

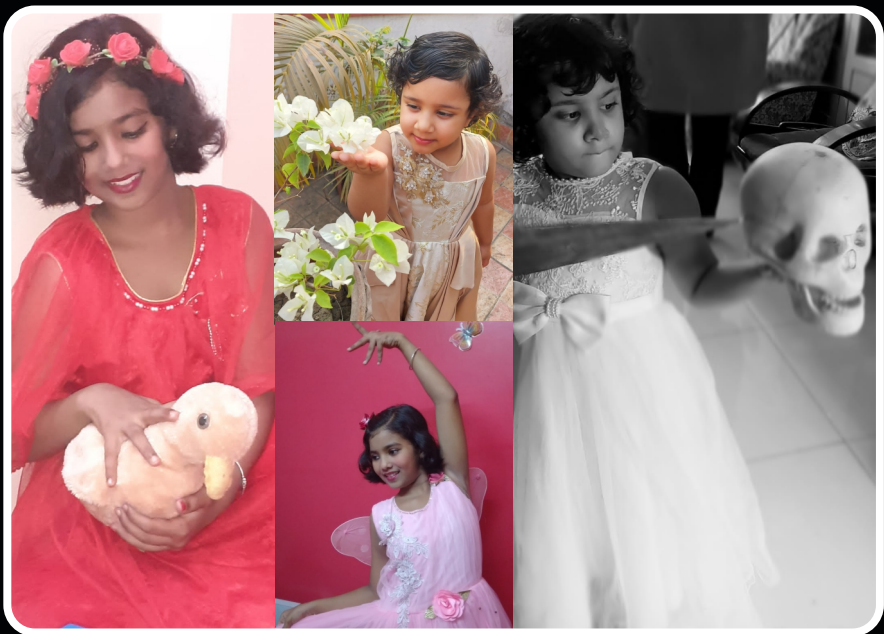
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Eds.

Amitava Roy, Ronan Paterson,
Bryan Reynolds, Subir Dhar, Tapu Biswas, Papia Mitra

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Front cover Left: Tapasya Biswas as Fairy Queen with Birdie.

Centre : Miura Roy Basu as Alice in the Garden; Tapasya in dance mudra .

Right : Miura in *Hamlet* Grave Diggers Scene with skull.

Back Cover: Miura as Queen in Garden; Tapasya in Ballet mudra.

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Contents

From The Editor's Desk	i
1. Contesting Categories of the Female Body and Male Desire, Partitioned Space and Layered Identities in Manju Kapur's <i>Difficult Daughters</i> – N. Banita Devi	1
2. 'Female' or (Fe)'man'? : The Collapse of Gender Hierarchy in Saradindu's Byomkesh Stories – Raj Raj Mukhopadhyay	13
3. Contextualizing Disrobing Scene of Draupadi across Cultures – Ph. Jayalaxmi	22
4. Death in Tagore's <i>The Post Office</i> – Tapu Biswas	41
5. The Reflection of Academic Society in Campus Fictionin Context : <i>Corridors of Knowledge</i> by M.K. Naik and <i>Atom and the Serpent</i> by Prema Nandakumar – Amit Yashvantrao Khapekhar & Ashutosh Singh	50
6. Image of The New Woman in Chinua Achebe's <i>Anthills of The Savannah</i> – Sazono Sibo	63
7. A Study of Enhancing Employment Opportunities for students with Seven "I" Framework : Internationalization Initiatives Taken by Gujarat Technological University – Sarika Srivastava	72

8. Lived Body in Phenomenology: A Fragment of Lifeworld for a Woman – Mizaj K. V	87
9. Significance of Social Sector Expenditure in relation to Human Development in Chhattisgarh – Rajbhanu Patel, Devdhar Bhoy, Ram Avatar Singh	94
10. “The Gaze Shows Back: Men’s Bodies as Visual Objects” – Rupsa Mukherjee Banerjee	102
11. <i>East ‘Meats’ West</i> : J. M. Coetzee and the Confluence of Carnivorous Cultures – Asmita Boral	113
12. Relevance of Rabindranath Tagore’s Idologies in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic – Brenda Coutinho	122
13. Anthropomorphism in Perumal Murugan’s: <i>Poonachi</i> An Exploration of Gender Narratology through the Nonhuman – Haritha Fernandez & Shibani Chakraverty Aich	133
14. <i>Head Against Heart</i> – Pradeep Chatterjee	140
Editors note on TGI Manifesto on Education and Culture in India	144
Our Contributors and Editors	147

From the Editorial Desk

Dear readers,

We once again come together to celebrate another year of fighting against the pandemic and emerging victorious, so far. It has been another difficult year of seeing the waves of the pandemic crash onto the shores of every nation, affecting our near and dear ones and strangers indiscriminately. There has been once again periodic lockdowns making us work sporadically. This journal is a bit fatter than usual – making up for the lean times – which can be divided into three sections. The first is gender ideology, the second is broad ranging discussion of various topics, while the third is data based research. Such an issue is sure to enrich you as it has enriched us.

Banita Devi explores the many layers of identity a woman acquires through the ‘male gaze’ in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*. In it a daughter pieces together the story of her mother’s life from memories of others. Through Virmati’s character, Banita Devi shows how conditioning girls to accept traditional patriarchal notions of honour and purity create a psychological vacuum and ignorance which makes them easy prey for a male in authority over her. Virmati gives in to male desire and loses social and economic security while her lover refuses to marry her. While the lover’s wife’s pregnancy comes to full term she is compelled to abort hers. Finally she gets married to him but as a co-wife she becomes a non-entity. Banita Devi’s paper shows that women are only tools and commodities in the patriarchal structure and they do not even realize their own repression.

Raj Raj Mukhopadhyay is interested in looking at how Saradindu Bandyopadhyay has treated female figures in his detective stories centred round Byomkesh Bakshi. He points out that Saradindu’s world is limited to that of the bourgeoisie strata and his notions of women is conventional. Byomkesh’s wife Satyabati is an educated enlightened woman who is also stereotypically feminine and her husband’s helpmeet. But women who are dominating, who rule their households and husbands, who are self-reliant are depicted as malicious or lascivious or involved in criminal acts and not

as intelligent as men. Mukhopadhyay interestingly coins a new term (fe)'man' which indicates female desire to assert psycho-sexual control over male counterparts. Yet inevitably these women characters are slotted back into gender stereotypes by Saradindu maintaining patriarchal hegemony.

Ph. Jayalaxmi turns our attention once again to Draupadi who is emblematic of male violence against women, who try to use their bodies to satisfy their lust. Jayalaxmi critically analyses how *Mahabharata* presents Draupadi as a fearless woman who argues what dharma is and provides a model for a woman to be viewed as morally independent agent. Similarly, Mahasweta Devi in her story and Thangjam Ibopishak in her poem presents their versions of Draupadis as women who willingly bare their bodies defying the male gaze. Jayalaxmi shows that though intersectionality also plays a role in whether women can preserve their dignity, all Draupadis are represented across cultures as a sign of protest against women's subordinate condition in male dominated societies.

Tapu Biswas is Indian foremost authority on Samuel Beckett and Badal Sircar. He has written in detail on the Universal theme of death in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*. Dr. Biswas has comprehensively discussed Amal's crisis in his paper.

Amit Yashvantrao Khapekar and **Dr. Ashutosh Singh** introduce us to a relatively new genre in Indian English fiction, the 'Campus novel'. After giving a brief introduction to the rise of this genre they analyse two novels *Corridors of Knowledge* by M.K. Naik and *Atom and the Serpent* by Prema Nandakumar. Both novels throw an unflattering light on the academic world in India. Teachers and administrators jostle for power, money, foreign visits and eagerly destroy each other to advance themselves. They are lethargic about teaching and research as a result of which teaching quality falls. Khapekar and Singh bring to our attention how both novels bring out in detail moral and professional deterioration in Indian academia.

Sazono Sibo analyses how Chinua Achebe presents gender inequality and power imbalance in *Anthills of the Savannah* through the character of Beatrice. Achebe is deeply disillusioned by post-colonial African society whose leaders had come to resemble their erstwhile European masters. Along with oppression and discrimination is objectification of women which had always been present in society. However, Beatrice, an educated

woman shows the path for others: traditional subordination of women is slowly changing. Her moral integrity also demonstrates that everyone must resist oppression if a new and better society is to be created. Sibò points out that ultimately for Achebe female empowerment is needed for a new Africa.

Sarika Srivastava has carried out a research project on the employable skills required in the modern age. She has collected data from Gujrat Technological University and has shown how parameters like development and modernisation of infrastructure, curriculum, international exposure has increased competency of students so that they can join the global workforce. This is an interesting study on something that is truly the need of the hour.

Mizaj K. V. takes up the subject of Phenomenology with regards to women. Phenomenology as a philosophical concept puts primacy on the body as it is situated in the world and how it is experienced by the person and how it is perceived by others. In our patriarchal world, the living body of the woman is objectified and regarded as a commodity, cutting off her access to her own body. A woman's self-identity thus becomes bound up with the male gaze. Mizaj observes how the male scholars of the School has failed to realize that the potential cannot flower in a female subject in patriarchal culture.

Dr Rajbhanu Patel, Devdhar Bhoy, Ram Avatar Singh have presented us with an analysis of social sector expenditure in the state of Chhattisgarh from 2005-06 to 2019-20 and how it has impacted human development during the same period. The study concludes that such expenditure is important for positive development.

Rupsa Mukherjee Banerjee travels in the opposite direction. Instead of critiquing male gaze and objectification of female bodies she critically demonstrates how the reverse can be true. In many Hindi film item songs the male body is put on display to be ogled by women. The same is true in the world of advertising. Rupsa discusses how in our contemporary world, the masculine body in such cases becomes an object to satisfy the female's lustful gaze, overturning patriarchal hetero-normativity on its head.

Asmita Boral in her well written and argumentative paper has penetrated the new 'me(a) thing ground' of Eastern spirituality marked by vegetarianism and western 'Cornucopia' prepared by the influx of fast food chains in the last three decades since globalization.

Brenda Coutinho resorts to the solace and strength Rabindranath Tagore can give in the most trying circumstances, even in Covid pandemics. Tagore had criticised stringently the belief that man can dominate over nature, that capitalism, modernity and the mechanical educational system as defined by the West is the only way forward. Coutinho reminds us that the only way for us to get out of presentday distress is to build a society on Tagore's concept of holistic learning, decentralization of economic and political power. Toleration and harmony among communities.

Haritha Fernandez and **Dr. Shibani Chakraverty Aich** have jointly written on Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*. Their close scrutiny of the text reveals an underlying textual subconscious that travels from the realm of animals to anthropomorphism. For them the novel can be read through a discourse tainted spectacles that will reveal to the inquisitive reader the strong shades of patriarchy and power abuse lurking behind the pastel shaded ordinary lives of mute animals.

IJCSS occasionally publishes unpublished verses or short fiction from various parts of the globe. We close this issue with a short poem *Head Against Heart* composed by Pradeep Chatterjee.

Happy Reading,
Papia Mitra, Tapu Biswas,
Ronan Paterson,
(for the Eds.)

Death in Tagore's *The Post Office*

Tapu Biswas

“Death may be the greatest of all human blessing”

—Socrates

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office* is a play that offered solace in the most unlikely places. In June 1940, as the German Wehrmacht tore through France and the fall of Paris was imminent, Andre Gide's translation of the play (French title *Amal et la Lettre du Roi*-Paris 1922) was broadcast over the radio nationally in France. Even more poignant and famous is its association with Jewish children in Poland. Dr Janusz Korczak, was a Polish doctor who was in charge of a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw when Poland was under Nazi occupation. He realized the children he was looking after would be sent to death camps because of their “impure” blood. On 18 July 1942 he produced and a young woman teacher directed the orphans in staging the Tagore's *The Post Office*. It brought colour and comfort in their grim lives. A few days later, the children were taken to the extermination camp at Treblinka. Dr. Korczak did not have to go with them; but he refused to abandon his children and accompanied with them. The admirer of the play and the little actors were killed there. Both incidents bring up the question – what did *The Post Office* offer to people facing desperate losses in war. Reportedly Dr. Korczak said that one must learn to accept the angel of death in peace and that is why he staged the play. The answer points to the key theme of the play: how to deal with the shadow of death which lies over everyone and how to greet the final event of life which cannot be averted. Since the central character in *The Post Office* is a child Amal who was not allowed to leave his room, surely it resonated with children who were also not allowed to leave the Ghetto. The child hero knew he was going to die; so too did the Jewish children that sooner or later they would be killed. But Amal was not afraid and

instead accepted death as a friend. Thus, the background of the story and Amal's tryst with death resonated with those who are facing the fear of death daily. It is this that makes the play universal as well.

The Post Office [Dakghar] was written in 1911 (first published on January 16, 1912) when Tagore was on a quest to find the meaning of life and death at the age of fifty. In the preceding decade, he had lost his wife, Mrinalini Devi in 1910, his second daughter Renuka in 1903, his father, Debendranath Tagore in 1905 and his youngest son Samindranath in 1907. The bereavements haunted him and are reflected in his poetry as well. Kalimohan Ghosh's diary records that the play was written when Tagore was weary of the arguments among residents of Santiniketan and he himself was not well. One night, sleeping on the terrace, he woke up and felt the shadow of death near him. It was then he wrote the play in one sitting releasing his own emotions. When Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson edited *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology*, they chose the play in their collection because it "seems to distil the thoughts and feelings that mattered most of all to its author into a vessel of timeless and universal appeal." They note in their introduction that W. B. Yeats called *The Post Office* a "masterpiece," and that Mahatma Gandhi wrote that he was "enraptured" by a 1917 performance of the play at the Bichitra Hall where the poet performed the role of Thakurdada. For all, the appeal is the process of dying and acceptance of death. Here "Tagore's insight into death is perhaps at its deepest". We can see in Kalidas Nag's entry in his diary that Annie Besant, Madan Mohan Malaviya, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were also present in the Bichitra, the poet's house, to enjoy the drama. With the brilliant performance and acting Malaviya was moved and became very emotional, his eyes were filled with tears and Tilak stared at the stage. Besant watched it with deep interest and Gandhi with deep attention without spending a single word. William Radice in his Translator's foreword of *The Post Office* published in 2008 by Visva-Bharati indicates

"*The Post Office* is poignant, tragic, even bleak in some of its implications. In his portrait of the dying boy Amal, Rabindranath must have had in his mind the grief and bereavements he had suffered in the preceding ten years, culminating in the death of his younger son Samindra in 1907." (6)

The play consists only of two Acts and the location remains the same. Act I opens with a sick child lying on a bed. We learn that he is Amal

(means ‘pure’ or ‘spotless’) an orphan who had been adopted by his uncle and aunt. His uncle Madhav had not wanted to adopt a child at first because he preferred his wealth to remain in his family’s hands. But his unnamed aunt insisted and after Amal was adopted Madhav came to love him more than his money. Unfortunately, he suffers from a disease. No one knows what it is. But as per the advice of the village doctor, he is kept confined in his bedroom because fresh air might injure his delicate health. But though he is basically immobile, his imagination has full play and as he sits at the window he talks with the people passing by imagining himself going with them. One by one, the Curd seller, Watchman, Sudha, the village boys and the Grandfather become his friends. Of special interest is Sudha who picks flowers; she agrees to bring back a flower for him swearing “You will be remembered.” He learns that a royal post office has been established in his village and he waits anxiously for a letter from the King to him, dreaming of being a messenger who will go to faraway lands. In Act II Amal deteriorates. There is no hope of him surviving. But his uncle refuses to believe it and insists that Amal follows all the rules the physician had laid out. None sees any hope of his survival. In a sudden surprise move, the writer introduces the King’s Herald and the King’s Physician. They inform him that the King is going to come to see him. Madhav becomes excited and tells Amal to ask for gifts. But Amal is not interested and it disappoints his uncle. Soon Amal becomes weaker. In a single instant he passes away though Madhav does not understand. But the others do and they maintain an appropriately respectful aura. Then Sudha arrives and asks for Amal. The Physician replies “he has fallen asleep”. Not understanding the truth, Sudha asks the physician to give him her flowers and says, “Tell him, ‘Sudha has not forgotten you.’”

Thus from beginning to end the play focuses on a death. It opens with the sight of a dying child and ends with his death. Everyone knows the boy is going to die but the word is never uttered directly. But the foreshadowing of the inevitable end is always present. As the play opens, Madhav voices his fears that Amal will not survive. The village doctor tells Madhav that if Amal “is fated for long life, then he shall have it.” Amal speaks with the Watchman about time and death. He asks the Watchman when he will sound the gong and is told that the time has not come yet. The Watchman says, “My gong sounds to tell the people. Time waits for none, but goes on forever” and everyone has to go there – it is a clear indication that no one can stop the march of time which will bring

the final end to every creature. Indeed, as time passes, Amal becomes weaker and weaker and grows closer to death. Sudha says that “to look at you reminds me of the fading morning star.” Amal asks her, “You won’t forget me?” Apparently it is just a request to visit him again and bring flowers for him, but it is a plea that the dead will not be forgotten. The Royal Physician says the boy is going to sleep and he tells Sudha he is only asleep. The Grandfather sits reverentially with folded hands. Madhav denies what has happened, and instead asks what is happening, the reaction of any average person to the passing away of a beloved child. But the Grandfather orders him harshly to be quiet, demanding equal reverence. There is no weeping or lamentation, only a deep quiet. The flowers left by Sudha are obviously a reminder of wreaths which adorn a dead body and also a concrete remembrance of the dead.

But what is distinctive in the play is that there is no struggle against death as such. Perhaps if this had been another kind of play, then we would have seen the boy hero raging against the dying of the light or sacrificing his life gallantly in some noble cause. But here Tagore studies a boy who is suffering from an incurable disease and how he deals with it. Because he is sick, he is not allowed out of his room or feel fresh air and sunlight. Life becomes a prison, albeit a prison made from love and concern. All he can do is to sit beside the window and dream of far away lands. Whenever he speaks to someone from the outside world, he wants to be like them and go away with them. He says to Madhav: “See that far-away from our window – I often long to go beyond those hills and ride away.” But it is not possible. He can only roam around in imagination. The only land mentioned here he can go to is like the Parrot island of the story – an unknown world where anything is possible. He waits eagerly for the coming of a greater physician who will override the village physician’s authority and set him free. So, Death to Amal becomes freedom. When the royal physician asks Amal if he would leave his bed when the King comes at midnight. Amal says “Of course, I’m dying to be about forever so long. I’ll ask the King to find me the polar star– I must have seen it often, but I d’not know exactly which it is.” (89) Only if he dies, he can be free both of this room which is like a prison and his pain which makes his physical existence unbearable. That is why in his last moments he tells the Royal physician “I feel very well, Doctor, very well. My illness is gone, my pain is gone. Now everything is open—I can see all the stars, shining on the far side of darkness.” Death is thus a release from physical, mental and

spiritual bondage of the soul. Amal surrendered himself to death which can be expressed with the words of Tagore: “মরণ রে, তুহু মম শ্যাম সমান।” This may be compared with John Keats’s idea to escape the pain of human existence, thought agony and frustration in “Ode to the Nightingale”

“Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain”

Naturally ordinary worldly people like Madhav do not feel this way. So, at the moment of Amal’s death, he says to the Grandfather, “Why so hushed, with your palms pressed together like a statue? I feel a kind of dread. These do not seem like good omens.” But the Grandfather understands that Amal is now free and it is a sacred moment and vehemently orders “Be quiet, unbeliever! Do not speak.” Death, far from being something to be mourned over, is deliverance for the child.

Another way to look at the notion of death is to interpret it mystically. Though Tagore had commented that the play *The Post Office* should be “read through the eyes of a child” (Rukhaiyar 59), certainly Tagore himself loads the play with enough symbols to do so. Death had always been considered as the doorway to the next world and meeting with God. Here too Amal leaves this vale of suffering and enters into the world of eternity and becomes one with the Supreme Soul. That is why in his preface to *The Post Office*, W.B. Yeats lays emphasis on “deliverance as the theme of the play”, the deliverance which the child discovers in death. The spiritual element becomes strongest regarding the symbolism of the King which had been hotly debated. God had always been considered the King of Kings and in several other plays by Tagore the King symbolizes God. The names of the two postmen of the King are Badal (rainy season) and Sarat (autumn): this links the King with nature elements and they are his servants. Since Nature is under God’s domain the names strengthen this interpretation. The King’s herald suddenly enters and announces that the King himself would come at midnight and is sending his “great physician to attend on his young friend” Realistically speaking there is no reason why the King should come to visit Amal and that too at midnight. Moreover, he does not actually come. But it makes sense if we think of the King as God. The royal physician is the mystic energy of God. After all, the Watchman had told Amal that since he badly wants to go outside “the doctor will hold your hand and take you there.” When Amal said that the doctor would not let him do that, the Watchman replied that he is referring

to a “greater doctor,” one “who can set you free.” Therefore, the first thing the greater doctor, i.e., the royal physician does is to throw open doors and windows through which the natural world can be perceived, the world that He created. Amal then feels that “all pain is gone”.

Nirmal Mukerji is confident that the King “obviously symbolizes death,” and adds that the “moment of death for the child is the moment of his union with the King.” But the King is also God, and so death is the way of union with God. Thus, the play “is about the yearning of the soul for the oversoul or the king symbolizing God. Death brings the fulfilment of such a yearning.” Therefore, “death is visualized as the liberator which frees man from all earthly pain.” (65) Though a critic like S. K. Desai does not think that the play is primarily symbolic, he agrees that the symbolism cannot be ignored. Indeed, *The Post Office* might be considered to be the whole world with the King/God sending messages to everyone. Here death is described as a sleep. Amal will wake to a new world, at one with the Supreme Being. S. Iyer goes so far as to argue that perhaps Amal is not dead after all: “In Amal the aspiration and divine response meet and the result is the newbirth, new physical death; the divine has come to the parched human heart and there will now ensure the burst of a new spring of life and joy. (28)

On the other hand, Pabitra Sarkar argues that as an atheist he does not believe in God and the soul and so the mystical interpretation did not move him. In fact, he argues that it is about the realistic depiction of a child dying.

Research by physicians and psychologists reveal that the attitude of children suffering from terminal diseases is to become indifferent about their own possessions. Amal in *The Post Office* at the end of the first act gives away all his toys to the street children asking them to play with the toys in front of him before taking them away to their homes.

Tagore’s play is not only about death but about death as the only certainty in life. But there is also the problem of presenting death artistically and aesthetically. Since Tagore had not been schooled in the tradition of European realism but had rather inherited a different set of artistic conventions, a different concept of theatrical aesthetic, his own personal experiences of death led him to present mortality in a manner simultaneously artistic and heart rendering and real.

The reactions of the people who come and meet Amal at the window follow a common pattern. At first, they do not respond kindly to a boy calling them, distracting them from their work. But when they find out that Amal is sick and that he is dying, their reaction changes. To them Amal reveals what he wants to be; he does not want to be a scholar, nor a doctor, nor one of the common run-off-the-mill people who accept whatever role is given to them. Instead, Amal wants to go out to meet people, to visit places far away and beyond the hills. There is a contrast between Amal's strong dramatic imagination and his restricted and cloistered existence. It is in such tiny and delicate contrasts that the dramatic germ of the play lies.

There is however no need to take any rigid stand regarding the 'real' meaning of the play. Tagore's play flows smoothly telling us of death and its coming. It can be thus read both realistically and symbolically:

The Post Office is a perfect fairy tale in the senses that one can submit to its pathos and fancy without any disbelief and without raising disturbing questions regarding the play's deeper intent or its proportions of allegory, myth and symbolism. It takes forward its dramatic action structurally to the one question: What is there beyond the Horizon? (Swaroop 156)

Tagore himself in a letter to C.F. Andrews explained the significance of the play in the following words: "Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road" (Ghosh 132) He seeks freedom from the comfortable enclosure of habits sanctioned by the prudent and from the walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respectable.

Tagore had composed the following song in December 1939 to sing after the death of Amal at a new production where Tagore played the role of Fakir. But after the production Tagore expressed that the song may be sung after his own death. The melody of the song touches the human life with the cosmic light of the world"

The ocean of peace lies ahead of me,
Sail the boat, O pilot
You are my constant companion now.
Take me at your lap.

Along our journey to the infinite
The pole star alone will shine
Given of freedom.
Set me free.
May your forgiveness and compassion
Be my eternal resources for the journey.
May the vast universe
Hold me in embrace,
And with an undaunted heart
May I come to know the Great Unknown

Quoted from *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man*. Ed. Krishna Dutt and Andrew Robinson

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Amal in the death bed

Cast : Amal–Chaiti Ghosal, Madav–Tarapada Mukhopadhyaya,
Thakurdada–Sombhu Mitra.

First performance by Bhourupée in 1957

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