



THE THEME OF MATERIALISM IN TAGORE'S *RED OLEANDERS* AS A WARNING TO THE MODERN SOCIETY

1MEERA N, 2Dr. S SUDHA

1Student, 2Assistant Professor

1Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science, Nava India, Coimbatore

2Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science, Nava India, Coimbatore

Abstract

Red Oleanders written by Rabindranath Tagore discusses the negative impact of materialism in the modern society. Boundless affinity to materialism shall take the society to the path of destruction. It can hinder the peaceful living of humankind as it kindles the exploitation of nature, human relationship and many more. Tagore's warning to the modern society to not get trapped into materialistic chaos can be discussed through the characters and their conversations

Keywords: Materialism, nature, exploitation, warning

Materialism is the relentless pursuit of material wealth and possessions often comes at the expense of nature, further deepening the rift between humans and the environment. *Red Oleanders* attempts to address the growing exploitation of natural resources. Tagore has observed the problems of workers, mines and the environment in the provinces of Assam. These are closely linked with modern global capitalism and corporate greed. As a result, man is drifting away from human values, morality, spirituality and nature. Alienation is extending its shadow on the man's life and foretelling the phase of disaster.

The character of the king and the theme of kingship in Tagore's Red Oleanders employ the figure of the king to represent the ruling class or those in positions of power who prioritize material gain and self-interest over the well-being of their citizens. Tagore portrays the selfishness, deceitful activities and irresponsibility of politicians in the present political landscape. This can be seen as critique of materialistic politicians who are primarily motivated by personal gain and power rather than serving the commoners. Their insensitive attitude towards the needs and concerns of the people reflects a materialistic mindset that disregards the welfare of others for the sake of material wealth and personal advancement. The same situation can be witnessed in Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* as Jones rule only for exploiting people and acquiring money as he says the following lines,

I sho' has! And it's in a foreign bank where no pusson don't ever git it out or me no matter what come. You didn't s'pose I was holdin' down dis Emperor job for de glory in it, did you? Sho'! De fuss and glory part of it, dat's only to return de heads' o' de lowflung, bush niggers dat's here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em an' I gits de money. (*Three Great Plays* 6)

The king's evasion of responsibilities and the enforcement of rigid norms, slavery and inequality illustrate the negative consequences of materialism. The king's focus on maintaining power and exploiting the commoners echoes the exploitative nature of materialistic pursuits. The rigid norms and inequality imposed by the king's system can be seen as an extension of the hierarchical structures perpetuated by materialism, where wealth and power concentrate in the hands of a few while the majority suffer.

Modernity, industrialism, and a thirst for material goods turn the wealthy people into an automaton. The ideology of capitalism destroys the population's ability to live in harmony. They are rendered speechless when they demand their freedom and justice because it incites rage, fear, and suspension. Anyone who attempts to protest is subject to incarceration. Additionally, all miners are required to work nonstop in the name of faith. The concept of welfare is absent from these workers' daily lives. They are not allowed to consider their happiness, personal lives, or tranquil lifestyle. These workers are sold alcohol by the dictators, and the alcoholism impairs their judgment and causes them to be misled. This condition of people trapped in the cycle of materialism is conveyed by T S Eliot through the line, "I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring." (*The Waste Land* 56)

The play's main female character is identified as the embodiment of nature and beauty. According to materialism, the built-in norms aim to obliterate Nandini and the natural world. The tragic loss of Nandini and the workers' sorrow serve as examples of the process of extracting natural resources. Nandhini exposes the potentially harmful mental states that might emerge in a materialistic culture and cautions against the irresponsible exploitation of nature. Through Nandhini, Tagore's perspective promotes a more balanced way of living, emphasising the value of empathy and emotional well-being over financial things and respecting the interconnectivity of nature.

The living heart of the earth gives itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom and disturb the dead, you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious. Don't you see everybody here is either angry, or suspicious, or afraid? (*Red Oleanders* 15)

This statement alludes to a relationship with nature and its innate beauty and lifegiving properties. This might be seen as the Earth's resources and the possibility for exploitation from a materialistic viewpoint. When these resources are indiscriminately used, Nandhini forewarns about the bad things which are going to happen. This viewpoint acknowledges the possible repercussions of utilising nature without taking into account its long-term viability. The dark demon that results from upsetting the heart of the Earth is mentioned by Nandhini as the curse of materialism. This might be interpreted as a metaphor for the harmful repercussions of excessive materialism.

The chase of money and goods is characterised as being envious, spiteful, ruthless, and blind. This implies that a preoccupation with money gain might result in undesirable undesirable traits and a loss of empathy and compassion. According to Nandhini, people feel either furious, distrustful, or terrified in a society where materialistic pursuits are prioritised. This suggests that materialism might cause emotional upheaval and feelings of insecurity. People with a materialistic worldview may become obsessed by rivalry, distrust, and fear as they pursue their own interests, creating a tense and uneasy atmosphere. A man who is into the luxuries of material world fails to appreciate the greatness of the life and world around him. This is seen in the eighth poem of Tagore's *Gitanjali*,

The child who is decked with prince's robes and who has
jewelled chains around his neck loses all pleasure in his play;
his dress hampers him at every step.
in fear that it may be frayed, or stained with dust he keeps
himself from the world, and is afraid even to move. (*Gitanjali* 16)

Nandhini's character emphasises the significance of appreciating the value of work and human connection in the pursuit of money from a materialistic standpoint. They also raise concerns over the genuine value of material belongings and their ability to bring about the same level of fulfilment as a relationship with nature and a feeling of purpose that goes beyond accumulation. Overall, Tagore's depiction of Nandhini urges meditation on the potential drawbacks of materialism and promotes a more all-encompassing method of locating purpose and fulfilment in life.

The day you let me into your store-house the blocks of gold did not surprise me, what amazed me was the immense strength with which you lifted and arranged them. But can blocks of gold ever answer to the swinging rhythm of your arms in the same way as fields of corn? Are you not afraid, King, of handling the dead wealth of the earth? (*Red Oleanders* 14)

Nandhini accepts the existence of gold blocks in the storeroom, which stand in for monetary prosperity and the value of human connection. She is astonished by the king's enormous power and effort in lifting and arranging the gold, not the gold itself. This viewpoint emphasises the significance of labour and human effort in the creation and management of wealth. It implies that working hard and investing in oneself to acquire riches is a more gratifying experience than acquiring wealth itself.

Nandhini contrasts material richness with natural plenty, asking if the rhythmic arm swinging in cornfields can satisfy the same way as chunks of gold do. This contrasts the immobile character of worldly things with the moving and sustaining elements of nature. From a materialistic standpoint, it begs the question of whether worldly success can bring true fulfilment on its own or whether interacting with and taking advantage of nature's abundance might offer something intrinsically more meaningful.

When Nandhini asks the monarch if he is not frightened of handling the dead wealth of the earth, she is inquiring about the relevance and purpose of worldly goods. An unhealthy attachment to material prosperity can cause a feeling of emptiness and alienation. It emphasises the idea that, while financial goods are meaningful in and of themselves, they may fall short of providing a person with the deeper emotional and spiritual fulfilment that can be found in other facets of life.

The earth is ruthlessly devastated in Yaksha town in order to acquire wealth. The earth's natural beauty, the vegetation, is overshadowed by the digging and the deep tunnels. Rarely are the women of the digger class and their appalling conditions recognized. In order to escape the confines of patriarchal culture, Nandini gives her life, displaying a strong personality. With her knowledge, she attempts to change the imperialistic social structure. She has such a strong influence that other characters continue the movement by adopting her views.

Materialistic possessions can contribute to a person's wealth, which in turn can enable them to hold positions of power such as a state owner, leader, or king. This observation reflects a perspective influenced by both feudal and capitalist societies. Wealth is often measured in terms of tangible possessions such as land, resources, or capital. The possession of such material wealth grants individuals the means to influence and shape societal structures. In a feudal society, for example, land ownership was a crucial determinant of power and social standing. The people in power have the ability to control and shape discourse, while discourse can also be used to consolidate and enhance power. This implies that the ability to control the narrative and shape public opinion is essential for maintaining and expanding power.

Under the cover of discourses, laws, and regulations, people are protected and kept in the shadows by power brokers, upper caste individuals, administrators, governors, industrialists, landlords, and policy makers. However, just like Phagulal, Bishu, Ranjan, and Nandhini in *The Red Oleanders*, the laborers, poor farmers, mine excavators, and other people must involuntarily obey by the discursive rules without having an option or demand. The character of Bishu emphasises the importance of material goods and financial gain as motivating elements by implying that Phagulal's unrelenting labour is the result of a dream of accumulating fortune.

"I say, yes. That Phagulal toils for hours over and above the twelve,-why? For a reason unknown to him, unknown even to you. But I know. It's your dream of gold that lashes him on to work, more severely than the foreman's whip." (*RedOleanders* 29). These lines underline how materialistic desires affect people's behaviour and their capacity to motivate them to put forth endless effort. Bishu agrees that Phagulal puts in a lot more than the requisite twelve hours' worth of effort. The focus on Phagulal's labour draws attention to the character's dedication and tenacity. According to Bishu, Phagulal works for a cause that is both unknown to him and to Bishu. This suggests that Phagulal's motivation is driven by something more profound and individualised than is generally understood.

Phagulal's arduous labour was driven by a desire for gold, according to Bishu. This shows that Phagulal is motivated by a desire for monetary gain and material success. A metaphor for the allure of material possessions and whatever possible benefits they may have is the quest of gold. Phagulal's obsession with gold, in Bishu's words, makes him labour even harder than the foreman's lash. This exemplifies how materialistic needs can lead people to push themselves over their physical limits.

When the thirsty heart despairs of finding water it's easy enough for it to be deluded by a mirage, and driven in barren quest from desert to desert. One day, while I was gazing at the sunset clouds, she had her eye upon the golden spire of the Governor's palace. Her glance challenged me to take her over there. In my foolish pride I vowed to do so. When I did bring her here, under the golden spire, the spell was broken. (*Red Oleanders* 49)

In these lines by Bishu, the thirsty heart represents a person's goals and aspirations, particularly those connected to financial money, success, and recognition, from a materialistic point of view. The pursuit of these goals is symbolised by the search for water. When the heart searches in vain for water, it represents the annoyance and disappointment that might result from having one's materialistic aspirations unfulfilled. The idea of a mirage implies that the heart can be tricked by fantasies of wealth and prosperity. This could be used to describe materialism's attraction to material items and the notion that having them will make one happy and fulfilled. However, these materialistic endeavours could end up being meaningless and unsatisfying, much like a mirage.

The Governor's palace's golden spire and the sunset clouds are mentioned as perceived emblems of riches, power, and social standing. These materialistic objectives are reflected in the Nandhini's ambition to bring the thirsty heart to the gilded spire. It is motivated by pride and the conviction that achieving such outward success markers will lead to fulfilment. The magic is dispelled, though, when the main character, Nandhini brings the heart to the golden spire. This implies that the protagonist begins to see that worldly goals do not provide true fulfilment and purpose in life. The protagonist's sense of hollowness and despair serves as a critique of materialism's nature.

Professor shed light on the negative aspects of materialism, including unethical means of acquisition and the potential devaluation of true treasures in life. They encourage individuals to reflect on the consequences of materialistic pursuits and consider the deeper values and treasures that go beyond material possessions. "It's their way to snatch things by fractions. But why should you want to drag your life's treasure down amongst this dead wealth of ours?" (*Red Oleanders* 7) In these lines spoken by the Professor, materialism is critiqued as a means of obtaining wealth through unethical and fractional means. The Professor implies that individuals who are driven by materialism resort to dishonest and manipulative tactics to acquire more possessions or wealth. The phrase "snatch things by fractions" suggests a gradual and incremental approach to accumulating material goods, possibly through exploitation or taking advantage of others.

Furthermore, the Professor questions why someone would choose to entangle their life's treasures, their true and valuable possessions, with the lifeless wealth obtained through materialistic pursuits. He contrasts the dead wealth, which implies a lack of life or meaning, with the more meaningful and fulfilling treasures that can be found beyond material possessions. By questioning the desire to immerse oneself in the pursuit of material wealth, the Professor suggests that materialism can lead to a devaluation of what truly matters in life. It highlights the discrepancy between the superficiality of material possessions and the deeper, more meaningful aspects of life such as relationships, personal growth, and spiritual fulfillment.

The Professor critiques materialism by contrasting the genuine needs of individuals with the pursuit of excessive wealth. They highlight the temporary and superficial nature of material possessions and emphasize the intrinsic value of individuals that goes beyond material wealth. The lines invite reflection on the true sources of happiness and fulfillment in life, suggesting that they lie in genuine human connections, inner qualities, and a deeper sense of purpose.

Materialism is contrasted with the genuine needs of the tunnel-diggers and the true value of human existence. The Professor draws attention to the tunnel-diggers, who represent individuals engaged in laborious work to fulfill their basic needs. They are depicted metaphorically as worms creeping out of holes, emphasizing their humble and essential role in society. The tunnel-diggers symbolize the hardworking individuals who strive for necessities rather than excessive material possessions.

The phrase "loads of things in need" suggests that the tunnel-diggers possess items that fulfill their genuine needs. This highlights the distinction between actual necessities and the excessive accumulation of material possessions associated with materialism. The Professor implies that the tunnel-diggers are more attuned to what is truly important in life, prioritizing their essential needs over the pursuit of excessive wealth. In contrast, the Yaksha town is described as having treasure made of gold, representing the material wealth that symbolizes materialism. However, it is referred to as the "secret treasure of dust," indicating that this wealth is transient and ultimately meaningless. It underscores the impermanence and emptiness of material possessions.

The Professor goes on to differentiate the true value of the individual addressed as the "beautiful one." He suggests that this person possesses a different kind of "gold," one that transcends materialism. This "gold" is metaphorically described as being of the light, representing spiritual or inner richness. It implies that true value lies in one's inner qualities, such as integrity, kindness, and love, which are not bound by material possessions or worldly attachments.

The Professor warns against staying in Yaksha Town, urging Nandini to leave and seek happiness elsewhere. He acknowledges that departing will widen the gaps left by their absence, emphasizing the challenging nature of breaking free from the grip of materialism. However, he still encourages her to flee, suggesting that a life free from the destructive forces of materialism is worth pursuing. The mention of people in their "drunken fury" tearing the earth's veil to pieces suggests that the residents of Yaksha Town are consumed by their materialistic desires to the point of recklessness. It implies that their pursuit of wealth and possessions has led to a disregard for the natural order and a loss of balance.

In the closing sentence, the Professor asks Nandini for a flower from her chain of red oleanders. This can be seen as a symbolic gesture, representing a desire to hold onto something beautiful and pure amidst the materialistic chaos. The red oleanders may symbolize the potential for love, beauty, and a deeper connection with nature that transcends material possessions. The Professor conveys a warning about the destructive consequences of materialism. They depict Yaksha Town as a place consumed by greed and the insatiable pursuit of wealth, resulting in an incomplete and fragmented existence. The Professor urges Nandini to break free from this cycle and seek a happier life where materialism does not tear apart the fabric of society.

All I possess is so much dead weight. No increase of gold can create a particle of a touchstone, no increase of power can ever come up to youth. I can only guard by force. If I had Ranjan's youth I could leave you free and yet hold you fast. My time is spent in knotting the binding rope, but, alas, everything else can be kept tied except joy. (*Red Oleanders* 18)

In these lines, the voice expresses a sense of disillusionment with material possessions and power. It suggests that all the possessions accumulated are burdensome and carry no real value or meaning. The voice implies that no amount of material wealth, represented by gold, can compare to the worth of a touchstone, which is a metaphor for something of genuine value or significance. The voice also highlights the fleeting nature of power, emphasizing that no matter how much power one possesses, it can never match the vitality and potential of youth. This can be interpreted as a critique of materialistic pursuits, as the pursuit of power and wealth often comes at the expense of the vitality and energy of youth, which is a time of exploration, growth, and genuine joy.

The speaker acknowledges that they can only hold onto others through force and control, implying that materialism often relies on manipulation and exertion of power over others. However, they express a longing for the youth and freedom that Ranjan possesses. The voice suggests that with youth, one can find a balance between freedom and commitment, holding onto someone without resorting to force or control. The speaker laments that their time is consumed by tying the binding rope, representing the effort spent on maintaining control and possession over others.

However, they acknowledge that joy is elusive and cannot be tied or controlled like material possessions. This suggests that materialism, despite its promises, cannot provide true and lasting happiness. The lines spoken by the voice convey a sense of disillusionment with materialism. They critique the superficiality and limitations of material possessions and power, highlighting the importance of youth, freedom, and joy that cannot be obtained through material wealth alone. The voice implies that true fulfillment and happiness lie beyond the confines of materialism, urging a reevaluation of values and priorities.

Materialism is conveyed through the emphasis on the luxurious and superior living conditions provided to the person referred to as "69 Ng." The Governor presents the rooms given as excellent, surpassing the ones at home, and boasts about the presence of a state watchman for safety. This portrayal reflects a materialistic mindset that equates wealth and material comforts with superiority and well-being. The Governor's question implies that the provision of luxurious accommodations should be sufficient to satisfy the individual's needs and desires. It suggests that material possessions and physical comfort are seen as the primary indicators of a desirable lifestyle. This perspective reflects a materialistic value system that places importance on external appearances and material wealth.

The Governor's statement about keeping a state watchman further highlights the materialistic mindset, as it emphasizes the measures taken to protect the individual's safety and possessions. It implies that the presence of security personnel adds to the perceived value and prestige of the living arrangements. The focus on material security reflects a narrow perspective that equates safety and well-being solely with physical protection and material possessions. His analogy of a heron teaching paddy birds how to cut capers adds a touch of mockery and condescension. It suggests that the individual, represented by the heron, is an outsider attempting to guide or instruct others who are perceived as less sophisticated or knowledgeable.

Materialism is portrayed through the admiration and excitement evoked by the grand procession and its extravagant display of wealth and opulence. Chandra's exclamation reflects a fascination with the outward manifestations of material wealth and luxury. Chandra expresses astonishment at the grandeur of the procession, noting the presence of numerous palanquins and the sparkling jewelled fringes of the elephant-seats. This highlights the focus on material possessions and their visual appeal. The emphasis on the beauty and extravagance of the procession suggests a captivation with the external trappings of wealth and status.

In the *Red Oleanders*, materialism is depicted as a destructive force that undermines human relationships, stifles individual freedom, and devalues the intrinsic worth of human life. The play serves as a warning to modern society about the dangers of excessive material pursuits and the neglect of deeper spiritual and ethical values. Tagore portrays materialism as a source of corruption and inequality. The pursuit of wealth and power creates a stark divide between the privileged few and the oppressed many. The system in Yaksha Town enforces rigid norms, slavery, and inequality, emphasizing the negative consequences of materialistic ideologies.

Red Oleanders warns against the dangers of materialism and advocates for a deeper understanding of human values. It emphasizes the importance of prioritizing human relationships, personal growth, and ethical principles over the accumulation of material possessions. The play serves as a reminder that true happiness and fulfillment lie not in material wealth but in the richness of human connections, empathy, and spiritual awakening.

I. Acknowledgment

This paper is part of my MA project at Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. I place my thanks to my guide Dr. S. SUDHA, Assistant Professor in PG & Department of English, for the help she has rendered for this journal.

References

- [1] Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Waste Land*. Boni & Liveright, 1922..
- [2] O'Neill, Eugene. *Three Great Plays*. Dover Publications, 2005..
- [3] Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali*. Maple Press Private Limited, 2017.
- [4] Tagore, Rabindranath. *Red Oleanders*. Niyogi Books, 2012.

