

Trippin'in Time: Tagore's *Tasher Desh* (Land Of Cards) After 100 Years

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Tasher Desh (Land of Cards) is a 2012 Bangla movie based on a 100-year old musical play by Tagore of the same name. The director of the movie is Q, the nickname of Quashik Mukerjee who is well-known for his controversial debut of *Gandu* (2010) which I believe is still banned outside art movie circles for its explicit portrayal of sexuality and drug abuse. *Tasher Desh* lies in a different domain altogether. Though one notices the characteristic themes of love and sensuality, this one reworks the story of Tagore in a trippy narrative rarely seen in Indian cinema. In this paper I explore how Q's movie reinvents Tagore for a new generation and if the concerns, cultural, political and sexual in nature, of the musical drama parallels that of the movie.

First, the plot. The movie begins with a young poet disillusioned with the society and life tries to bring back Tagore's eponymous play to the stage. He gets lost and finally ends up in an abandoned mansion where he meets a widow. This narrative is intercut with the plot of the drama, *Tasher Desh*. In this story, we see two young men, one, a prince, another a merchant's son leaves their luxuries, comforts and familial ties to explore the world. They end up in an island in which playing cards rule. The cards have a military regime which highlights order and punishes emotion or chaos. But chaos is what the prince and his friend bring. Their ideas of freedom is viewed suspiciously by the men, but women takes to it immediately. They begin to discover emotions of love and desire, they discover their own bodies and each others'. Soon chaos begin and the women help some men to explore this freedom and together they march towards a freer world. In the outer narrative of the poet and the widow, they also discover love and sensuality and the widow leaves the mansion with the poet.

Partha Chatterjee in his famous exposition of nation and its women discussed how women's issues which were so central to the reformatory rhetoric in late nineteenth century Bengal and elsewhere in India had vanished from the public sphere by early twentieth century. He sees the answer in the strategic reconstitution of the public sphere of modernity as the domain of the male and the private sphere of tradition as the domain of the female which informed the nationalist discourse in the beginning of the twentieth century.

But of course, this theory has been much-quoted, oft-repeated and used in all context ad nauseam. It would be quite ironic, if after this statement, I go on to do exactly the same. I would venture here to say that theory may not have outlived its usefulness, especially when discussing phenomena that parallels the ones that Chatterjee himself discusses in his seminal piece. The original *Tasher Desh* was written during the same time. The dance drama has a story counterpart which appeared in the collection *The Hungry Stone and other Stories* and I will be referring to that.

The differences in the story and the movie's inner plot are simply in the agency of women which was completely invisible until the Prince came. But even when the Prince's arrival, their protests hardly venture outside their own homes. It is in the matter of personal and private that even the Queen of Hearts could choose. In the story she chooses the Prince as her husband in a Swayamvara ceremony. This choice symbolized by the very nature of this ceremony definitely points to an agency, albeit a very limited one. But what are these limits? Here is where Partha Chatterjee's categories can be successfully deployed. Women are the spiritual upholders of tradition, the custodian and keepers of home and the private sphere is their rightful and 'proper' domain. The story and the dance drama is too perfect a match for the theory here.

Q upsets the plot n multiple levels. He invents a meta-narrative for the plot of *Tasher Desh*, which is completely shot in black and white, while the story of *Tasher Desh* is shot in colour. However the drab life of the poet may not be so different from the dark and washed-out colours of the mansion in which the Prince and his mother lives initially before he escapes, It is only when he escapes to the outer world that the colours take on a life of its own.

The most important difference is of course in the plot itself. Q's *Tasher Desh* is filled with Nazi-style soldiers donning air masks, shouting orders at each other. Their gas masks is reminiscent of chemical-biological weaponry part of a dystopic future war. The evident biological and emotional barricades they have put up had suitably prevented them from being humans. They don't talk, they shout orders and obey them without questions; they don't make love, they procreate; they don't distinguish men, women, class or caste; in fact the different cards are stacked against each other, virtually indistinguishable. Perhaps this might be the most crucial difference between the drama and the movie. The drama proclaims that *Tasher Desh* was divided into all kinds of caste and class hierarchies, bound by rules which cannot be trespassed upon, a true picture of India which Tagore wanted to show. Q sees a different India, one that is riddled with harmful effects of globalization and neo-imperialism which promises a boundary-less, well-connected global village that erases local culture and homogenise differences aligning them with a singular and market-driven consumer culture.

The agency of women and the portrayal of sexuality take Q's adaptation to a new level. It is the women folk who opens up to the freedom call of the Prince. He is the wind that shakes and stirs the heart of women, opens them up to the desires and cravings of bodies, both their own bodies as well of others. These womenfolk now defy traditions opens up to love and desire and it is one without boundaries. In the close quarters of their military encampment, women find each other's bodies capable of desires and cravings they had hitherto unknown and if it is homosexual love, so be

it. Women's bodies, men's bodies love is everywhere. And it is the freedom induced by this new-found expression that makes them agents of their own bodies, their own selves and their own destinies. The whole country is caught up in these winds of change and women we see are not merely at the receiving end, they are the ones who lead the revolution, they become the agents of change, not of tradition. In the outer narrative we have the poet's rescue of the widow which is also a sensual discovery, of her self, of her body which reminds us of reformatory discourses in Bengal during the late nineteenth century, even though this narrative is set in the present times. There is one troubling fact here: the orientalist nature of women's education brought about by a foreigner which exists in the story too and in a lesser proportion in the movie. Maybe the question to ask here is not only how colonial education impacted our civilization, but also what we do with it in the present.

Q saw to it that his own movie was a musical and employed 30 musicians from across the world and from different musical genres to reinvent Rabindra Sangeeth that Tagore wrote for the play. There is even a rap version of a Rabindra Sangeeth at the end titles. The actual impact of this subversion maybe easily lost on a non-Bengali audience like our own. But Q hits the perfectly right note here.

There are other things to be noted. Like in *Gandu*, there is the explicit portrayal of drug usage. The movie was even described by the director as "Tagore on an Acid trip." The surreal imagery and the dream-like narrative and dialogues as well as the choreography which emulates Kabuki dance dramas from Japan may be influenced by movies made from Irvine Welsh novels, and has no evident predecessors in Indian cinema.

It is interesting to note that even though *Gandu* was banned in India, it was the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) who co-produced *Tasher Desh* along with Anurag Kashyap and others. It could very well be that NFDC saw the name Tagore and agreed readily! That says more about the legendary status of the Nobel laureate rather than Q's directorial stature. And I believe what Q does with Tagore is what makes him truly of the new generation.

New-generation has become even a term of reproach these days in Kerala with multiple and contradictory meanings. In an article which followed up to the weeks leading to the IFFK 2014 (the annual international film festival of Kerala), the noted film critic, C.S. Venkiteswaran reflected upon the relevance of parallel movies in Kerala. He thought of political interventions in movies that questioned mainstream discourses on dalits, racial and sexual minorities, technological innovations that shape cultural expressions and most importantly, one that rethought the financial aspects of the production of parallel movies. He was pointing towards the lack of documentaries that were self-reflective about its aims and production and one that posed a challenge to the mainstream market aesthetics. But Q's feature film with his NFDC funding and his reconfiguration of Tagore complete with meta-narratives, portrayal of drug usage and homoeroticism will rightly fit this label without much stretch of our imagination.

Works Cited

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