Chapter IX

Romantic and Symbolic Dramas

I

Romantic Drama

In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine such plays as do not come under any of the categories discussed so far, mythological, historical or social. It will also be seen how far and in what ways Western influence, technical, stylistic and ideological, has helped shaping these plays. These plays are called 'romantic' because in them imagination is given free play and emotion receives unfettered expression. The settings are either purely imaginative or medieval, and "Characters and scenes alike are viewed through magic casements which transform reality,"¹ to quote Nicoll on Shakespearean romantic comedy. These plays do not observe the 'unities' of time and place, and are marked by a mixture of the tragic and the comic as well as the natural and the supernatural. We have already seen that many of the plays discussed in the foregoing pages have these qualities, but the difference between them and the 'romantic' plays lies chiefly in the fact that while the former take their subject-matter from mythology, history or contemporary society, the latter depend for their themes on the invention of the playwrights. Yet these plays are not unrelated to real life, and in them not only are universal human passions dramatized, but in some, as in

¹ British Drama, p. 123
Kāreṅgar Ligirī, contemporary life and society are also mirrored.

Romantic drama, of course, is nothing new in Indian literature. Ancient Indian drama was largely of this nature. "The Hindu theatre", remarks W.H. Wilson, "belongs to that division of dramatic composition which modern critics have agreed to term romantic, in opposition to what some schools have been pleased to call classical." Sushil Kumar De points out that "With just a few notable exceptions love has been the dominant theme of this romantic drama, which obeys neither the unity of time nor the unity of place and includes in its sweep of imagination both heaven and earth with human, divine and semi-divine personages ... ." Medieval Assamese drama also is marked by such characteristics. In plays like Rukmini-harana, love is the dominant theme. Neither the unity of time nor the unity of place is observed in these plays. The action not only shifts from one place to another within Bhārat (India) but also moves between earth and heaven. The characters, too, include human beings as well as divine and semi-divine personages. The plays, consequently, have little relation to reality, and everything is subordinated to the playwright's didactic purpose.

2. The Theatre of the Hindus, Preface, p. 3. Wilson also quotes Schlegel who says "The drama of Sakuntalā presents, through its oriental brilliancy of colouring, so striking a resemblance, upon the whole, to our romantic drama, that it might be suspected the love of Shakespeare had influenced the translator, if other orientalists had not borne testimony to the fidelity of his translation."

3. Ancient Indian Erotics and Erotic Literature, p. 60
Modern Assamese romantic drama hardly reveals any influence either of Sanskrit drama or of medieval Assamese ankiyā nāts. Whether it is in the technique or the feelings expressed, this drama, as we shall find, appears to be largely due to inspiration coming from the West.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who had made his debut as a playwright with his mytho-romantic play, Sonit-kuwarī, gave us a fascinatingly romantic drama in his Karengar Ligiri (The Palace Maid, 1934). The story is set in medieval times, and the characters and situations, as the playwright himself tells us, are all imaginary. Prince Sundar, the hero of the play, is a learned man and an idealist with a somewhat misogynistic nature. Much against his will and only to please his mother, the Queen, the Prince marries Kānchana-matī, the Prime Minister's daughter. But when he comes to know that Kānchana-matī's heart lies elsewhere, he forgets that he has married just to satisfy others, and demands both her body and mind. Kānchana-matī succinctly retorts that he has got no right to demand both because the institution of marriage requires only bodily chastity, since it does not care to know if the two persons really love each other. The Prince realizes his mistake, but makes another. On the pretext of going for a picnic, he takes his wife to the forest of Kaziranga where he leaves her with Ananga, her former lover. But Kānchana-matī, then, poisons

4. Preface to Karengar Ligiri, ed. 2, undated, p. 1
herself to death. This gives rise to scandal, and the Prince's action comes to be interpreted as having been prompted by a secret love affair he is supposed to have with Sewālī, a palace maid. This greatly disturbs the Queen Mother, who gets Sewālī secretly banished to the Naga hills. When the Prince learns this he runs to rescue Sewālī. But Sewālī knows that if the Prince marries an ordinary palace maid like her he will not only lose his kingdom but his life will also be in danger. So, in order to absolve the Prince from such a stigma, she kills herself by jumping into a stream, creating thus a void in the Prince's heart.

Kārengar Ligiri appears to be a blending of Shakespearean romantic comedy and Shavian play of ideas. With its medieval setting, imaginary characters and situations, and the free play of fancy and imagination, the play comes very close to a Shakespearean romantic drama. In fact, Shakespeare's influence is discernible in the blending in it of tragic and comic elements. The comedy stems chiefly from the character of Bapurā, who is obviously modelled on the Fool and clowns in Shakespeare. But the romantic ideal expresses itself most forcefully through the character of the hero whose revolutionary mind knows no bounds. "The underlying idea of the play", the playwright himself tells us, "is that eternally revolutionary mind which wants to move along the road of revolutionary progress. How that mind fights against its adversaries and how it tramples cruelly all social customs and class conventions in order to have its way is also shown here."

5. A.N.S., p. 335
It has also been tried to show how the revolutionary psychology, transcending marriage and class consciousness, gives up its all in order to proceed along the way of progress.  

This brings us to the focal point of the play—the conflict between an individual's free will and the conventionalized will of a static society. The former is represented by the Prince and the latter by his mother, the Queen. The Queen is determined to marry to her son a girl from the aristocracy. The Prince abhors this very idea, but is unable to oppose his mother. He seems to have some weakness for Sewālī, the palace maid, but his aristocratic pride does not allow him to own this. Prince Sundar is thus an embodiment of the creative and revolutionary mind which, although it is yet to be fully free from the trammels of a static psyche, is fighting its way forward. Totally unconcerned of popular reactions, Sundar hands over his lawfully-married wife, Kānchanmati, to her lover, and finally decides to marry the palace maid and make her queen. This does not, of course, materialize, because Sewālī does not live for it; but such a decision itself signifies how the revolutionary will is working in him.

This is also clear in the talk between the Prince and Kānchanmati (II, i) which centres on marriage and love, and society's attitude to them:

Sundar: What's the difference between marriage and love?

6. ibid., pp. 335-336
Kānchānmatī: Marriage brings about physical union, although society presumes and directs that it should also effect mental relation. Love is emotional relation, physical relation may not be its aim.

Sundar: Are they two things, then?

Kānchānmatī: Obviously.

Sundar: Then you won't object to staying at one place physically, while mentally you are at another?

Kānchānmatī: What's strange about it? You are physically here in this room, but your mind might be straying over the Himalayas.

Sundar: You're prepared to abide by society's directions?

Kānchānmatī: Yes.

Sundar: Society directs that you ought to love the one you marry. How would you obey it?

Kānchānmatī: Society directs, but has no spies to see if its directions are obeyed. But it has spies enough to see if a married woman follows the social formalities. And society is satisfied if only these formalities are observed, because such an observance ensures its safety.

Sundar: It's nice to hear. Does then chastity mean physical chastity alone?

Kānchānmatī: That would satisfy society.  

The dialogue continues, and it drives home to the revolutionary Prince the hypocrisy of social marriage which has no foundations in love. Kānchana has married him only to obey the rules of society in the same way as he has wedded her to please his mother, who symbolizes social conservatism. Their marriage is thus not founded on love. Yet none of them has been able to oppose it openly. Sundar is now convinced that a total revolution is a must to purge the society of all its evils. "Let there be a total revolution", he declares, "It is a must. Such a revolution is needed to purge society of all its age-old garbage."

The rather long dialogue quoted above is undoubtedly reminiscent of Shaw. It is doubtful if translation can do justice to the original, and yet the Shavian touches, both in style and the ideas expressed, are unmistakable. The technique of the play, too, appears to be largely modelled on Shaw and Galsworthy. We have already seen how Jyotiprasad has successfully used the naturalistic technique in Lāhhitā. In Kāhegār Lāgīrī, this technique is skilfully employed in order to create a medieval setting:

Palace - The bed-chamber of Prince Sundar. In the centre of the room is a large gold-plated bedstead supported on sculptured lion-heads. Three mirrors stand fastened to the rear wall. Over the bed hangs a large golden canopy. On the left side of the room three lamps burn, one of which hangs from the ceiling. On right at a little remove from the bed stands a big stool. The stout legs of the stool are spotted with gold and silver,

8. ibid., p. 41
and a thick blanket spreads over it. A heap of books lies on the blanket. On the left of the bed and within reach from it is a pedestalled platter which is as tall as the bed, and which holds another heap of books. When the curtain rises, Prince Sundar is seen seated on the bed leaning against the pillows with his legs hanging and eye-brows raised. Star[...] one of the lamps with hands on cheeks and elbows pressing the pillows, he appears to be very thoughtful. He is 28, but looks older because of his thoughtfulness...

This, if not modelled on, is undoubtedly reminiscent of Galsworthy. The stage-directions for a scene in one of his plays (Loyalties) for example, run as follows:

The drawing-room of Charles Winsor, owner of Weldon Court, near Newmarket, about eleven-thirty at night.
The room has pale grey walls, unadorned; the curtains are drawn over a window, Back Left Centre. A bed lies along the wall, Left. An open door, Right Back, leads into Lady Adela's bed-room; a door, Right Forward, into a long corridor, on to which abut rooms in a row, the whole length of the house's left wing.
Winsor's dressing-table with a light over it, is Stage Right of the curtained window. Pyjamas are laid out on the bed, which is turned back. Slippers are handy, and all the usual gear of a well-appointed bed-dressing room. Charles Winsor, a tall, fair, good-looking man about thirty-eight, is taking off a smoking-jacket.

9. ibid., pp. 1-2
10. Loyalties, I, i
The parallels between the two sets of stage-directions quoted above are indeed striking. It is needless to say that Jyotiprasad, who was in the habit of reading Galsworthy, Ibsen and Shaw, models his dramatic technique on these masters. But the stages in Assam at that time were poor, and so the stage-managers found it difficult to cope with such elaborate settings and stage-directions. "The social challenge, complicatedly developed characterization and long stage-directions", Mahešwar Neog tells us, "combined to make this wonderful piece of drama almost an unwelcome challenge to the Assamese theatre."\(^1\) But the challenge was gradually met, and this became the accepted technique for post-War Assamese drama.

Kārēngar Ligirī, it has been pointed out, is a tragedy of an eternally revolutionary mind in conflict with society. Although it is romantic both in theme and execution, its relation to real life is pronounced. The next play, Rupālim (1939), has a purely romantic ring, and the influence on it of Maurice Maeterlinck's Monna Vanna is unmistakable. Jyotiprasad himself hints at such an influence, saying that this might be due to the great impact with Monna Vanna had on him years back.\(^2\) In Maeterlinck's play, the city of Pisa, besieged by the Florentine army, is starving, and to save it from destruction Monna Vanna agrees to give herself to the mercenary general, Prinzivalle. But the general, surprisingly enough, proves to be a chivalrous lover and lets her go without any harm done to her.

\(^{11}\) Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 31
\(^{12}\) Preface to Rupālim, 1938, p. 2
is about to be arrested as a traitor, Wonna Vanna takes him with her. When she arrives home with him, Guido, her husband, suspects her of unchastity. She declares that she has not been seduced, but he would not believe. When Guido vows to take revenge on Prinzivalle by torturing him, she lies boldly, and the play ends giving us the impression that she will rescue him from prison and go off with him.

**Rupalim** is a romantic love story of Rupalim, a girl of the imaginary kingdom, Rukami, "somewhere in the north-east frontier of Assam." Rupalim is betrothed to a Rukami youth, Mayabo, but is forcibly taken away by Manimugdha, the ruler of another and more powerful frontier kingdom. Manimugdha confines Rupalim in his room and tries to persuade her to give herself up to him. When she is told that her father, Junapha, and her lover, Wayabo, will be released from captivity if she agrees to his proposal, she gives her consent. But Manimugdha fails to come close to her because he is charmed by her mesmeric personality. Finally, she is released, and goes away as pure as ever. But when she comes back to her village, she is charged with being unchaste and burnt to death at the orders of the jealous queen, Itibhen.

The parallels between the two plays, both in characterization and dialogue, are indeed striking. The character of Manimugdha comes close to Prinzivalle, while Wayaboö appears to be an echo of Guido. Two other characters, Marco of Wonna Vanna and Junapha of Rupalim, have also obvious similarities. The character of Vanna gets a different and more complex treatment at
the hand of the Assamese playwright; she appears to be realized through two complicatedly developed characters, Rupalim and Itibhen. Prinzivalle longs for Vanna's love, but she is already Guido's wife. Yet Prinzivalle cannot but have her love:

**Prinzivalle:** (Seeking her hand) You do not love him, Vanna?

**Vanna:** Whom?

**Prinzivalle:** Guido.

**Vanna:** Do not take my hand. I cannot give it to you. I see I must make myself clear to you. I love Guido today with a love less strange than the one you imagine you feel; but mine, at least, is steadier, calmer, more faithful, and more sure. That is the love that fortune has given me; I accepted it with my eyes open, I shall have no other; and if anyone breaks it that one will not be I.\(^\text{13}\)

In an almost similar situation, we find the following dialogue between Manimugdha and Rupalim:

**Manimugdha (Contracting eye-brows):** Rupalim, you love Mayabo very much?

**Rupalim (In the same breath):** I do.

**Manimugdha:** How much?

**Rupalim:** I cannot tell you. I love him very very much.

\(^{13}\) Monna Vanna, tr. by Alfred Sutro, New York, 1920, Act II, pp. 225-226
Of course, the answer to this question has already been given only a few lines earlier:

Rupālim (With eyes at the window): Prince Ṣānimugdha, please leave me alone. Wayābo is pervading my life. Ṣānimugdha, please take me to Māyābo. 14

Rupālim's love for Wayābo parallels Vanna’s for Guido. But Vanna has another and more attractive aspect of her character. She embodies patriotism, and this is represented in the Assamese play through Itibhen. When Prinzivalle says, "It is not for myself that I fear, but for you", Vanna replies,

I place the life of my people high above all. 15

In Rupālim, there is a piece of dialogue that echoes this:

Maṇīmugdha: O' so you have come armed to save her (Rupālim's) chastity? ...

Itibhen: ... I have come to save the honour of my country and of my people at the cost of my life. 16

But Rupālim has come not only to save the honour of her country but also to avenge herself on Maṇīmugdha, her betrothed, because he considers Rupālim's beauty above hers. When she finds that the prince, who is supposed to marry her, is giving all his

14. Rupālim, Act IV, p. 37
15. Monna Vanna, Act II, p. 214
16. Rupālim, IV, p. 42
attention to an ordinary girl, she becomes jealous. So she strikes Mañimugdha with the golden chain she is tied with. When Mañimugdha falls unconscious and begins to bleed, she takes his head in her lap and cries, caressing him:

Itibhen: Mañimugdha, Mañimugdha, I am here with you.

Mañimugdha: Itibhen, please give me a little drink.

(Itibhen hastily pours some wine in his mouth. This enables Mañimugdha to regain his self).

Mañimugdha: Itibhen, You have hurt me indeed. You are cruel. Don't you love me, Itibhen?

Itibhen (weeping): Mañimugdha, Yes, I love you, I love you very very much.

(She embosoms Mañimugdha; kisses him on the head, and continues weeping with her cheek pressed against his head.)

This undoubtedly unfolds an important aspect of Itibhen's character. Her jealousy and her break-down after having hurt Mañimugdha make her character come closer to life. Vanna, too, reacts in an identical way when she finds Prinzivalle bleeding in the face:

Vanna: But you are wounded, the blood is flowing ...

Prinzivalle: Ah, it is not my first wound.

Vanna: Let me adjust your bandage, it is badly tied.

(She winds the linen round his cheek). I have often tended the wounded in this war ...

17. ibid., p. 45
18. Monna Vanna, Act II, p. 219
But there are differences also, and very significant ones. Prinzivalle is an ideal character; his love of Vanna, if not platonic, is one that does not stem from desire. It is love inspired by higher feelings. Whatever little animal desire might be there in Prinzivalle dies away because, "the love of which T have spoken craves other things." Manimugdha, on the other hand, is far from being an ideal character. The dramatist himself tells us that he intends to show variety and complexity of characters rather than ideal characters. Manimugdha is completely a flesh-and-blood character; he does not actually love Rupālim; it is only her outward beauty that fascinates him. He says to Itibhen:

My life will be in vain if I fail to enjoy Rupālim's beauty.

Again,

Rupālim: Why can't you see how I suffer? Aren't you a man?

Manimugdha: Man? No, Your beauty has made me cease to be a man. I am lust uncontrollable and thirst incarnate, seeking to take hold of your beauty. I am an eternal desire for what is inside your fascinating person ...

19. ibid., p. 227
20. Preface to Rupālim, 1938, p. 1
21. Rupālim, IV, p. 45
22. ibid., p. 38
Vanna also is an ideal character: she embodies love for her country as well as her husband. Neither Rupalīm nor Itibhen, on the other hand, is idealized. Rupalīm becomes a victim of Itibhen’s jealousy. It has been noted already that it is not only love for her country but also jealousy that impels Itibhen to take arms against Maṇimugdha. Here she reveals an aspect of character which Vanna does not possess. She is made of sterner stuff than either Rupalīm or Vanna. When her brother, the king, says that they are too weak to fight against Maṇimugdha, Itibhen retorts:

If we cannot do anything, we can at least die striking our heads against Maṇimugdha’s stone ramparts. 23

This echoes Guido’s

Come, my friends, we will return to the ramparts, and die, at least, since die we must, without straining ourselves with dishonour ... 24

Itibhen, of course, acts upon her words: she actually attacks Maṇimugdha’s palace, while Guido does not appear to make any positive move. Again, Rupalīm’s father, Junāphā, who echoes Vanna’s father-in-law, Marco, is also given an original touch. When nobody believes Vanna’s declaration that she has not been seduced by Prinzivalle, Marco is the only one to believe in her chastity. In Rupalīm, even Junāphā does not believe that his daughter’s chastity has not been violated. Unlike Marco, he

23. ibid., p. 26
declares agonizingly that Rupalīm is unchaste. But having recognized this, Junāphā breaks down because his love for his daughter has been unbounded. His love is definitely more passionate and fatherly than Marco's. But Junāphā lacks the philosophical aspect of Marco's character. This aspect we find in another character, Rukamīraj (King of Rukami), who has clearly a philosophical bent of mind. Least troubled by passion or sentiment even in the midst of worst hardships, this character philosophizes on subjects like woman's nature and king's rôle on earth. True, Rukamīraj cannot compare with Marco, yet the latter must have influenced Jyotiprasad in conceiving the former.

The characterization in Rupalīm is thus developed in a more complex way than that in Monna Vanna. Of dramatic action Monna Vanna has little. This is only natural because, as a proponent of "static theatre", Maeterlinck is concerned more with the implied interaction of soul-states than with characters in action. So, the dramatic movement of Monna Vanna is, indeed, very slow. The action of Rupalīm, on the other hand, moves faster until it culminates in its tragic end. And this is the greatest difference between the two plays: Monna Vanna, ends in a happy note because, as Nicoll observes, we are left to believe that Vanna will rescue

25. Rupalīm, VII, p. 64
26. ibid., p. 64
27. Allardyce Nicoll says, "There (in the works of Maeterlinck) is a struggle here, not between love and honour, not between two thoughts or two emotions, but between the conscious and the sub-conscious mind, between human ties and the ties of the soul" (The Theory of Drama, p. 95).
Prinzivalle from prison and go off with him. 28 Rupālīm, on the other hand, ends very tragically with the heroine tied to the logs of a pyre, shot at with arrows from all sides, and then burnt. As the flames go up, Junāphā falls unconscious, and Māyāhō rages and fumes. This is, obviously a very different ending from that of Monna Vanna.

Anandachandra Narua

Anandachandra Narua's Vijaya (1932) is a romantic tragedy based on the story told in a Spanish play, Los amantes de Teruel (The Lovers of Teruel, 1837) by Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch. Narua, of course, took the story not directly from the original play, but as it was retold by K.K. Handiqui in the Awahan. 20 Professor Handiqui dealt with the play critically: he first narrated the story step by step and then examined its similarities with and differences from the English Romeo and Juliet. In The Lovers of Teruel, two lovers fail to unite because of the intervention of a third character, who is interested in the heroine, and the jealousy of the Begum of Valencia herself. The play ends with the deaths of the lovers in very tragical circumstances. It is a romantic play full of external action, intrigues and machinations.

28. World Drama, p. 622

Barua takes only the skeleton of the plot from the foreign source as he got it from Handiqui's article. The story is completely Indianized and set against a medieval background.

Visvasimha is a brave but poor Rajput youth of Udaypur. He loves Vijayā, daughter of a rich gentleman named Vijaysimha, and she reciprocates. But another rich but cruel man, Pinadas, proposes marriage with Vijayā. Vijayā's rich father tells Visvasimha that he can marry her only if he makes himself rich within a period of six years and seven months. Visvasimha goes abroad determined to collect the money that will enable him to marry the girl he loves. But on his way back he is robbed of all his possessions by wayside dacoits. He is rescued from the dacoits by the Begum of Lucknow, who offers to marry him. Visvasimha politely refuses telling her that he is already in love with another girl to win whom he has undergone so much of suffering. This makes the Begum extremely jealous and warns Visvasimha to prepare for the consequences of his refusal. Meanwhile, he comes into confidence with the Nawab whom he has rescued from a terrible conspiracy. Out of gratitude the Nawab presents him a large amount of money and gold. But as he comes back home with the money, he is waylaid by robbers appointed by the Begum, who is determined to foil his efforts to marry Vijayā.

Meanwhile six years have elapsed, but Visvasimha has not returned. Pinadas threatens Vijayā's mother with intimidation if she fails to marry her daughter to him. The mother, Kamala, does not relent, but Vijayā declares that she will marry Pinadas against her will rather than get her mother's character publiclv
profaned. Meanwhile Julimā, the Begum, arrives at Vijaysimha's house in disguise and informs them that Visvasimha has been killed by the Nowab of Lucknow, as he was found involved in a secret love affair with the Begum. Vijayā faints at this false piece of news. Visvasimha is actually kept tied by wayside robbers after having been robbed. The Begum also gives him the painful news that Vijayā has married Dinadās. In the meantime, Vijayā's father comes to know of Visvasimha's plight, and gets him released and brought to his house. Visvasimha, now sheltered at Vijaysimha's house, has nearly gone mad, but vows to take revenge on Dinadās. One day he attacks Dinadās and wounds him fatally. Before dying Dinadās tells Visvasimha that he has left certain letters which will be enough to ruin both Vijayā and her parents. Desperately, Visvasimha meets Vijayā and entreats her to come with him. He also informs her that Dinadās is about to die. Vijayā refuses to accompany him on the ground that she is now a married woman. But the strain on her mind has been too much for her to bear, and she cries out in desperation: "Visvasimha, misfortunes track you at every step. Fiel I hate you." Vijayā says it only at the spur of the moment, but its consequences are fatal. This completely undoes the already maddened Visvasimha who now falls fainting. His consciousness never comes back. Nor can Vijayā live when her lover lies dead. She, too, faints and dies. Thus the lovers are finally united in death.

Vijayā is thus a romantic piece inspired by a European play. The playwright follows the outline of the original story as

30. Vijayā, V, vii, p. 95
retold by Professor Handiqui, but he shows originality of approach both in characterization and plot development. The play is cast in the mould of a Shakespearean romantic drama. This is natural, because Shakespeare was still a strong influence when Vijayā was written. Sensational situations, disguises, madness, bloodshed on the stage, sudden and unexpected entrances and exits of characters are some of its features reminiscent of Shakespeare. The medieval setting also adds colour to the romantic quality of the play. The play is in five acts, subdivided into scenes. Comic elements are introduced here and there much in the Shakespearean way. The dialogue is in prose, but the playwright at times turns to poetry when intense feelings are to be expressed. For example, when Julimā asks Visvāsima how much he loves Vijayā, he suddenly becomes poetic as if prose is not enough to express his love.

There is also much use of soliloquies and asides.

The playwright not only Indianizes the story, but also gives very Indian characteristics to characters and situations. The character of Vijayā, the heroine comes close to an ideal Indian woman. She undergoes much of suffering for her mother and the man she loves. Professor Handiqui points out that Isabel, the heroine of the Spanish play on whom Vijayā is modelled, unlike Juliet, does not betray the anxiety and excitement of love. Instead, she suffers silently and waits for the inevitable. Thus the Spanish Isabel herself embodies ideal womanhood. When Visvāsima

31. ibid., I, i, pp. 8-9
32. Handiqui's article is reprinted together with the play (Vijayā, 1963 ed). The reference here is to this reprint (Vijayā, p. xlii).
dies, Vijaya wishes that they might live together in the after life. This gives more Indian touches to her character. To conclude, although the playwright has taken the story from a foreign source, he shows originality in developing it dramatically, and thus makes a notable contribution to Assamese romantic drama.

Atulchandra Hazarika

Of the many plays of Atulchandra Hazarika, two are purely of romantic nature. These are Manas-pratima (written, 1925; published, 1948) and Mārjyāna (1939). In the former, the idea is taken from the Persian Sirī Farhad episode, but the dramatization is the playwright's own. There are two historical characters, the Āhom king, Rudrasimha, and the famous sculptor, Ghanashyām; but apart from the names there is no historicity about their actions or the events they shape. Enamoured by the beauty of a Brahman girl, Sādarī, Rudrasimha gets her brought to his palace and marries her. Meanwhile he has sent people abroad to look for a sculptor who will be able to build a befitting memorial to his mother, Jaymatī. The royal messengers come to Delhi where they meet the famous sculptor, Ghanashyām, at a time when he is contemplating how to infuse life into a statue he has made. Ghanashyām is taken to Assam and presented before the king. During his stay in the palace, the sculptor sees Sādarī in whom he finds the living image of his dream. Gradually attachment develops between Sādarī and Ghanashyām. But the king comes to know of it, and both Sādarī

33. H.A.L., p. 158; A.N.S., pp. 343-344
and Ghanashyām fall victim to his jealousy.

The other play is based on the story of 'Alībābā and the forty robbers' of the Arabian Nights. It is rightly called Mārjīyānā because Mārjīyānā is the central character of the drama. The love episode of Hossain and Mārjīyānā is dramatically linked with the main story of Ālībābā and Kālāpāhār, the ring leader of the dacoits. In fact, it is Ālībābā who plays the predominant rôle in the action. Kālāpāhār is determined to kill Ālībābā, but all his plans are foiled by the clever Mārjīyānā. It is Mārjīyānā who saves Ālībābā from the hands of the dacoits and clears his way to prosperity. It is she again, who applied all her intelligence to effect her union with Hossain, who is an inactive and poetically-minded sentimentalist.

Both Maṇas-pratīmā and Mārjīyānā turn on the romantic and the fantastic. Love, jealousies and intrigues characterize both the plays. In the former, the linking of the Persian episode with two historical figures lend colour to the romantic theme. It may be noted that Ghanashyām, although a historical person, has long passed into a legend with the extremely unusual artistic gifts attributed to him. So, the association of such a half-historical and half-legendary figure with the story only intensifies the aura of romanticism that pervades it. Mārjīyānā, as Satyen Sarma points out, is obviously influenced by the Bengali play, Ālībābā (1897) by Kshirod Prasad Vidyavinod. This is evident both in characterization and the manipulation of situations. In Vidyavinod's

34. A.N.S., p. 344
play also, Mārjīyānā plays a very important rôle. She succeeds in saving Ālibābā from the hands of the dacoits, and is finally married to Hossain. Like the Bengali play, Hazarika's Mārjīyānā also abounds in songs. But the Assamese playwright gives even more prominence to the character of Mārjīyānā than his Bengali predecessor does. This is why he names the play after her and not after Ālibābā. The Bengali Ālibābā, again, is an operatic play, while Mārjīyānā is a regular drama replete with action.

Another play is Janardan Thakur's Bhaiyāmar Senduri (The Vermilion Roads Leading to the Plains, 1954). It is a romantic play with a difference. Although the characters and situations are imaginary and an unmistakable romantic aura pervades the play, the playwright's social aims are clear. He tells us in his preface that he wants to focus on the importance of maintaining unity and harmony between the hills and the plains of Assam. An Assamese girl, Raṅgī, is rescued from being drowned in the Dhanshiri river by a Naga youth, Tekāmerin, and handed over to Brajenmohan, a rich businessman of Kohima. When Raṅgī grows up she realizes Brajenmohan's evil intentions towards her. So she leaves him and joins a group of social workers led by Deviprasād Barua, who have come to Kohima in order to work for establishing unity between the people of the hills and plains. When Brajenmohan finds that Raṅgī is attracted to the selfless worker, Deviprasād, he conspires to get her removed. The plot is detected by Tekāmerin, who himself is now a busy member of

35. H.B.L., p. 233; Bānglā Nātya Sāhityer Itihās, Part II, p. 327
Deviprasād’s group of workers. Meanwhile, conflicts grow between Tekāmerin’s followers and those people who oppose his work. Tekāmerin finally wins them over and is made a village headman. But excessive work has told upon his health. He falls ill and dies, having united his foster-daughter, Raṅgī, with Deviprasād.

The hilly background, highly imaginary characters and situations, and sensational scenes put the play in the realm of the romantic. But the technique used is naturalistic. This is because the play was written in the early fifties when realism and naturalism dominated the stage. There are very elaborate settings as well as detailed instructions for stage arrangements. The first scene where the sinking of the boat occurs is reminiscent of the first scene of The Tempest, with the difference that in the Assamese play the setting is detailed and the modern flashback method is used in order to acquaint the audience with what happened seven years ago. When the curtain rises, the fast-flowing Dhanshiri is discovered with a boat on it carrying four persons. The storm rages, accompanied by thunder and lightning. After a background declaration that what is seen actually occurred seven years ago, we get the following stage-directions:

The storm grows gradually. Thunder and lightning again. The boat is shaking. The boatmen are heard crying, "Save us, save us; 0' God, please save us ..." The next moment the boat sinks in a whirlwind. Cries like "the boat has sunk" are heard coming from the background.

36. Bhaiyāmar Sendurī¯ Ali, p. 1
Bhaiyamar Sendurikali is thus a romantic tragic-comedy written to suit a modern stage. There is undoubtedly drama in it, but much of it is marred by its declared didacticism.

II

Symbolic Drama: Parvatiprasad Baruva

Assamese drama is strikingly poor in symbolic plays. In fact, the dramatic movement of Symbolism has had but little impact on our dramatists. From Ibsen, for example, our playwrights learnt how to dramatize a social problem, not his use of symbols to suggest the truth of a situation. "The essential of Symbolism", John Russel Taylor observes, "was the abandonment of the appearance of life in favour of its spirit, symbolically represented, and the search for a poetic rather than a prosaic drama." Assamese pre-War drama, as has been seen, was mainly mythological and historical, while drama after the War is predominantly social in theme and naturalistic in form. While the former deals with a world not our own, the latter appears to concentrate on the 'appearance of life' rather than 'its spirit'. The writers of realistic social plays do not show such insight into life and understanding of the human condition as is characteristic of a symbolic and poetic drama. They mostly look at the surface of life, and often fail to grasp its inner realities. This appears to be one of the reasons why we have hardly any poetic plays. While Eliot and

Yeats have influenced so much of our poetry, the playwrights have not responded to them. Another reason is that drama depends on an audience, and a large section of our audience still looks for excitement and sensation on the stage.

An attempt, however, was made as early as the third decade of the present century to write a truly symbolic play by Parvatiprasad Baruva, who was primarily a poet and lyricist. The result was the lyrical play, Sonar Soleng (The Golden Fruit), first published in the Asan of 1929 and printed in book form many years later (1955).

Sonar Soleng, is apparently an echo of Maeterlinck's The Blue Bird. A group of boys fail to enjoy Bihu (a festival of merry-making) because they feel the absence of the Prince of Bihu (Bihu-kowar). They do not know where the Prince, who is the source of all joy and happiness, can be found. They approach Grandmother who tells them that he will be available only if they find for him a golden fruit (Sonar Soleng). But where can such a fruit be found? The old woman sends them to the Roving Minstrel (Bin-baragi) to ask him if he knows where such a fruit is to be found. The Minstrel tells them that he himself is in eternal quest of a golden deer. Then the boys go on interrogating everything that they come across—the golden swans winging widely across the endless blue of heaven in search of a golden lotus; the clouds that play at hide-and-seek behind the unending white of the sky, the wind that wander far and wide trying to find out where the blue ends, and the mountain streams that flow melli-fluously through hills and dales—if it can tell him as to
where the golden fruit can be found. The boys come to learn that all these things are moving forward in search of something. Then they pursue light, and in their pursuit come near the sea. The sight of the wavy and endless sea thrills the boys with a sense of some mysterious happiness, and they start singing and dancing in an ecstasy of joy. When the Roving Minstrel finds the boys thus, he says that joy or happiness lies not in the getting of the thing looked for, but in the pursuit of it. "He realizes", to quote Birinchikumar Barua, "that 'Sonar Soleng' (Ideal Bliss) is not something which is to be had without. It is something within, which is in life, and in it every minute of life is lived intensely and made eternal."  

Sonar Soleng has striking parallels with Maeterlinck's The Blue Bird. In Maeterlinck's play, two children, Tyltyl and Mytyl, son and daughter of a wood-cutter, are asked by Fairy Berylune to go around and look for the blue bird. Accompanied by the Dog and the Cat, they go around different mysterious places in search of the blue bird: the land of memory where they meet their dead grandfather and grandmother, the Palace of Night, the Forest, the Palace of Happiness, the Graveyard, the Kingdom of the Future. But the blue bird is not to be found anywhere. Even birds that at first look blue turn black or die as soon as they are caught. But when Tyltyl and Mytyl wake up in the morning, it appears that it has been a dream and that the real blue bird has been with them all the time. The Fairy is none else but Madame
Belingot, the old neighbour, whose little girl is ill, and wants a bird like the one belonging to Tyltyl. And when the bird is given to her, the little girl immediately recovers from illness. But the bird manages to escape from the little girl's hands; and when the bird flies away, Tyltyl, stepping to the front of the stage, and addressing the audience, says: "If any of you should find him, would you be so very kind as to give him back to us? We need him for our happiness, later..."

The blue bird is thus a symbol of happiness ("we need him for our happiness ... "). Elsewhere also it is referred to as "the great secret of things and of happiness ... "

In much the same way 'Sonar Soleng' is also a symbol of happiness or "ideal bliss." Maheswar Neog thinks that it "symbolizes the divine despair of the human soul that ever seeks but finds not." The two plays also show similarities in the development of the concept. In The Blue Bird, it is Fairy Bervlune who sends Tyltyl and Wyttyl to look for the blue bird. In Sonar Soleng, it is Grandmother who asks the boys to search for the golden fruit. The blue bird is wanted because it would cure the neighbour's little girl of illness. The 'Sonar Soleng' is looked for because it is expected to make the boys perfectly happy on the occasion of the Bihu festival. In Maeterlinck's play, Light is

39. The Blue Bird, tr. by Alexander Teixeira Mattos, New York, 1919, VI, ii, p. 287
40. ibid., III, ii, p. 135
41. H.A.I., p. 163
42. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 33
represented as knowing the secrets of the blue bird. In the Assamese play, Stream says to the boys, "Light knows everything. Go and ask him. He will tell you where the golden fruit is to be found."\textsuperscript{43} Tyltyl and Mytyl finally realize that the blue bird has been with them all the time, vainly have they been looking for it. In the same way the Roving Minstrel (\textit{ghin-bar\={a}gi}) achieves the realization that the 'Sonar Sole\={a}ng' is something within us and has been always with us.

All this shows how Parvatiprasad Baruva was influenced by Maeterlinck. But it must be noted that Baruva develops his idea on his own lines. The play turns on the eternal quest for something which is in reality within us. Yet the quest is all that matters, because it puts man on the go. The boys are looking for the golden fruit; the Roving Minstrel's aim is the golden deer, and the swans are flying in search of the golden lotus. Because, as the Minstrel says, it is the eternal quest that gives the joy of life:

\begin{quote}
Go forward, go forward
Why look back?
The sun and the moon are moving with the rhythm of speed;
The clouds fly for the joy of flying;
And the river floods for the thrill of life.
Why should there be an aim?
We have no aims.
Go we must;
So, brothers, go forward.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43.} Sonar Sole\={a}ng, p. 19
\textsuperscript{44.} ibid., p. 8
Sonar Soleng is a much smaller play than The Blue Bird. There is so much of song in the play that it can be called an extended lyric. Even the pieces of prose dialogue, which are but few, read like poems. It is, therefore, noted more for poetry than drama. 45

We do not find any other plays which can be called symbolic. Parvatiprasad Baruva has another lyrical play, Lakhimi (1931), which is an allegorical piece welcoming the Goddess of Prosperity. Dhūli (The Dust, 1930) by Kamaleswar Chaliha is also an allegory showing how the dust, neglected by all, are the last resort for everybody. These plays cannot be called symbolic, because their meanings are clear; they do not suggest. 46 Sonar Soleng is symbolic because, like The Blue Bird, it is suggestive and open to interpretation. Whether the golden fruit symbolizes "ideal bliss" or "the divine despair of the human soul that ever seeks but finds not" or man's eternal quest for the unattainable, there is, in any case, some 'mysterious suggestiveness' about it. Neither Lakhimi nor Dhūli has this quality.

We have already seen how writers of mythological and historical plays combine indigenous themes with Western dramatic methods. The writers of social plays and farceurs, it has been noted, are also largely influenced by European masters both in

45. P. Goswami, Assamese Drama, p. 34
46. "It is of the very nature of symbolist poetry", says G.S. Fraser, "that it cannot be tied down to any single and simple interpretation; however much of the intention one may think one has dredged up to the surface, it retains always a residue of mysterious suggestiveness" (The Modern Writer and His World, pp. 38-39).
the selection of subject-matter and its treatment. The plays, which have been discussed in this chapter and which do not belong to any of the other categories, reveal a few interesting characteristics. Two of those we have called 'romantic' are based on Arabian and Persian themes, and another draws heavily on a Spanish play. Jyotiprasad, of course, reveals unquestionable originality in the choice of subject-matter, while his dramatic methods are largely influenced by Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy as well as Maeterlinck. In Atulchandra Hazarika, who is primarily a pre-war dramatist, Shakespearean echoes are naturally heard. We have already stated why Assamese theatre is so poor in plays poetic and symbolical. Yet the one that has been discussed in detail, Sonar Soleng, is indubitably a symbolic play of considerable merit. While Parvatiprasad may have taken the idea from Maeterlinck, the way he develops the theme, giving it a touch of oriental mysticism, is a sure mark of his originality.