



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 8. Issue.2. 2021 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

INTERTEXTUALITY BETWEEN RUPALIM AND *THE ARTIST'S WORLD*

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Article information

Received:18/4/2021

Accepted: 14/5/2021

Published online:18/05/2021

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.2.93](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.2.93)

ABSTRACT

It has remained largely unnoticed that Assamese playwright Jyotiprasad Agarwala's 1948 play *Rupalim* is informed by many ideas contained in his famous essay *Shilpir Prithivi* (1938) or *The Artists' World*. Read from this angle, the play yields new meanings and new insights into the author's idea of historical evolution as continued conflict between the forces of "Sanskriti" (culture) and "Duskriti" (evil culture). It deepens and also modifies our understanding of the play's purpose, its characters and actions. Further, it exposes the limitations of so much of traditional criticism of the play and justifies its nomenclature which such criticism finds unexpected.

Keywords: Rupalim, Sanskriti, Duskriti, Antar-Sanskriti, artist.

Introduction

There is a gap of ten years between the publications of *Rupalim* and *Shilpir Prithivi*. But the play can be interpreted in the light of Jyotiprasad's idea of historical evolution as continuous conflict between Sanskriti (culture) and Duskriti (evil culture) presented in *Shilpir Prithivi*. Such interpretation may revolutionise the understanding of the play, disrupt its traditional, critical reception and present the characters and actions before us in a totally new light. This study doesn't claim to be the complete analysis of the play, rather it attempts to show that a new reading of the play is possible taking note of the fact that the ideas of *Shilpir Prithivi* inform its structure and texture.

The Title Controversy

Traditional criticism opines that the play should have been named after Manimugdha or Itibhen and not after Rupalim, because the other two are brighter, more complicated and more varied personalities than her. Dr Amiya Mahanta says, "Itibhen tends to claim the role of the heroine in the action of the play." Mrs Aruna Gogoi says, "Manimugdha, the most varied character, is a nice analysis of human psychology." But such interpretation based on psychoanalysis, can't come closer to Jyotiprasad's idea of "Sanskriti" outlined in *Shilpir Prithivi* which establishes Rupalim as the representative of "Antar-Sanskriti" (inner culture) in spite of her apparent weaknesses and confirms Itibhen as bearer of "Duskriti" though she appears to be a warrior against injustice.

In *Shilpir Prithivi* Jyotiprasad says, "We have conflicts with Duskriti, but don't have any malice or hatred. Malice and hatred don't belong to the artist; they are not ingredients of Sanskriti." Manimugdha's inhuman and cruel abduction of Rupalim is clearly Duskriti but differences of conflicts posed by Rupalim and Itibhen against this Duskriti are significant. Rupalim, the bearer of "Antar-Sanskriti", is far from malice and hatred. She cherishes an unconditional love for all humans, all beings. She is concerned about what may befall Junafa, her father, after her marriage with Mayabo; she laments for the young ones of the tiger killed by Mayabo; she wants to keep her sister's child close to her bosom and, ultimately, agrees to Manimugdha's evil proposal only to save her native captives.

Jyotiprasad further says, "If Sanskriti, in its attempt to destroy Duskriti, takes recourse to the means of Duskriti like malice, crookedness, trickery etc., it gets infected with these diseases and consequently gets spoiled." The question is: who – Rupalim or Itibhen – takes recourse to these means of Duskriti? Rupalim's overwhelming "love" is extended to all beings, even to the aggressor Manimugdha, and this loving nature can't be dismissed as simplicity of a hilly, tribal girl as simplicity opens its door as much easily to love as to hatred. At this point, we can closely examine Rupalim's conflict against the Duskriti of Manimugdha

Criticism so far accepts Manimugdha's moral and humane uplift in the sixth act as the climax of the play. But Rupalim's acceptance of Manimugdha's unjust and evil proposal in the same act has not received its due importance whereas judged in the light of Jyotiprasad's idea of Sanskriti, Rupalim's decision to surrender is the central focal point of the play. Significantly, the playwright brings all the important characters –Rupalim, Manimugdha, Itibhen, Mayabo, Junafa – together when Rupalim declares her decision; and thus, places the conflict between Sanskriti and Duskriti, Violence and non-Violence at the climactic height. At this point Rupalim rises to such "sanskritik" (cultural) height to which none of the other characters at no point of time rises.

Rupalim has only two alternatives: preservation of personal chastity or people's welfare. Preservation of chastity is also understood as part of Sanskritik thought and she is well aware of this. Therefore, she sincerely wishes to preserve her chastity and the playwright stresses on this. Thus, in the Fourth Act, when Manimugdha comes closer to her, she jumps down the window. Even after surrendering to Manimugdha, same is her reaction when he comes closer to her. "Now Rupalim is quite pale - (she) trembles. Her eyes become like those of a corpse. She is about to fall down." (Sixth Act) Now let us closely look at the part of the play quoted below from the Sixth Act.

Manimugdha: (Side-glancing to Itibhen) In return of your freedom, Rupalim has gifted me her body.

(All the captives roar "What?")

Junafa: Rupalim. Is it true?

Rupalim: (Gladly) True.

Junafa: (Angrily) Unchaste!

The question is: Why is Rupalim, who is so sensitive about her chastity, glad while declaring before Junafa and others her decision to agree to Manimugdha's proposal? Is it merely her simplicity, innocence? Or is she the model of Jyotiprasad's Sanskritik wisdom?

When personal chastity and collective welfare are the only alternatives before Rupalim, she doesn't hesitate to accept the second one gladly forsaking her dear chastity. She doesn't suffer from any idealistic conflict and takes the straight and clear road. She may, therefore, appear to be "simple" which she is not. She prepares for forsaking her chastity not because of her "utmost simplicity" as claimed by Jogesh Das. A profound Sanskritik ideal is there behind her act and this alone could prove to be victorious over Manimugdha's Duskriti. And Manimugdha's moral and spiritual uplift is a primary aim of the play. But the question is: through whose conflict was this aim achieved – Rupalim's or Itibhen's?

This is clear that Itibhen's conflict had no impact on Manimugdha's spiritual regeneration; it was simply an effect of Rupalim's pro-people sacrifice of personal interest and the glow of her agony at the prospect of the realization of her decision. Here the use of symbols is significant. Indicating the Duskriti of Manimugdha, who

abandons even minimal humanity only for self-gratification, all lights of his room are put out. Only one light on a stand is burning at the place where Rupalim is standing, because she is the only source of sanskriti and conscience at that moment. But after Manimugdha's spiritual uplift, that light became unimportant; so "suddenly the burning light was put out by the wind" and the night gives way to the dawn.

Thus, for Manimugdha, Rupalim is the guide to attain cultural resources. This is how an artist, who worships inner culture, discharges her duties. Jyotiprasad says, "This is what the artists – the artists of the whole world – must make people realise today. He (the artist) must awaken this artist-being in full form in every heart." But is this the role played by Itibhen?

It's true that in the third act she dethrones the drunkard, coward and corrupt king, her brother, of the Rukmi kingdom. Her passionate and poetic speeches encourage the Rukmi heroes to fight against Manimugdha's Duskriti and thus Itibhen appears to be a vocal representative of Sanskriti.

Itibhen represents Sanskriti not in reality, but in appearance only. In the third act her oration is only rhetorical, because she doesn't have profound sincerity in what she professed. It is said in *Shilpir Prithivi*: "The elements of Sanskriti and those of Duskriti co-exist in human mind" and in the character of Itibhen the latter gets the better of the former.

Earlier Itibhen termed Manimugdha as the enemy of the Rukmi race and he passed order to burn down towns and villages of the Rukmi kingdom. In the Seventh Act she dreams of being in his arms: "Manimugdha, I love you – I love you. I love you a lot." Her self-interest made the public interest insignificant; her passion for the Duskriti-bearer against whom she fought, proves the slackness of her awareness of culture.

The moment when Itibhen strikes Manimugdha with a gold-chain in the Fourth Act is revealing. He expressed his desire to make Rupalim a queen and so she strikes him. But, when he faints because of bleeding, she, agitated like a true beloved, takes care of him. Feeling better he asks, "Don't you love me, Itibhen?" Itibhen bitterly weeps, hugs him, kisses him on head and says, "Manimugdha, I love you – I love you. I love you a lot... Don't tell me about Rupalim. Don't bring her here." Manimugdha says, "My life will remain futile if I can't enjoy Rupalim's beauty." Itibhen violently reacts, "This time I would kill you before meeting her." But he quickly manages her and sends her to prison.

Thus, Itibhen doesn't have a stable personality; she oscillates like a pendulum. Her quick oscillation between love and hatred proves that she is ordinary victim of emotions. Such a personality is not fit vessel for containing profound cultural consciousness. More importantly, Itibhen's hatred of Manimugdha is not propelled by any sense of responsibility for her people but by his interest in Rupalim. It will be far-fetched to say that Itibhen regards Rupalim to be a symbol for the honour of the Rukmi race and so her seemingly personal interest is in reality achieves a collective dimension. It's not so because Itibhen attempts to free Manimugdha from the attraction of Rupalim rather than Rupalim from his clutches.

Further, Itibhen is more concerned with the abstract honour of the Rukmi race than with the question of concrete welfare of them. When Manimugdha orders to "burn down towns and villages" of the Rukmis, Itibhen "shivers", but forgets to concentrate on that issue and turned the debate from that to the subject of Rupalim. She was not further disturbed by this thought of collective welfare. Thus, Itibhen who in the Third Act says, "I won't accept such a husband" and who in the Fourth Act says, "Manimugdha, I love you – I love you. I love you a lot", may be an expression of common humanity, but can't come near Jyotiprasad's cultural wisdom.

In order to come to a final conclusion about whether Itibhen is on the side of Sanskriti or Duskriti, we may look closely at the Seventh and final Act. *Shilpir Prithivi* says, "Malice and hatred don't belong to the artist; they are not ingredients of Sanskriti." But Itibhen declares her hatred, "You savage! I hate you!" Further she deceives the Rukmi people by saying that "Manimugdha is extremely willing to marry her" which is not true and Jyotiprasad identifies deception as an element of Duskriti. When Itibhen executes Rupalim, the bearer of Sanskriti, in the name of Sanskriti, her real face comes out.

But no Rukmi raises question against Rupalim's execution. It's so because they are confused about Sanskriti and Duskriti, right and wrong. All of them accepts that Rupalim was unchaste which is not true. In "*Shilpir Prithivi*" Jyotiprasad says, "In this way Duskriti disguises itself as Sanskriti, destroys Sanskriti, and pretending as Sanskriti, hides its real face and achieves its own interest. Sometimes, the true devotees of Sanskriti, failing to understand this deception of Duskriti, embraces Duskriti earnestly taking it for Sanskriti's true form...Duskriti thus ...snatches away the good fortune of the people." This is the exact role of Itibhen in the play. She blurs and deludes the Rukmi's sense of Sanskriti and Duskriti and so the play ends with "noises and smokes" which is the symbol of lack of clarity and delusion.

Is Manimugdha a Complete Artist?

Till the end of the Sixth Act Manimugdha represented Duskriti. He has this conscience, "I have gone down to a very low level – only to get you I have degraded myself from the ranks of humans to that of the fierce beasts." But he would not be guided by this conscience. Further, his humble courting of Rupalim is only Duskriti disguised as Sanskriti. He would not like to see himself as a rapist. His superiority complex would be satisfied if Rupalim willingly cooperated with him. But, though not guided by conscience, yet it was in him lying dormant; so, the enlightening experience of Rupalim's sacrifice and agony raises him and makes him aware of his own potential of being an artist.

But this uplift is not his ultimate achievement; it's only partial though significant. He is not complete as an artist. Let's quote from *Shilpir prithivi*, "An artist is the guide for cultural resources.... This is what the artists – the artists of the whole world – must make people realize today. He (the artist) must awaken this being of artist in full form in every heart." Thus, an artist is responsible for disseminating and giving publicity to Sanskriti. Manimugdha refrains from it. He gives freedom to Rupalim but takes no step to inform the Rukmis that Rupalim remains chaste. His inactivity helps Duskriti to thrive. He knows that Sanskriti is of the people and so allows Rupalim to go to the people. But he didn't perceive that the people may reject Rupalim as the Sanskriti of the royal house. Thus, he fails to become complete as an artist.

Is mayabo Complete as An Artist?

Many a critic thinks that Mayabo is weak. It is far from the truth. He can behead a tiger; defeat Manimugdha's commander-in-Chief Renthayang. He has both bow and flute. He is a devotee of Sanskriti and a natural artist. There is a bond between the artist and Sanskriti, so Mayabo loves Rupalim. But he is also incomplete as an artist. He doesn't understand the Duskriti of Itibhen. At the same time, he can't accept Rupalim's death-sentence. So, he weeps and become restless. He doesn't understand the Rupalim-Itibhen conflict. Thus, he is confused. In the last Act he is not given any dialogue which implies his confusion.

Rupalim's Breaking of Mayabo's Flute:

In the first Act Rupalim breaks the bamboo flute of Mayabo. This flute is the symbol of "outer cultural resources". An artist's love for such outer cultural resources must not be greater than his love for "Antar-Sanskriti". That Rupalim breaks the flute is suggestive of this. But when Mayabo explains that this outer cultural article, namely the flute, sang the song of Antar-Sanskriti represented by Rupalim, that is, the flute is a means for worshipping Antar-Sanskriti, then Rupalim realises the significance of the flute, she weeps, kisses the flute and says, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Conclusion

In this way, there are invisible exchanges of ideas between *Shilpir Prithivi* and *Rupalim*. The former thus helps to make a completely different reading of the latter. In the light of these ideas we may conclude that the artists' world of Jyotiprasad's imagination has not bloomed in the play; it remains a nebula, a dream, a wish. Manimugdha's uplift is a stage of Sanskriti winning against Duskriti and Rupalim's execution by Itibhen is a stage of defeat of Sanskriti in the hand of Duskriti. Thus, instead of dramatising facile optimism or pessimism, Jyotiprasad, through ups and downs of Sanskriti and Duskriti, wisely enacts the complex, dialectical movement of history itself, a movement from which the dream of the artists' world is not dissociated.

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