Abhisār – Rabindranath Tagore's Poetic Adaptation of an Episode from Upagupta Legend: An Example of Buddhist Narratives in the Time of Bengal Renaissance[1]

Upali Sraman

Narratives in the popular forms of stories, fictions, novels, epics, myths, poetry, and in modern time, films of various genres have diverse effects upon society. But when narratives of a particular language, culture and religious background, by means of translations or reproductions, get incorporated into another language and culture subverting its original religious identity, certainly there are positive functions and implications. In such circumstances, in addition to comparative studies, it is necessary for critics to stop for a while and see the way a reproduced version is used and the purpose it is meant to serve. This aspect or function of a narrative has been my concern in the present study of a poem titled as "*Abhisār*" written by Rabindranath Tagore. I take this poem as an example to have a glimpse into the way Buddhist narratives were used during 19th century and early part of the 20th century – the time of Renaissance in Bengal.

01. Abhisār – the Story of the Poem

Abhisār was written in the first decade of 20th century. Rabindranath Tagore was about 45 years old then and the nationalist movements against the British were in full swing in India. At this time Rabindranath was reading Rajendralal Mitra's masterpiece "Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal". Rabindranath was deeply inspired and became overwhelmed by its contents. The book became his constant companion and he used to carry this book with him in his travels. This book opened a new layer in Tagore's creative sphere. Tagore was seeking the true identity or the soul of India from India's past literary achievements. He discovered amazing similarities of the picture depicted in these narratives with his contemporary society. As the history was repeating, with patriarchal domination, religious and caste discriminations and various social inequalities, Rabindranath discerned immense applicability of human values demonstrated widely in Buddhist narratives to his contemporary society. This was the time he wrote the poems of 'kathā o kāhini' (stories and legends). The subject matters of the poems in this collection were from tales of Buddhist, Sikh, Rajasthan, Marāṭhi etc. non-Bengali literary traditions. Many of them were reproductions of narratives from the Buddhist Avadānaśataka, Mahāvastu-avadāna, Avadānakalpalatā, Divyāvadāna, and Kalpadrumāvadāna. This collection, in addition to other works of Tagore is, therefore, an important source for the critical study of 'Bengalizing' (or Bengali reproductions) of Buddhist narratives.

Abhisār – an episode connected to the diverse personality of Upagupta, appeared in this collection. Upagupta is a prominent figure in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. His actual identity and historicity have been controversial topics among scholars for decades. However, in understanding the poem *Abhisār* and the poems of 'kathā o kāhini', Rabindranath emphasized in response to a criticism, the reader is not to worry over the actuality or historicity of facts, but, the poem and its message. The original story of Tagore's '*Abhisār*' is found as 'Upagupta-avadāna' in Avadānakalpalatā, a collection of Buddhist narratives of the type of jātakas, written by a Kashmiri polymath Kṣemendra in the 11th century A.D. Rabindranath read only the synopsis of the story from Rājendralal Mitra's book before writing *Abhisār*. In Rabindranath's version, this is the story of a monk Upagupta with whom a dancing girl named Vāsavadattā tried to make a relationship. To the utter surprise of Vāsavadatta, Upagupta rejected her invitation. But, later on in her bad times – affected by serious skin diseases, all her beauty and pride gone, when she was thrown outside the city – Upagupta extended his compassionate hand and treated her wounds.

Here, I reproduce Rajendralal Mitra's synopsis and the poem *Abhisār* translated into English by Rabindranath himself, for reasons of comparison.

Rajendralal Mitra's Synopsis of Upagupta-avadāna from Avadānakalpalatā

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“Upagupta was intended by his father, Gupta of Mathura, to be a disciple of śonavāsi. Upagupta had deep reverence for śonavasi. Vāsavadatta, a prostitute, finding Upagupta very Handsome, desired him to call it hers. Upagupta said," This is not the proper time for going to a prostitute; I shall call at the proper time." Sometime after this, Vāsavadatta poisoned one of her paramours at the instigation of another. She was sentenced to be killed with torture. The executioner cut her nose, her ears, her hair, and took away her clothes. Upagupta, thinking that to be a proper time for seeing a prostitute, appeared before Vāsavadatta, and instructed her in his faith, which gave her great Consolation. Upagupta became an Arhat; he conquered Kāma and commanded him to exhibit Sugata's beauty. Kama transformed himself into Sugata, assuming a brilliant form, with large eyes shut in meditation, and still eye-brows. Upagupta converted eighteen lacs of the people of Mathura.”

Rabindranath’s Abhisār in English (37th poem in the Fruit Gathering)-

Upagupta, the disciple of Buddha, lay asleep
on the dust by the city wall of Mathura.
Lamps were all out, doors were all shut, and
stars were all hidden by the murky sky of August.

Whose feet were those tinkling with anklets,
touching his breast
of a sudden?
He woke up startled, and a light from a woman’s
lamp fell on his forgiving eyes.
It was a dancing girl, starred with jewels,
Wearing a pale blue mantle, drunk with the wine
of her youth.
She lowered her lamp and saw young face
austerely beautiful.
“Forgive me, young ascetic,” said the woman,
“Graciously come to my house. The dusty earth
is not fit bed for you.”
The young ascetic answered, “Woman,
go on your way;
When the time is ripe I will come to you.”
Suddenly the black night showed its teeth
in a flash of lightening.
The storm growled from the corner of the sky, and
The woman trembled in fear of some unknown danger.

A year has not yet passed.
It was evening of a day in April,
in spring season.
The branches of the way side trees were full of blossom.
Gay notes of a flute came floating in the
warm spring air from a far.
The citizens had gone to the woods for the
festival of flowers.
From the mid sky gazed the full moon on the
shadows of the silent town.
The young ascetic was walking along the lonely street,
While overhead the love-sick koels uttered from the
mango branches their sleepless plaint.
Upagupta passed through the city gates, and

stood at the base of the rampart.
Was that a woman lying at his feet in the
shadow of the mango grove?
Struck with black pestilence, her body
spotted with sores of small-pox,
She had been hurriedly removed from the town
To avoid her poisonous contagion.
The ascetic sat by her side, took her head on his knees,
And moistened her lips with water, and
smeared her body with sandal balm.
"Who are you, merciful one?" asked the woman.
"The time, at last, has come to visit you, and
I am here," replied the young ascetic.

02. Discussion

In comparison with the original version we notice that Rabindranath has taken only the core idea of the narrative – an encounter of a dancing girl with a disciplined follower of Buddhist path. Taking this substance, quite typical in Indian literature, the skilled poet has produced an extraordinary poem using fine diction and imagery. The poem is intensely symbolic and the events are poetically dramatized. Abhisār, as the poems of the whole collection are, is not like conventional narrative poems. There is no chain of events linking the beginning, development or climax, and end of the story using words like – 'now', 'then' 'after that' etc. Instead of calling them narrative poems, Rabindranath felt comfortable to call them 'gallery of images' (*citraśālā*). Seasonal descriptions, of which Rabindranath was a master, are used to symbolize emotions of love, fear, and spiritual awakening. Dramatic presentation of events of a dancing girl walking at night with her friends and the rhythmic use of phrases describing her anklets making jingling sound create a clear imagery of the whole atmosphere. There is no detailed introduction to characters or places, but the characters and places are left to speak themselves in very precise expressions with depth of meanings. In narrative style, substance, and implications *Abhisār* has diverged significantly from the original story.

One must remember that Kṣemendra was not the first composer of the original story. Upagupta first appeared in Divyāvadāna and became a central figure in Aśoka-avadāna, Ratnamālāvadāna, etc. ancient Sanskrit texts. Kṣemendra borrowed this story from his predecessors and composed a summarized poetical version of it. However, the Sanskrit version of the story demonstrates some aspects of the patriarchal psychology in weaving a narrative plot and portraying women of that period. In the original version of Kṣemendra, Upagupta was not even ordained as a monk when he met Vāsavadatta. He was the son of a merchant named Gupta and did a business as a seller of yellow sandalwood, musk, camphor, and aloe. Vāsavadattā got to know about Upagupta from a maid whom she sent for buying sandalwood from Upagupta. She became anxious for union with Upagupta and sent him a message of invitation through the maid. But Upagupta rejected her invitation saying "the time is not appropriate for meeting her". He went to meet Vāsavadattā when her body cut up, smeared with blood, she was thrown into the ocean of misery. Pathetically she asked Upagupta "O, Lotus-leaf-eyed one, is this the time for seeing me?" Still her lament was for her failure to unite with him. Upagupta, however, was still dispassionate about her. He took this opportunity to preach the futility of sensual enjoyment and the uselessness of pride in physical beauty. Vāsavadattā lamented for her folly, became established in the path of dharma, and found spiritual liberation. Thus from a feminist perspective one would notice an attempt to ennoble the male protagonist in the popular narrative. Kṣemendra's Vāsavadatta is expressly referred to as a prostitute (*gaṇikā*). She was blatantly anxious for union with handsome youths like Upagupta and wickedly avaricious for wealth, so much so that, she even did not hesitate to poison a paramour. Accordingly a sharp contrast between a courtesan (woman) and an ardent follower (male) of Buddhist path is established: woman symbolizing passion male symbolizing liberation; woman symbolizing pride in physical beauty and male beauty of calmness and restraint; woman symbolizing ignorance male wisdom and enlightenment; woman subjected to ills of society and the male as spiritual protector.

Rabindranath's Vāsavadatta, in contrast, "is a dancing girl, starred with jewels, wearing a pale blue mantle, drunk with the wine of her youth." She is gentle and sympathetic towards a young ascetic lying in austere environment. Her

invitation is not for sexual union, but, for offering appropriate bedding for this young ascetic. She was not tortured for poisoning any paramour, but attacked by natural skin diseases. There is also a humanitarian aspect when Upagupta offers help and compassionately treats her wounds when she had been discarded out of the city walls. Thus the treatment of the narrative in two different periods very clearly depicts the shift of portraying women, sexuality, and system of value-judgment from Kṣemendra's 11th century patriarchal society to Tagore's 20th century liberal humanism.

The relationship that binds the protagonists in *Abhisār* is one of respect, trust and sympathy. Woman here is not a passionate lover who entices males with her feminine coquetry. The monk too does not use woman passively as an object of meditation for his own enlightenment. They offer aids in each other's difficult moments and submit themselves to time and nature. The time and nature are presented as unpredictable and the foremost teachers of eternal laws. Thus *Abhisār* is an illustration of the fact that, in the transitory nature of existence, the delicacy of passion is nothing but a mockery in the face time. *Abhisār* has remedied the faults of Kṣemendra's dry narrative style and rescued his Vāsavadattā from the blames she had been bearing over centuries for heartless greed for wealth and shameless passion. Through *Abhisār*, Rabindranāth establishes Upagupta as the symbol of spiritual awakening and humanistic activism of the youths at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century. (One is immediately reminded of personalities like Swamy Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, B.G. Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi etc. who merged Spirituality or dharma with nationalism). Here, the narrative does not remain as a typical subject for religious sermon; the monk, representing a religious institution, has been brought out of the city walls to confront the distress of society at the turn of the century and to actively participate in the service of humanity. This somewhat radical assertion of the poem (in the conservative perspective) is sometimes overshadowed by the poet's arts, rhythm, and romanticism.

03. Conclusion

His son, Rathindranath Tagore, later wrote in his reminiscences that after writing the poems of 'Kathā o Kāhini', Rabindranath used to read them with his children instead of the poems of their textbooks. Even though the children did not understand the poems, Rabindranath would break words and phrases and explain the background story with great care. In the end, the stories became very clear and the poems got stuck in their memory. This fact explains very clearly Rabindranath's purpose in writing the poems of this collection. It was mainly to educate the Bengali readers on the great narratives of ancient India and to awaken their nationalist sentiments through them. Rabindranath started to materialize this idea through his own children. In recent times, a dance drama of thirty minutes was produced based on this poem. Thus the Buddhist message is carried across time and again; the poem has become a part of popular Bengali culture.

04. Books Consulted

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