treatment and communication which becomes increasingly important with the passage of time, with the change of social structure where the middle class man gradually becomes important with all his features alive.

In a tragedy, the element of treatment and communication is different in tone though the aspect of follies and foibles are there too. One has every right to say that king Lear is very silly in expecting that his most favourite daughter will love her father only and none else. He was so stirred by the sensible truth from her that the lies uttered by the other two got into his brain. As a result, he threw Cordelia out. divided the property between Goneril and Regan with the expectation that they will take care of him by turns. But in reality, Lear was thrown out in the cold, sheltered by the disowned daughter temporarily, ultimately a death in prison in fully disbalanced state was his fate after enduring the rude shock of his dear cordelia's death. Yes ,it had its origin in his folly but what happened to him is no where enjoyable to us. We get it as his hamartia; his tragic error to us. We get

the communication from the catharsis which rouses pity and fear in us. Comedy on the other hand consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster' as Aristotle describes. Comedy also leads to a happy ending as Plautus and Terence reflected. But comedy is not just entertainment as well as it takes up the oddities and eccentricities of characters, exposes it and gives a message why it is to be got rid of.

There becomes the importance of comedy of manners which we may find in Shakespeare's 'Much ado about nothing' or 'Love's labour lost'. Both these represent the deviation from sense and sensibility. His contemporary Ben Jonson wrote 'Comedy of Humours'-sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic are picked up and ridiculed. His 'Every man in His humour' (1598) is an ideal exponent of this trend. On the other hand, his 'Volpone' and 'The Alchemist' are satiric comedies where protagonists are rogues and other greedy persons are after them to grab their wealth.

From the English playwrights, let's move to a French genius in this field with a purpose which will be disclosed in due time. We are talking about Moliere who is aware of theories but still maintains that drama is not based on theory only, it demands some flesh and blood, some colour which has to be contributed by the playwright's individual talent. A Pedant named Lysidus in his play 'La critique l'Ecole des femmes' (1663) says:

Those who know their Aristotle and Horace see immediately, madam, that this comedy sins against all the rules of art.

There is, indeed, recognition for the great theorists. But the way it is ultimately projected by a pedant shows how people of his attitude spoils dramas in attempting a bookish approach to it. He also works in the same line in preface to 'Les Precieuses':

I could have tried to write a beautiful and learned preface; and I am not short of books which everything erudite there is to be said about tragedy and comedy, about the etymology of both.

The comic tone is not opaque and it is also apparent from his plays that he stressed on commonsense more than theories. In content, he also takes up the violation of good sense or commonsense as a major theme of his treatment. His Tartuffe is an imposter who is cheating Orgon to win his fortune and his daughter. It is not a 'volpone' situation

where one rogue is combating another but a gullible man falling in the trap a cheat or imposter .

From Moliere, we are getting to nineteenth century Bengal where a gentleman named Jyotirindranath Tagore, writing dramas being influenced by him. Jyotirindranath was a versatile genius with great inclination for writing plays and staging it, sometimes in own home and sometimes in professional theatre. How much a hero he was for the professionals can be seen in the recollections of Amritlal Bose who used to wait everyday to watch him when he was a mere boy. If he is so for a stranger ,we can easily understand how affective he can be to the budding genius named Rabindranath Tagore who acknowledged his inspiration repeatedly in memoirs like *Jeevansmriti* or *Chhelebel* as a unique elder brother. Rabindranath himself played the imposter *Alikbabu* in Jyotirindra's '*Amon kormo ar korbo na*(I swear I will never do it),later renamed as *Alikbabu* in 1900. When alive, Kadambari played *Hemangini* and we can guess why Rabindranath dedicated her book under the guise of '*Smt he*'!

But he was Rabindranath and he did not get into the play mechanically and Jyotidada was liberal enough to allow him just as he allowed Robi to write and include a song in his '*Asrumati*'. According to Abaninandranath ,his famous painter-nephew,Jyotindranath could not erase the prominent French touch in this adaptation of Moliere despite his nationalist ethos. For example, he pointed at Hemangini's easy entrance in presence of a stranger which was unthinkable in those days. His another uncle '*Robika*' made a lot of changes to take the play out of the French overtone and give it a local name and habitation. He put Hemangini behind the curtain to make things realistic though her obsession for sentimental novels was retained very much. There lies the point of comic criticism .The world of a decayed feudal society under foreign rule is not the world of sentimental novel where the hero is really a hero and heroine woos him with a long verbal eulogy and vice versa .No, it is a world where imposters are active to plunder wealth with the disguise of a good man . If you fall in their trap, they will just slay you. If the truth did not get exposed in time , Hemangini would marry a rascal only to spoil her life leading to a suicidal situation .

Rabindranath was sarcastic about those who analyzed him as a genius devoid of comic sense. .How much sense of humour he has can be seen in all his three memoirs '*Jeevan Smriti*', '*Chhelebel*' and '*Golposolpo*' where he makes fun of himself too frequently as a true humorist. He is also capable of producing dark comedy , whose glaring example is '*Sarajini Prayan*'. This is apparently a travelogue, describing a river cruise with Jyotindranath, Gyanadanandini and her children. The point to be marked is this

travelogue is written only after a month of Kadambori's suicide. How can we reconcile that with the Rabindranath deeply shocked – a shock that remained in this heart through out his life and made him write endless poems and songs? Jagadish Bhattacharya in his *Kobimanshi* part 1 sorted it out which Prabhat Mukhopadhyay failed to track and exclaimed as a result . Bhattacharya drew out attention to the excluded portion in this writing originally published in 'Bharati'. In 'Bichitra Prabandha' it acquired an abridged form. Rabindranath's hidden emotions are expressed in that excluded portion .

Let's have a look at that:

No farce is better than death .we are defeated if we weep, it is our win when such a big joke got exposed . someone places us like dolls on a decorated velvet of life spread out on us . At the end of the day this velvet is taken off ,only some pieces of woods remain - there lies dig. This invites a very big laughter. We too are laughing - ha ha ha!

Needless to say, this laughter is not an easy one, it has many things behind. Rabindranath is not all light, serenity and worship. He also had in him a sense of dark humor which out in his '*Baikunther Khata*' (Baikuntha's exercise book).The world of this play is that where an imposter is determined to win over a gullible gentleman, squeeze money from him with lies. The matter does not end here. It's ultimate plan is to marry Baikuntha's brother with his sister- in – law, get hold of the property and drive him and his widow daughter out. This world is not the one with innocent fancies, it is a dark world, *Baikunther Khata* could become a tragedy but for the poetic justice at the end where Baikuntha's brother got up from the slumber and drove the rascals out of the house who were torturing the owner and his widow daughter to the most undesirable extent. Now, let us come to the text. Baikuntha is a rich widower , may not be overflowing with money in a decayed feudal setup but does not have to earn by the sweat of the brow.. He has his old loyal servant Ishan and his widow daughter to take care and arrange everything for him .As a result, he has all the time in the world to attempt book on the origin and development of eastern and western music and the new type of notation . The set up is quite similar to that of Rabindranath's own house circle and Baikuntha's similarity with his eldest brother Dwijendranath is marked by both Sukumar Sen and Prabhat Mukhopadhyay . Jagadish Bhattacharya spoke in the same line with reference to fact that Dwijendra himself played the role of Baikuntha !Though not a singer like his

illustrious younger brother s Jyotindranath ,Somendranath & Rabindranath, he was a theorist who laid down the pattern of notation utilised by Jyotindranath in practice.

That is one side of the story which does not imply much harm .It begins when he indulges an imposter without getting into his attitude and motive simply to get him as a reader and listener of his manuscript and the later swallows it to serve his vile purpose. Rabindranath however did not paint Kedar with a flat black colour. No, he is allowed to speak out his predicament - the predicament of a lowly born person in a colonial setup where the motive of earning money dries up other elements.

Baikuntha babu , your meal comes to your room and waits even , but, what to say, when in college, I set the creeper of hope on a high stage and it also produced big pumpkins ,But without water there was no ascent of sap and it remained hollow, now I am fighting hard for money and food .All that was substantial within got squeezed and dried .

Well, the communication is clear. A rich person can indulge in his hobbies, the poor despite his potential has to sacrifice everything and drive for money only. If Kedar silently swallows the bitter pill to marry his sister in law to a moneyed bachelor, it does not imply any gross violation of ethics. When Kedar squeezes money by selling a book of daily balance of a china man as a book on Chinese music, we can not check our smile through it is a clear act of cheating. Well, you can enjoy your hobby, but you have to pay if you are indiscriminate in your enjoyment. You should not purchase a Chinese book without getting into its content. If not only usurps your purse but makes you a burlesque of your own serious self. Abinash, his brother is also a social deviant and therefore becomes a subject of comic treatment. He is a bachelor of forty years busy with his gardening which Baikuntha finds as wastage of money though he pampers his brother to any extent! There lies the ironical part of comic enjoyment! Both the brothers can recognize the other one's folly and the deception as its result, but none can see their own images in the mirror! Abinash too becomes a prey to Kedar's plan as this semi old bachelor falls in love from head to toes. Kedar wins both the brothers and marries his sister in law to Abinash.

Story so far is more or less enjoyable with our willing suspension of ethics. The real dark twist of the story gets exposed after the marriage. We hear Kedar speaking his dark mind:

The marriage is over safely. But things are not sufficiently enjoyable so long Baikuntha is there.

It is now taking up the shape of a serious story of villainy with Kedar already filling up the house with his undesirable relatives to torment Baikuntha and his widow daughter one Bipin occupies the room of Baikuntha where he invites his friends to have a nice time .Baikuntha becomes a stranger in his own house. Things become intolerable to the old servant Ishan to watch his master and his poor daughter getting so much tormented in their own household. This perhaps happened to Dwijendranath himself which is evident from his letter to Gunendranath. Anyway, that is another story. Goodman Baikuntha ultimately decides to leave the house and we also feel his tears when he comments on his writings:

My writings!It is all rubbish!I know,Ishan, everybody makes fun of it. Leave it. It is not required by anyone.

Leaving the house would be the feat accomplished .Fortunately, Abinash waked up from his slumber. Tinkori, Kedar's accomplice, revolted against the extreme turn of events. Kedar took up his stick with Tinkori giving full support. Ishan came out in full swing to end up the proceedings. Brecht's *Good Person* returned back in disguise to teach the parasites a lesson. Rabindranath's *Good Person* could not do that but ultimately put no extreme opposition to the steps taken .He did not stop Kedar but offers a breakfast before departure. For a gentleman of his extreme, even this is a big thing!

To end '*Gorai Golod*', another comedy by Tagore, a chorus is used at the end to communicate the ultimate message of the play-be adjustable to your life partner, learn how to discover the good and the positive in her and be happy. In *Baikunther Khata*, the message is woven through out the pattern of the play. Corruption is an obvious prodigy of the colonial economy. The economy of today's India could not shake off the legacy properly. The poison is still working on our ethics and economics. If you do not take guard against that, you are absolutely vulnerable .The recent chit fund scam in India is a palpable example.

In his article '*Koutukhasya*', Rabindranath opined that the difference between comedy and tragedy is different in degree only. This may sound controversial but it is relevant to the comedy we have taken up. If Abinash did not rise to the occasion , Baikuntha and his daughter would simply handover the house to Kedar and his scoundrels. Not only Dwijendranath, Rabindranath himself had bitter experiences of deceptions .Well, he knows the burns and wants to involve the audience in a comic catharsis to immune themselves from the infective ways of the world.

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