

UDK: 930.85(5+6)

COPYRIGHT ©: ANA JELNIKAR

## Srečko Kosovel and Rabindranath Tagore: Points of Departure and Identification

Ana JELNIKAR\*

### Abstract

In this paper I explore some of the connections the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926) surmised between himself and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). I argue that what linked the two poets into a joint framework across the vastly different cultural and politico-geographic space was not just the fact that Kosovel read Tagore and took inspiration from the Bengali poet at the height of Tagore's reputation in continental Europe, but that they shared a number of preoccupations, informed by their respective historical positioning. Both wrote from a profound awareness of their region's subjugated status and endorsed an anti-imperialist stance that rejected nationalism as a viable means of liberation, embracing instead a creative universalist ideal.

**Keywords:** anti-imperialism/anti-colonialism, nationalism, universalism, situational identification, Slovenian response, larger search for liberation, Tagore, Gandhi

### 1 Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet and thinker Srečko Kosovel read with great interest, at the same time urging others to do so, convinced that here was someone able to show a new direction out of the crisis Europe in general and the Slovenian people in particular were experiencing in the disillusionment of the post-Great-War years.<sup>1</sup> When in 1925, aged twenty-one and within months of his untimely death, he was getting his first poetry manuscript ready for publication, he decided to give it the title *Zlati čoln* (*The Golden Boat*), in direct allusion to Tagore.

---

\* Ana Jelcnikar, Translator, University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, SI–6000 Koper, Slovenia. E-mail: ajelnikar@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup> Tagore is by far the most often referred to foreign poet and author in Kosovel's essayistic writings and notes, even in his poetry. He gets a mention over fifty times. Leo Tolstoy, another figure Kosovel admired, is referred to thirty times and Romain Rolland fifteen.

Some key questions that guided my research could therefore be summed up as follows: Why did Kosovel feel drawn to the Indian poet? How did he incorporate what he read into his own poetic and intellectual horizon? In what way did this serve his preoccupations and interests? And, finally, are there correspondences, or deeper unities to be drawn between the two contemporaries?

Since it would be impossible to answer all these questions within the scope of a single article, I will limit myself in considering, in some detail, merely the first question: Why did Kosovel find himself so drawn to the Indian poet in the first place? As we consider the particulars of Kosovel's historical positioning, from which he sympathetically reached out to Tagore and took lessons from him, it will become clear that Tagore and Kosovel in fact shared a remarkable set of preoccupations against their respective backgrounds. For like Tagore, Kosovel too understood the pressures and dilemmas pertaining to a culture dominated by another. Interestingly too, with regard to those pressures and dilemmas, he offered some remarkably 'Tagorean' answers.

## **2 Points of Departure and Situational Identification**

There are a number of interrelated ways in which Kosovel's keen response to the Indian poet can be made sense of. The most obvious is to see in Tagore's attraction for Kosovel yet another predictable response coming from the West from within the romantic and orientalist tradition of Europe's enchantment with Eastern thought and art. Some of the qualities Kosovel perceived in Tagore, notions such as 'simplicity', 'naturalness', 'child-likeness', as also his comparing the power of Tagore's language to that of the gospels (Kosovel 1977: 509, 558, 561), are indeed all part and parcel of the dominant tropes that guided the imaginations of Europeans when they turned towards the East in the early decades of the twentieth century, and which have since been criticized for their orientalizing thrust. Kosovel's most explicit tribute to Tagore in his creative writing, the poem called *In Green India*, which imagines the Indian poet dwelling "among silent trees" in a symbolist meditation on timelessness and life caught "like eternity [...] in a tree", could be seen as a case in point (Kosovel 2010: 96).

But to stop here would be to stop short of more fully appreciating why Tagore was so important to Kosovel or how even some of these same concepts might have actually contributed to the project of (cultural) emancipation both poets shared. For all the enthusiasm the young poet felt towards his older Indian contemporary, there was little of blind veneration in the way he perceived him. Rather Kosovel studied his poetry

and his philosophical writings seriously, taking ‘lessons’ from him when they struck a chord, and urging others to do the same. Significantly, when works were not yet available in the Slovenian translation, as was the case with *Nationalism*, *Sadhana* and *Personality*, he got hold of them in German and Serbo-Croatian (the languages he could read alongside French, Italian and Russian).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the orientalism at work here (i.e. Western ideas about ‘the Orient’) is not that of the Saidian mould, motivated by ambitions to dominate over ‘the East’ or secure a sense of a positive, superior identity for itself; rather it belongs to the subversive strain of the twentieth-century orientalist discourse in which Eastern thought served as a ‘corrective mirror’ to Europe, undermining some of its certainties and orthodoxies (cf. Clarke 1997: 26–30). Within the existing body of critically examined Western responses to Tagore in which orientalism aligned to imperial interests has been in the forefront of discussions, responses which do not fit into this mould are an important reminder of an arguably richer spectrum of Western reactions than the Said-inspired model, or perhaps any theoretical model, can allow for. What of the fellow poets and like-minded individuals in the West who endorsed Tagore’s literary genius outside the strictures of an imposed or adopted mystic identity? Or, argued differently, in as much as Kosovel’s response to Tagore, in itself emblematic of a host of other similar European responses, known and unknown to us, is still seen to operate within the twentieth century Orientalist discourse of ‘Otherness,’ then it must be acknowledged, as J. J. Clarke has argued in his reassessment of Orientalism, that there can be, as indeed there was, a counter-hegemonic cultural dimension to this phenomenon. Without disputing the basic premise that when Western thinkers drew on Eastern thought – the religious and philosophical ideas of India, China and Japan – they did so in line with their own goals and pursuits, Clarke rightly argues that these ideas were “often in the business not of reinforcing Europe’s established role and identity, but rather of undermining it” (Clarke 1997: 27). They provided a source that would be exploited for a critique and re-evaluation of thought systems indigenous to the West and was often “an energiser of radical protest”:

... one of the pervasive features of orientalism which prevailed right throughout the modern period is the way in which, though perceived as ‘other’, Eastern ideas have been used in the West as an agency for self-criticism and self-renewal, whether in the political, moral, or religious spheres (for purposes, Clarke acknowledges, good and bad). (Clarke 1997: 27)

---

<sup>2</sup> From his letters and journals it can be established that he read *Sadhana* in German, as also *Personality* (*Persönlichkeit*, Kosovel 1977: 683), but *Nationalism* was available to him in German or Croatian (tr. Antun Barac), both published in 1922. Poetry, however, he read in Gradnik’s Slovenian translations.

Furthermore:

The perceived otherness of the Orient is not exclusively one of mutual antipathy, nor just a means of affirming Europe's triumphant superiority, but also provides a conceptual framework that allows much fertile cross-referencing, the discovery of similarities, analogies, and models (Clarke 1997: 27).

A more open and reciprocal model of otherness and inter-cultural (textual) encounters presents itself here, allowing us to appreciate in a more nuanced way some of the responses to the Indian poet coming from the West. The talk of 'crisis' or 'sickness' besetting Western civilization and of the need to turn 'Eastwards' for cure certainly provides one relevant framework within which Kosovel's endorsement of Tagore can be made sense of.

Imre Bangha has pointed out with respect to Hungary how Tagore's greatest supporters were to be found among the readers and writers who were born or lived in regions 'lost' after WWI, and how they would often sympathise with the Indian freedom struggle as opposed to the colonizer's viewpoint (Bangha 2008: 15). Something similar can be said of Kosovel whose hometown had been 'lost' to Italy following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Certainly, within Europe, there were many individuals and groups who celebrated Tagore from their own real or imagined position of 'otherness.' Their cross-cultural response was framed by their perceived sense of commonality and joint purpose with the Indian poet and they genuinely looked to Tagore (and/or Gandhi) for moral sustenance as well as alternatives to some of the thinking that drives imperialist ideologies, seeking to substitute the old mechanistic and dualistic ways of thinking for a more holistic paradigm (Clarke 1997: 105).

In that sense, a useful way of framing Kosovel's response to Tagore is to see it in terms of a *situational identification* (a term I borrow from Patrick Colm Hogan) where sympathies are forged between individuals and inspirations derived from a sense of shared predicaments, or as Hogan puts it, "we develop an immediate sense of intimacy with someone as we intuit shared feelings, ideas, references, [and] expectations" (Hogan 2004: 26).<sup>3</sup> For Kosovel, reading Tagore meant encountering a voice that shared some of the age's deepest cultural and intellectual concerns, spanning nationalism, scientific and technological revolutions, environmentalism and feminism

---

<sup>3</sup> The colonial framework provided one such context for trans-national solidarities. Elleke Boehmer has spoken pertinently of *cross-colony* identifications (in the context of anti-colonial nationalist movements) whereby ideas are transferred and adapted laterally across geographical space at the same historical time from structurally similar, if specific, material conditions. The 'contact zone' of cultural exchange conventionally located between the colonial centre and its periphery is thus relocated *between* peripheries themselves, and ideas seen to travel multilaterally, from various 'centres', as opposed to unilaterally spreading out from the (Western) centre to the (Non-western) margins (2002: 2).

alike, and which helped him think through some of these pressing issues. It is therefore more in the spirit of parity that Kosovel approaches Tagore, as opposed to an Eastern guru at whose feet one should sit, or, following the colonial mindset, ‘an Oriental’ who deserves to be patronized.

### 3 Slovene’s Initial Response to Tagore

If Tagore’s fame in England was launched through the efforts of the Anglo-American-Irish literary elite, amongst Slovenes too, it was the enthusiasm (backed by translation) of some of the country’s foremost writers that introduced Tagore to the general reading public and generated an unprecedented response to any literary figure of international stature. Following some of the early translations done by Miran Jarc (1900–1942) and France Bevk (1890–1970), it was the talented poet Alojz Gradnik (1882–1967) who devoted himself to translating Tagore’s works. During the war, he came across a copy of *The Crescent Moon* in a bookshop in Trieste, and taken by what he read he decided to introduce as much of Tagore’s poetry as was then available in English to Slovenian readership (cf. Bartol 1961). One after another, the following titles came out: *Rastoči mesec* (*The Crescent Moon*, 1917; sold out within months and republished in 1921), *Ptice Selivke* (*Stray Birds*, 1921), *Vrtnar* (*The Gardener*, 1922), *Žetev* (*Fruit Gathering*, 1922) and *Gitandžali ali žrtveni spevi* (*The Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, 1924). These collections are being reprinted to this day. Alongside many newspaper and journal articles about the poet, as well as translations of his novels (*The Home and the World*, *The Wreck*, *Gora*), essayistic writings (*Sadhana*, excerpts from *Nationalism*, and *The Religion of Man*) and the staging of two of his plays, *The Post Office* and *Chitra* at the Ljubljana City Theatre, Tagore can be said to have found a permanent place in the Slovenian letters.<sup>4</sup>

Slovene’s initial response to Tagore, however, was largely dominated by extra-literary factors rather than any authentic appreciation of the writer’s sensibility. Slovenes had their own political axe to grind with the Austrians. In the first substantial article entitled *Last year’s rivals for the Nobel Prize* (1914), Tagore’s winning of the Nobel Prize is juxtaposed to the defeat of the Austrian poet Peter Rossegger. In the same year that Tagore’s name was put up for the consideration by the Swedish committee, the Austrians had their own candidate, Peter Rossegger, whose name for Slovenes was associated less with literary credentials than with an aggressive

---

<sup>4</sup> Most recent addition to Tagore’s translations into Slovenian is a selection of Tagore’s short stories, cf. Tagore 2010.

Germanization policy pursued against Slovenes in Southern Carinthia and Southern Styria.<sup>5</sup>

Against this background, the author of the article sets “a spiritual giant of enormous horizons” in opposition to a parochial writer who “fans the flames of nationalist hatred”. Tagore is celebrated for his love of humanity as opposed to love of nation. His patriotic songs are not “boisterous fighting hymns”, but seen as perfect expressions of “his universalism”. Tagore's patriotic sentiments are admired for their lack of anger or envy towards the oppressors, for upholding the high moral ideal that “the love of humanity is above all nations” (Lokar 1914: 246). In spite of the narrow politicized framework in which the discussion of Tagore is positioned by this article, the poet's vision of India's anti-colonial struggle is nevertheless portrayed with some insight. Here is ‘a patriot’ whose voice is tuned to the deepest harmonies of humanity, refusing to surrender the task of his country's liberation from under foreign rule to a nationalist agenda.

Indeed, Tagore critiqued both imperialism and its anti-colonial nationalist derivation, to eventually argue that imperialism and nationalism are two faces of the same monster (cf. Tagore 2002). After his own brief involvement with the Swadeshi movement, the first popular anti-colonial movement in India sparked off by Lord Curzon's proposed partition of Bengal in 1905, Tagore rejected both imperialism and nationalism. He withdrew from the movement once he saw how the close alignment of Swadeshi with Hindu revivalism gave rise to communal violence. But even as he rejected the anti-colonial variety of nationalism, seeing it as basically flawed in that it was top-down and elitist, riding roughshod over many people's lives, particularly the Muslim and Hindu poor, he held onto – and this is often missed – to an anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist position (cf. Collins 2008). In fact he gave his anti-colonialism a significantly broader base, envisioning it as “a larger search for liberation” (Said 1994: 265) grounded in a universalist ethos.

It was precisely this high ideal underscored by the article that was to resonate so strongly with Kosovel, who aimed for a like-minded resolve with respect to Slovenes and their struggle for political and cultural autonomy. In fact, from its beginning, Tagore's popularity in Slovenia was connected less with the romantic side of Orientalism that looked towards India for a redemptive spiritual injection and saw in Tagore above all “the exotic and bearded Oriental prophet” (Petrović 1970: 13), than with a sense of identification with the poet and his people, derived from a perceived common goal of striving after political and cultural independence. In other words,

---

<sup>5</sup> For a time Rossegger was closely linked with the nationalist organisation called *Südmark Schulverein*, which aided German-language schools in ethnically Slovenian or mixed territories.

pressing the notion of situational identification further, we need to understand Kosovel's own lived experience of nationalism. For it was the political circumstances of the early decades of the twentieth century, as Slovenes were caught in the cross-fire of a number of aggressive nationalisms (external and internal), that in large part galvanised the poet to grapple with the problematic of nation, nationalism and nationhood. In an important essay he wrote in response to Tagore's book *Nationalism* and entitled it *Narodnost in vzgoja* (*Nationhood and Education*), we see him striving for a definition of Slovenianness that – even as it remained sensitive to the particular needs of his people and espoused their right to self-determination – refused to yield to an inward-looking or a separatist stance.

#### 4 Kosovel, Primorska and Colonialism

Srečko Kosovel was born in 1904 as the youngest of five children in the town of Sežana not far from Trieste in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, growing up in what for many Slovenes these were historically trying times. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Slovenes joined the newly-founded nation state of South Slavic peoples: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (in 1927 officially renamed Yugoslavia).

Enthusiasm for the creation of the new state, which offered guarantees against Italy and Austria, possibility of national emancipation, and the opportunity for cultural and economic development was, however, mitigated by the fact that a large number of Slovenes (and Croats) remained outside the borders of the newly established state. The Treaty of Rapallo (1920), fulfilling some of Italy's territorial claims conceded by the secret Treaty of London in 1915 (when Italy joined the Allies), allocated swathes of ethnically Slovene territory, including Kosovel's native region of Primorska, to Italy. Coupled with losses to Austria along Yugoslavia's northern border, one-third of the Slovenian population effectively remained outside the boundaries of the newly-formed state. All in all this was quite a desperate time for many Slovenes (cf. Scherber 1991: 57). It was against a climate in which it seemed vital to keep a separate Slovenian identity, in order to hold out against assimilation, that Kosovel's particular treatment of the Slovenian national question needs to be considered.

Kosovel referred to the year of 1918 as a “catastrophic defeat” in which “our destiny was decided by foreigners and not ourselves” (Kosovel 1977: 34). He must have been referring to the above-mentioned Secret Treaty of London, in which Britain had promised Italy the possession of Trieste, the whole of eastern Adriatic coastal region (excluding the port town of Rijeka/Fiume), the islands off the coast of Istria

and Dalmatia, as well as African colonies, as an incentive to enter the war on the side of the Entente (Sluga 2001: 26). The “catastrophic defeat” Kosovel refers to was lent force by the policies of assimilation adopted by Italians towards the Slovene and Croat population now living within Italy’s borders. After the defeat of the Empire, the city of Trieste, then an important centre of Slovenian culture where its institutions were established soon after the revolutionary year (the turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trieste also had a bigger Slovene population than Ljubljana), became infected by the virulent ideology of *italianità*, whereby – as noted by Katia Pizzi, a scholar of Triestine cultural history – “a straightjacket of Italian officialdom was imposed on the city’s multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity, notably through acts of violence and persecution directed towards the Slovene community” (Pizzi 2001: 243). The anti-Slav sentiments ran high, giving rise to a series of attacks on the Slav cultural strongholds in Trieste.<sup>6</sup> In 1920, the seat of Slav cultural life, the *Narodni Dom* (National House) in Trieste was torched by a mob with the consent of the Triestine police and authorities. This signalled the beginning of enforced assimilation, a doctrine which gained broad legitimacy as fascists came into power in 1922. Political parties were dissolved, journals and magazines banned, and with the implementation of Gentilli school reform in 1923, Italian became the only language of instruction in schools (cf. Cenčič 2004: 12). Kosovel’s father was forced to retire for refusing to abide by the Italian-only language policy. This brought the family severe financial difficulties. They even lost the roof over their heads, since their accommodation was tied to father’s teaching post. By 1926 non-Italian names had to be Italianized. By 1927, shortly after Kosovel’s death, the use of Slovene was prohibited in public.

If Italian irredentism was one major source of grievance and concern for Kosovel, the other was Yugoslav unitarism, as the centralising tendencies of Belgrade were becoming more prominent. While most Slovene intellectuals accepted the newly-formed state of Yugoslavia, within which they were indeed able to set up their own educational and cultural institutions – the Ljubljana University in 1919, the Slovene radio in 1928, and the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1938 – they were at the same time eager to preserve the distinct language and culture (Velikonja 2003: 89). Kosovel’s own response to the above questions at a time when the Yugoslav state centralism was gaining the upper hand (to culminate in King Alexander’s dictatorship in 1929) is worth looking at.

Against charges of separatism leveled against Slovene critics of Yugoslav integralism, Kosovel wrote a short essay titled *Separatisti* (*Separatists*, 1925).

---

<sup>6</sup> Anti-Slav sentiments, however, predate fascist ideology. As Pizzi writes: “A staunch anti-Slavism was [...] no Fascist novelty”, but had its antecedent in “an ancestral, irrational aversion to the East of Europe [...] in the dialectic insiders versus outsiders, Slav populations were frequently and literally represented as a *disease* attacking the healthy body of *italianità*.” (Pizzi 2001: 186)



Predictably, it seems, he states: “Are a people automatically separatist, if they want to live? If they want to develop in their own direction and crystallize their own body in their own spirit?” (Kosovel 1977: 59) But if this is a classical espousal of a separatist cultural nationalism, it must also be acknowledged that Kosovel interrogates the whole notion of ‘separatism’ as it is used in the political discourse by lodging it in the very human condition: “Man is by his nature a separatist.” Kosovel’s focus is on the individual rather than a collective:

Walking along the street, you bump into a friend, who presumably wants to say something to you or simply feel your friendship. But as it happens you are not in the mood. In your state of mind you know your words would come across as too bitter. Therefore you prefer to go off on your own, sit by yourself in a café, read a newspaper, and dwell in your own thoughts. You are, what else – a separatist. Or, let’s assume you are invited to a dance. Although you like watching people enjoying themselves [...], you keep a distance. At once you are again a dangerous separatist (Kosovel 1977: 59).

This rather tongue-in-cheek exposition of the individual’s right to “separatism” is then, however, finally reconciled in a philosophy that carries an undeniable Tagorean imprint: “We are all walking with different faces, with distinct motivations; each of us has our own way, our own goal, but only seemingly so; in the depth of our souls we are all striving for one thing: harmony [...] Let us be one in spirit and love, but maintain our own faces” (Kosovel 1977: 59).

The post-war situation alerted Kosovel in a most powerful way to the pathology of nationalism and the raising of barriers along ethnic lines, where being Italian, German, Slovene or other, overrode notions of a shared human identity or precluded the possibility of hybrid or multiple identities. It was also the cosmopolitan city of Trieste, in many ways a city he felt more at home in than in Ljubljana, that sensitized him to models of subjective identification that could either accommodate difference (the city before the war was a place where diverse groups were able to share the same territory without too much conflict) or violently repress it (as was the case once the city and its environs were designated as exclusively Italian and assimilation became the order of the day).<sup>7</sup> The shifting political geography of the Adriatic region at once corroborated a sense of national identity and undermined it. The multiple names Kosovel was obliged to adopt as governments changed hands (under Austrians, *Srečko* meaning ‘lucky’ became *Felix*, under Italians, he was *Felice*), reflect the political and cultural pressures he was under. Similarly, adoption of three passports in so short a life must have thrown the notion of nationality as something organic to one’s identity seriously into question.

---

<sup>7</sup> On Kosovel and Trieste, cf. Kosovel 1971.

His task therefore became twofold: to show that “nationalism was a lie” (Kosovel 1974: 31) and to salvage the concept of *narod* (a people) from being hijacked by nationalism: “A *narod* for us can only ever mean a nation which has freed itself from nationalism” (Kosovel 1977: 624). Driving a wedge between nationhood and nationalism meant for Kosovel demarcating the important sense of national selfhood from a self-indulgent celebration of one’s own identity. Nationhood required a measure of selflessness, lest it should lead down “the wide road of national egoism” (Kosovel 1977: 67). Vital input for thinking through these issues Kosovel got from Tagore’s book *Nationalism* (1917).<sup>8</sup>

The reason why I have dwelt on the wider political aspect of Kosovel’s background is that is precisely from this historical juncture that Kosovel gained his sense of intimacy and shared concerns with Tagore. In other words, when he thought of the troubles of Primorska, the Slovenian Littoral, under Italian rule, he aligned them with the ‘unnatural act’ he saw in the “colonisation of the non-European peoples” (Kosovel 1977: 65–66). But if what we have sketched so far can be called the political geography to Kosovel’s short life, there’s also the related mental geography that was just as instrumental in influencing political decisions and historic events.

Another important aspect to Kosovel’s situational identification with Tagore stems from the fact that both writers were perceived as occupants of the large ideological constructs of the ‘East’. In the context of Kosovel, I am referring to the tradition of representation that predates fascism and goes back to the Enlightenment, in which ‘Eastern Europe’ or ‘the Balkan East’ is imagined as the Western half’s lesser other. In this representational framework, Germans and Italians were seen as cultural equals: bourgeois, modern, nationally evolved, and essentially ‘Western,’ while Slavs were backward peasants, lacking national consciousness and ‘Eastern’ (Sluga 2001: 2). Such mental geography was instrumental in influencing political decisions and historic events. What helped justify and consolidate the Italian claim to authority over the disputed Adriatic border region was in other words their alleged racial, cultural and linguistic superiority.

In that sense both Tagore and Kosovel were projected as belonging to an inferior and governable race, Indian and (Balkan) Slav respectively. Both were at the receiving end of what Raymond F. Betts has termed “the peculiar geography of imperialism,” whereby Western Europe was the centre of the world, “radiat[ing] outward” from its core “those attributes we describe today as ‘modern’” (Betts 1998: 7). Not wanting to oversimplify what is indeed a more complex topic, I wish to merely reiterate that it is

---

<sup>8</sup> For further analysis of this, cf. Jelnikar 2008.

from the particular historical positioning in which the Slovenes under Italian occupation were culturally and politically oppressed (and ideologically othered) that Kosovel sees himself as occupying the same space vis-à-vis the imperial West as Tagore.

At a time when we are being lashed by European imperialisms, we are down on our knees, praying to God to grant us our rights and give us righteous masters. And these masters let us have our God but take away all the rights God has given to man (Kosovel 1977: 35).

But if Kosovel could understand the violence of a colonial encounter based on the binaries of imperial imagination, he could also understand the opportunities that came with cross-cultural contact. With energy worthy of Tagore, his artistic temperament in the final instance celebrates the meeting of ‘East’ and ‘West,’ and he extends the notion of ‘East’ to encompass Asia:

We happen to be living at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, on the battlefield of Eastern culture with Western, in an age which is the most exciting and the most interesting in its multiplicity of idioms and movements in politics, economics and art, because our age carries within itself all the idioms of the cultural and political past of Europe and possibly the future of Asia (Kosovel 1977: 178).

The reference to Asia is no doubt an allusion to Tagore’s own understanding of Asia’s future relationship with the world, which Kosovel was familiar with from reading *Nationalism*. And the fact that Kosovel saw his own position defined in terms of an ‘East-West’ juncture – at once a point of division and contact – enabled him to relate to Tagore’s own project of exploiting the divide for a creative encounter: the forging of a new emancipated individual – ‘new man’ – who would somehow be free of these divisions.

It will not do, as Tagore wrote in his essay *Purba o Paschim (East and West)*, thinking of the relationship between the British and the Indians, “to blame them alone.” We have to be prepared to “take the blame on ourselves” (Tagore 1961: 138). Both Tagore and Kosovel, for all their affection for their respective countries became their respective countries’ harshest critics. Both transformed – what Ashis Nandy has so aptly characterized with reference to Tagore – “passionate self-other” debates into “self-self” debate (Nandy 2005: 82).

In the same way that Tagore, despite the violence and humiliation of foreign rule, refused to succumb to a dismissal of everything British or, conversely, an uncritical valorization of everything Indian, Kosovel too made it a point to discriminate between imperialist forces that deserve all reprobation and Italian culture which may or may not be implicated by these forces. Both strove to override politics in an open

acceptance of what they felt was commendable in any given culture, laying themselves open to charges of denationalized surrender.

In a lesser-known poem entitled *Italian Culture*, Kosovel makes it quite clear that his quest for liberation had to be larger. With a reference to Gandhi, this poem once again demonstrates how Kosovel was searching for alternative cultural models: as Slovenian institutions were under attack in Trieste, Gandhi was launching his Non-cooperation movement on the Subcontinent to oust the British.<sup>9</sup>

The Slovenian National House in Trieste, 1920.

The Workers House in Trieste, 1920.

Wheat fields in Istria on fire.

Fascist threat during the elections.

The heart is becoming as tough as a rock.

Shall Slovenian workers' homes

continue to burn?

The old woman is dying at her prayers.

Slovenianness is a Progressive Factor.

Humanism is a Progressive Factor.

A humanistic Slovenianness: synthesis of evolution.

Gandhi, Gandhi, Gandhi!

*Edinost*\*\* is burning, burning,

Our nation, choking, choking. (Kosovel 2008: 137)

---

<sup>9</sup> An article on Gandhi was published in 1922 in the newspaper *Slovenec*. Kosovel may also have read Romain Rolland's book, *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924). His notes reveal that he was planning a lecture on "Tagore and Gandhi: two solutions to the question of nationhood" (Kosovel 1977: 746) as part of the activities of the *Literary and Dramatic Club Ivan Cankar* he co-founded with his colleagues.

\* *Edinost* ('Unity'): a Slovenian political association, a printing press and the name of the main Slovene daily newspaper, published in Trieste, the premises of which were attacked several times by Italian fascists in the 1920s, and finally burnt in 1925.

What makes this poem interesting is that the crisis it describes is transformed into a rigorous self-questioning, in which violence and retaliation as a means of asserting one's identity (evocation of Gandhi is appropriate indeed) are superseded by an universalist and a humanist perspective. Slovenianness, if it is to progress in evolution, must not surrender humanist ideals. Or, as he wrote to his French teacher Dragan Šanda: "A nation only becomes a nation when it becomes aware of its humanity" (Kosovel 1925, 1977: 323–324). Both Kosovel and Tagore believed in the perfectibility of human beings.

Thus, in line with some of the most imaginative anti-colonial or anti-imperialist responses across the globe, Tagore's and Kosovel's liberational stances commanded a pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative and pluralistic view of human community (cf. Fanon 1963, 1986; Ngugi 1993). What they sought was much more than the simple departure of the colonizers: there had to be a complex transformation of the colonized, else alien hegemony would merely be replaced by a home-grown one (Gibson in Fanon 2003: 179–180).

The universal philosophy of Tagore certainly struck a chord with Kosovel who saw his native region affected by imperialist forces, perceived as similar to those that subjugated India. Furthermore, he understood the plight of his native region in the larger context of the plight of all who are – in his own vocabulary – 'beaten', 'downtrodden', 'subjugated'. If the suffering of his own people was a symptom of wider social forces – namely those of capitalist Europe with its imperial onslaught on the rest of the world, and an outlook promoting sharp distinctions between races and civilizations – then Kosovel felt the solution too had to be sought at a global scale, in the ascendance of a new social order.

## 5 Kosovel Turns 'East'

Certainly for those writers who resisted the civilizational crisis in anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist terms, the Russian revolution of 1917 offered a realistic hope, however short-lasting, for the ideal of a new, non-exploitative, classless society. Moreover, it unleashed what Timothy Brennan has argued was "a full-blown *culture* of anti-imperialism for the first time" (Brennan 2002: 19, emphasis original). This last point is crucial if we are to understand the final aspect to Kosovel's sense of situational identification with Tagore, in which the Indian poet is aligned with the proletarian movement, the connection Kosovel made in a lecture he delivered to the miners in Zagorje shortly before he died. Indeed, seeing in Tagore a spiritual and intellectual kin, Kosovel co-opted him into the ranks of those "intellectuals, famous artists and

scientists” who had taken up “a relentless fight against injustice and violence” and who had “joined the proletarian movement” (Kosovel 1977: 27).

Stressing the links between the inter-war avant-gardes, the colonies and anti-imperialist consciousness, Brennan submits that “the Russian Revolution [...] was an anticolonial revolution.” This he takes to mean in “its sponsorship of anticolonial rhetoric” which “thrived in the art columns of left newspapers, cabarets or the political underground, mainstream radio, the cultural groups of the Popular Front, Bolshevik theater troupes,” meeting with responses and contributions from “the various avant-garde arts.” Brennan cannot overstate the implications of the revolution for the “the idea of the West.” It “delivered Europe,” he says, “into a radical non-Western curiosity and sympathy that had not existed in quite this way before.” It “altered European agendas and tastes by situating the European in a global relationship that was previously unimaginable” (Brennan 2002: 192–193).

The idea of social revolution was now combined with anti-imperialist thought. This was because an analogy was being made between the capitalist’s exploitation of the worker and imperialist’s exploitation of the colonized. The notion of imperialism as rapacious capitalism expanded overseas in search of new markets, resources and people to exploit was theorized by Lenin in his key text *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1920). It is therefore not surprising to see Kosovel, who subscribed to this view, assume the social standpoint of those whom modern capitalism as a world system most exploits and oppresses, even when they are not ‘proletarian’ in any conventional sense (cf. Larsen 2000: 29). I would even stress that for Kosovel – no blind admirer of the Soviet experiment – the ‘proletariat’ was more or less interchangeable with the ‘suppressed’ or ‘humiliated man’, suggesting a more universal human condition. Though the poet was not himself always above a dualistic view of the world that pitted suppressors against the suppressed, in the final instance he did not permit himself the luxury of thinking that the solution to the “world problem” lay in a simple reversal of these dichotomies and the power structures they entailed: “In our innermost being, there are no classes or nations” (Kosovel 1977: 102).

When Kosovel turned towards ‘East’ for inspiration, anticipating a ‘new morning’, this morning, he said, would come ‘in a red mantle’, hence its irradiating core was Russia and not primarily ‘the Orient’ of Tagore (Kosovel 1977: 93). And yet, of course, the two were closely related. In an important aspect of Kosovel’s identification with Tagore, therefore, the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles converged, so the ‘East’ became as much the promise of a new world order associated with the Bolshevik Revolution as it was evocative of the old romantic ‘Orient’ that would help heal the deep spiritual ‘crisis’ of the post-War European generation.

## 6 Conclusion

I have stressed the links and associations that Kosovel surmised between himself and Tagore and which extended his vision beyond the borders of Europe to suggest that Kosovel's poetry is part of a more complex, global configuration of anti-imperial politics and ethics. Painfully aware of the historical realities of his time, where a handful of Western powers had brought an overwhelming part of the globe under imperial control, Kosovel, like Tagore, deplored the fact that the meeting of cultures had come for the most part on the back of conquest and colonization, rather than in a spirit of free exchange, but argued, against the odds, for a non-hierarchical dialogue between cultures. How to resist foreign impositions and yet not bar oneself from the discoveries of the modern age, whether in science, technology, economics, politics, art, or literature; how to adjust creatively and retain agency as opposed to imitate slavishly or conform unthinkingly, and what are the implications of global expansion for cultural identities – were questions that preoccupied both thinkers. And these shared concerns were at least in part a result of being exposed to the same globalizing forces such as capitalism and imperialism and of intuiting common goals arising out of the consciousness of inhabiting one world as opposed to separate cultural enclaves. Both poets stressed the need to understand local problems in a global perspective, and seek solutions in world-wide cooperation. As Tagore put it in *Gitanjali* poem no. 12:

The traveller has to knock on every alien door to come  
to his own, and one has to wander  
through all the outer worlds to reach  
the innermost shrine at the end. (Tagore 2004: 25)

And Kosovel in the poem *Who Cannot Speak*:

You have to wade through a sea  
of words to come  
to your self. Then alone,  
forgetting all speech,  
go back to the world. (Kosovel 2010: 66)

## References

- Bangha, Imre (2008) *Hungry Tiger: Encounters between Hungarian and Bengali Literary Cultures*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Betts, F. Raymond (1998) *Decolonization*. New York: Routledge.
- Boehmer, Elleke (2002) *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial 1890–1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brennan, Timothy (2002) 'Postcolonial Studies between the European Wars: An Intellectual History.' In: *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 185–203.
- Clarke, John James (1997) *Oriental Enlightenment; The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Collins, Michael (2008) 'Rabindranath Tagore and Nationalism: An Interpretation.' In: *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, <http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm>. Pp. 1–37.
- Fanon, Frantz (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press.
- Gibson, Nigel C. (2003) *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm (2004) *Empire and Poetic Voice: Cognitive and Cultural Studies of Literary Tradition and Colonialism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Jelnikar, Ana (2008) 'Rabindranath Tagore and Srečko Kosovel: At Home in the World.' In: *Indian Studies; Slovenian Contributions*. Lenart Škof, ed. Calcutta: Sampark. Pp. 63–80.
- Kosovel, Srečko (1974) *Zbrano delo 2* (Collected works 2). Anton Ocvirk, ed. Ljubljana: DZS.
- Kosovel, Srečko (1977) *Zbrano delo 3, prvi del* (Collected works 3, part one). Anton Ocvirk, ed. Ljubljana: DZS.
- Kosovel, Srečko (2008) *The Golden Boat*. Translated and edited by Bert Pribac and David Brooks, assisted by Teja Brooks Pribac. Cambridge: Salt Publishing.
- Kosovel, Srečko (2010) *Look Back Look Ahead*. Translated and edited by Ana Jelnikar and Barbara Siegel Carlson. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press.
- Kosovel, Srečko, Stane Kosovel, Boris Pahor and Milko Bambič (1971) *Srečko Kosovel v Trstu* (SK in Trieste). Trieste: Zaliv.
- Larsen, Neil (2000) 'Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism.' In: *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, eds. London: Blackwell Publishers. Pp. 28–52.
- Lokar, Janko (1914) 'Lanska tekmeča za Nobelovo književno nagrado.' (Last Year's rivals for the Nobel Prize). *Slovan* 12 (6), pp. 242–247.
- Nandy, Ashis (2005) *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism; Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Petrović, Svetozar (1970) 'Tagore in Yugoslavia.' *Indian Literature* 13 (2), pp. 5–29.



- Pizzi, Katia (2001) *A City in Search of an Author; The Literary Identity of Trieste*. London, Sheffield Academic Press.
- Said, Edward W. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Sluga, Glenda (2001) *Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Europe: The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Tagore, Rabindranath (1961) *Towards Universal Man*. London: Asia Publishing House.
- Tagore, Rabindranath (2001) 'Nationalism [1917].' In: *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Two, Plays, Stories, Essays*. Sisir Kumar Das, ed. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. Pp. 417–466.
- Tagore, Rabindranath (2010) *Rabindranath Tagore; Kratke zgodbe*. Selected and introduced by Ana Jelnikar, translated by Dušanka Zabukovec. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ, Wa (1993) *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey.