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for the World Today**

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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore: Between Continents, Literatures and Ideas

Ana JELNIKAR*

Anniversaries of important dates in the lives of writers provide scholars with a pretext to assess the significance of the celebrated individual. They also offer an opportunity to evaluate afresh the state of scholarship in the field, seeking new critical directions. Recognized globally as one of the major poets and thinkers of the modern era, the intricacies of his uneven reputation notwithstanding, Rabindranath Tagore, one might think, needs no such excuse. Nonetheless, with the 150th anniversary of his birth coming up, it is inevitable that the flow of Tagoreana which began in 1913 with the poet's winning the Nobel Prize for Literature will once again gather speed, forcing us, almost a century later, to grapple with the man's legacy and the relevance of his thinking for the world of today.

This volume of contributions by a number of Tagore specialists, Indologists and Asian scholars steals a march on the many publications promised for the year 2011. Does Tagore the creative writer still possess the power to excite our literary taste buds, and Tagore the thinker the salience to address some of the most pressing issues of the contemporary world, spanning global warming and climate change, identity politics and social (dis)integration? Moreover, does Tagore the man of action nudge us out of our intellectual comfort zones by insisting on theory being translated into practice?

The first set of papers engages with Tagore's legacy from a variety of perspectives, taking into account his literary works, practical achievements in education and rural reconstruction, as well as his philosophy, particularly as it applies to his creative writing. What is no doubt a "rich and diverse legacy," which has always meant "different things to different groups of people," as Ketaki Kushari Dyson puts it, is

* Ana Jelnikar, Translator, University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, S1-6000 Koper, Slovenia. E-mail: ajelnikar@yahoo.com

considered also in relation to translation, the politics of language and the importance of keeping the tradition alive and vibrant.

Tagore wrote against the backdrop of what is now commonly understood as the first wave of globalization, when, in ways foreshadowing our own time, the world had shrunk significantly through technological advancements, a communication revolution, global commerce, imperialism and migration. In this expanded international context, cultures and individuals were brought together in unprecedented ways, throwing into sharp relief questions of cultural identities, global cooperation, power inequalities, social cohesion, and so on. Tagore stressed the need to understand local problems in a global perspective, and while his 'ideal of a humanitarian world', to quote from the first contributor Malashri Lal, underpinned his efforts also as a creative writer, Tagore's strategy was to start with the local, the particular, the grass-roots and gradually build it up. This involved thinking differently about the 'Other', the content of which shifted depending on where one stood. Tagore went beyond the more evident cross-cultural dichotomies of colonizer and colonized, bringing to the fore unsettling constructions of the 'Other' also within his own society. Lal's paper engages with the stereotyping of a married Bengali woman and an Afghan trader as gleaned from two of Tagore's famous short stories, *The Wife's Letter* and *Kabuliwala*. It provides an analysis of the ways in which Tagore questioned the received notions of gender and racial identity by successfully blurring the lines between the constructions of 'self' and 'other'. Lal sees this as part of Tagore's larger project of experimenting innovatively in the many genres he used 'by entering the minds of people substantially different from himself'. The author's choice of the two stories also highlights Tagore's relevance today: "Beyond the evident literary quality of the stories lies a domain of contemporary contexts in which Afghanistan and woman's rights provide keys to a global discourse."

The fact that Tagore's concerns were not limited to "the cultural domination that grew out of colonial hegemony but equally with the cultural domination that had evolved from his country's own past and was gathering momentum as a divisive force between city and village in early modern India" is also stressed by Uma Das Gupta. She approaches the humanist side to Tagore from the perspective of his educational and rural reconstruction experiments, as the founder of the international Visva-Bharati University in rural southern Bengal. The poet's half-a lifetime-long effort to bring city and village life together in an alternative form of education that combines traditional knowledge with the findings of modern science, is, the author emphasizes, "central to his national and international concerns throughout his life." Urging us to also lend equal weight to Tagore in his roles as an educationist and rural reformer, Uma Das Gupta acknowledges the sad incompatibility of 'his cosmopolitan educational project'

with ‘the imperatives of a competitive capitalism and nationalism’. How Tagore’s humanist educational ideals can be made applicable for, or withstand the pressures of, a power- and profit-driven world remains a pertinent question.

If Uma Das Gupta’s paper understands Tagore’s making of the institution Visva-Bharati also in terms of an on-going dialectical tension existing between his thought and action, the uneasy relationship between Tagore’s substantial body of discursive writings (his lectures and essays in English and Bengali) and his literary works is pushed to considerably more provocative lengths by William Radice, who wants to have Tagore’s creative writings opened up to fresh perspectives and a more rigorous and challenging approach.

Seeing that reading Tagore’s creative works through the filter of his ideas and ideals has become somewhat of a trend in scholarship and a source of continued misunderstandings, Radice asks what might be gained in our appreciation of his literature if we pretended his discursive writings did not exist, and focused solely on the works themselves and what they are saying. Testing this experimental hypothesis against Tagore’s plays *Bisarjan* (*Sacrifice*, 1890) and *Acalāyatan* (1912), Radice conveys that seeing the plays in terms of a message of non-violence, or an attack on idolatry and Hindu orthodoxy is ultimately reductive and blinds us from appreciating the many strands of humour, the absurd and the irresolvable present in his writing. Tagore is not blameless in this, for he himself, in response to criticism, would often explain his own work in terms of idealistic messages. It is precisely the institution of ‘the messenger’, to which Tagore occasionally succumbed, that needs dismantling, if we are to appreciate the basic fact that literature works in ways far more complex and ambiguous than any one message can capture.

In a compelling personal account, from the perspective of someone who grew up “reading Tagore’s books, listening to his music, watching his dance-dramas, and writing poetry under the inspiration of his words,” Ketaki Kushari Dyson takes the question of Tagore’s legacy head-on. Pointing out that while to a Bengali and an Indian the pride in what she dubs his ‘phenomenal legacy’ (if only in terms of the sheer scope and breadth of his creative output) is certainly justifiable, looking after that heritage is also a ‘serious responsibility’. Asking how best to do this and what ways there are to relate to it, Dyson offers a number of general and concrete pointers that should stimulate a more dynamic and productive approach to Tagore’s formidable legacy in the years to come. Against claims of intellectual proprietorship, she stresses that ‘the right to work on [Tagore] does not belong to insiders alone’ – a point in consonance with Tagore’s own strongly-held universalist beliefs that cultural products belong to the world at large and are there for anyone to claim as rightfully theirs (cf. Hogan 2003: 16–17). In keeping further with Tagore’s spirit, she urges for a more

dynamic approach in the way, for example, Tagore's educational institutions are being run. As for the performing arts, a certain freedom of interpretation is essential if his works are to be kept relevant and part of 'a living tradition'. Finally, she takes up the worrying issue of language politics in which the so-called 'regional languages' are being marginalised at the expense of English in elitist circles and the dominance of Hindi in popular culture, with consequences for one of the more obvious – if perhaps inadequately acknowledged and understood – legacies of Rabindranath, that of the modern Bengali literary language.

If, as Dyson rightly argues, the definition of what constitutes Tagore's heritage and legacy needs to be broadened beyond the obvious, this definition obviously includes the vast legacy of Tagore in cultures and literatures other than his own. After 1913, as he became, in Amit Chaudhuri's words, 'the first global superstar or celebrity in literature' and the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, his life took on an entirely new dimension (Chaudhuri 2001: xviii). What followed was an unprecedented response to any poet in the history of letters. Many interrelated factors came into play as various countries, groups and individuals responded to the Indian poet, each in their own way, even as they drew on the common stock of perceptions that guided people's imagination as regards 'the East' and 'Asia' in the early decades of the twentieth century. Between receiving the Prize and his last foreign tour to Persia and Iraq in 1932 at the age of 71, Tagore undertook no fewer than twelve world tours, effectively spending more than a tenth of his lengthy life, close to nine years, abroad. Multiple times in Europe, North America, the Middle East, the Far East, and once to South-East Asia and South America, Tagore visited every inhabited continent except for Australia and, perhaps more unexpectedly, Africa (discounting a short stay in Alexandria and Cairo on his return trip in 1926). Some trips kept him away from Calcutta and Santiniketan for over a year.

This hugely significant component of Tagore's life has over the years given rise to a substantial body of literature that deals with Tagore's reception in the various countries abroad.¹ Certain aspects have received more attention than others and it seems apt with the approaching anniversary to take stock of this scholarship, identify gaps and entertain new methodological orientations. The second set of papers therefore takes up Tagore's reception and impact with respect to China and East Central Europe, with the focus on Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. Tagore's visits to these three countries have so far received comparatively little scholarly attention.²

¹ For Tagore's reputation in the West, cf. Aronson 1978; Kämpchen 1999 (Germany); Bangha 2008 (Central Europe, particularly Hungary). For more on East-and-West encounter, cf. Ivbulis 1999.

² Imre Bangha's recent publication is a path-breaker in this respect.

Jana Rošker examines Tagore's impact on China in the light of the country's nascent cultural and political orientations of the 1920s, gauging the significance of the encounter also in view of the wider historical and cultural relations between the two neighbours. Her approach has an important comparative dimension which, while identifying the common preoccupations of India and Asia with issues of tradition, modernity and Westernization, points to their divergent cultural and intellectual responses. This disjuncture, it seems, must be taken into account if we are to understand the mixed response Tagore received on his visit to China in 1923. "Colonialism successfully determined the terms of discourse in India but failed to conclusively shape the discourse in China," writes Rošker. This explains why Tagore's high hopes of re-establishing the cultural and spiritual links between the two cultures embedded in his idealist discourse of Asian unity could not but fail to convince most Chinese intellectuals, who were in search of more concrete answers to human suffering and its alleviation, and therefore objected to what they perceived as hopeless escapism. Nonetheless, Tagore's visit to China did incite "much interest both in China and in India for the revival of Sino-Indian cultural collaboration and many private, as well as official agendas were realised in this direction."

Imre Bangha's opening paragraph to his paper on the Hungarian response to Tagore in the wider East Central European arena not only points to the gaps existing in the scholarship dealing with Tagore's reception in Europe, but also to the need to broaden the scope of post-colonial discourse to include the culturally rich 'peripheries' of Western Europe. It is worth citing in full:

The cultural encounter between 'East' and 'West' has been the subject of an enormous amount of scholarly work in recent decades. Most studies, however, investigate British, French and German 'Orientalisms' while the cultures of East Central Europe, roughly the Eastern part of the European Union, with languages hopelessly decorated with diacritics and inaccessible for most of the academic cosmopolis, have received relatively little attention in post-colonial discourse. However, this colourful region, often perceived to be part of the Orient during past centuries, has much to offer to a student of cultural encounters or of reception history.

That there is something of a pre-history to Postcolonial Studies to be taken into account by Western academe is borne out also by the fact that it was, like it or not, "the communist literary policy," as Bangha notes, "that discovered Indian realism and started translations [from modern Indian languages, and non-Tagore ones, sometimes directly from the original] long before the West discovered Postcolonial writings." Taking up in detail two understudied phases of Tagore's reception in the region from a trans-national perspective, Bangha shows how ideologically motivated readings of the Bengali poet are closely related to wider European trends and global events. This

constitutes another important shift in orientation, whereby studies from a ‘national’ perspective – what has become something of an orthodoxy in scholarship – give way to a less artificially bounded approach that looks for similarities and dissimilarities across a broader regional context.

What was broadly true of the Hungarian response can also be said to be true of Tagore’s reception in Croatia, as Klara Gónc Moaçanin’s article demonstrates. Tagore’s popularity in East Central Europe came in three waves, with the second wave reaching its apex in 1926, when Tagore toured this part of the world, coming from the sanatorium at Lake Balaton, where he had been recovering from severe exhaustion, to lecture in Zagreb. That his popularity had initially less to do with any appreciation of the intrinsic quality of his works and thought and more with external factors made fluctuations in his reception inevitable. The third bout of enthusiasm for Tagore came in the wake of the Non-Aligned Movement. Predictably hijacked by various groups at different times throughout his checkered reception, Tagore, the author suggests, has always had a following of individuals who out of their deep appreciation of his writing take it upon themselves to stimulate interest in his works among the Croatian-speaking community. Moaçanin, however, is skeptical that “the fourth wave of enthusiastic readers of Tagore is to appear any time soon,” seeing the little response she gets from “the Internet generations of our present-day globalised world” in the university classroom, notwithstanding “a kind of renaissance for Tagore in limited educated circles interested in literature and art.” Can Tagore speak across such vastly different sensibilities?

Moving from the regional, via the national to the individual, the last contribution examines Tagore’s relevance for the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel against the broader canvas of the Slovenian response to the poet and the specific concerns of his home-region that came under fascist Italian rule in the 1920s. Kosovel’s response to Tagore, Ana Jelnikar argues, can best be made sense of in terms of situational identification – the poet’s identifying with another poet contemporaneously across cultures because of their shared predicaments and expectations. Building on this notion, Jelnikar relates it to the various points of identification Kosovel surmised between himself and the Indian poet, the various concerns he shared with him, and the messages he imbibed, and finally suggests that Kosovel’s poetry should be seen as “part of a more complex, global configuration of anti-imperial politics and ethics.”

Taking the contributions together, it not only appears that the 150th anniversary of Tagore’s birth holds the potential of taking Tagore scholarship further, as it indeed should, but also that Tagore’s legacy is alive and well.

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Tagore, Imaging the ‘Other’: Reflections on *The Wife’s Letter & Kabuliwala*

Malashri LAL*

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech said poignantly, “The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity.... It comprehends all, and it has been the highest aim of our spiritual exertion to be able to penetrate all things with one soul...to comprehend all things with sympathy and love.” This ideal of a humanitarian world found expression in Tagore’s work in many genres and, to a great measure, he experimented innovatively by entering the minds of people substantially different from himself. The essay looks into his portrayal of a married Bengali woman and an Afghan trader in two short stories.

Keywords: Tagore, gender, race, women, marriage, child, Afghan, ‘other’

Rabindranath Tagore in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech said poignantly, “The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity.... It comprehends all, and it has been the highest aim of our spiritual exertion to be able to penetrate all things with one soul... to comprehend all things with sympathy and love.” (Das 1996: 965) This ideal of a humanitarian world found expression in Tagore’s work in many genres and, to a great measure, he experimented innovatively by entering the minds of people substantially different from himself.

This article reflects upon Rabindranath’s construction of the ‘Other’ in the short stories *The Wife’s Letter* and *Kabuliwala* to show how he could overcome the barriers of gender and racial identity to empathize with ‘difference’. It shows that the ‘foreignizing’ impulse is built up by notions of stereotype whether that of a woman doing ‘wifely duties’ or a poor trader plying his ware. These dichotomies of the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’ raise suspicions and hostilities, unfounded on the facts of inner life.

* Malashri Lal, Prof. in the Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India. E-mail: malashri@hotmail.com

Rabindranath Tagore's dislike of power structures and hierarchies led him to question the stereotypes and to look beyond the obvious.

In literary theory the concept of the 'Other' is derived initially from Hegel and later developed through the psychoanalytical tools offered by Lacan.

When social, cultural, or literary critics use the term 'the Other' they are thinking about the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone 'Other,' persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images. (Psychology)

Rabindranath Tagore recognized the principle of 'othering' but sought unity in diversity saying in his essay, *The Religion of Man*, "whatever name our logic may give to the truth of human unity, the fact can never be ignored that we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love." (Das 1996: 102) Quoting from the Vedas, "*Ya eko varno bahudha saktiyogat...*" Tagore translates the meaning "He who is one, above all colours, and who with his manifold power supplies the inherent needs of men of all colours, who is in the beginning and in the end of the world, is divine, and may he unite us in a relationship of good will." (Das 1996: 102).

In his literary practice Tagore enters the world of the 'othered' beings, seeking unification with his own sensibilities and sympathies. Take, for example, the story *The Wife's Letter*. Written originally for the journal *Subujpatra* (The Green Leaf), Tagore impersonates a woman's voice and sentiments in composing a letter from the wife, Mrinal, to her 'Husband' of no name, simply identifying him by his 'lotus feet.' I should explain a cultural practice here: a wife in Bengal cannot utter her husband's name as this is both impolite and unlucky. Also, it is a common practice for a wife to bow and touch her husband's feet on special occasions and address him with due deference. In the letter, Mrinal recalls fifteen years of their married life in a joint family in Calcutta, unearthing layers of patriarchal oppression suffered by her and other women in this so called privileged aristocratic home. The story unfolds to mark the following episodes: Mrinal, an extraordinarily beautiful and intelligent village girl is married at the age of twelve into a wealthy household. While praised for her beauty she is expected to hide her intelligence. No one knows that she writes poetry in secret to keep her creative fires alight. She has a baby girl who dies at birth. Bereft and alone, Mrinal is befriended by Bindu, an 'ugly', abandoned, orphaned teenager related to another member of the family who does not want her. Bindu clings to Mrinal with deep affection and Mrinal finds a mentorship role in teaching the young woman household arts. But patriarchy dictates that Bindu is to be married off. As it turns out,

her husband is a mentally unstable and violent man. She comes back to Mrinal who, sadly, is unable to protect her despite attempting some subversive tactics. Bindu, when compelled to return to the mad husband and abusive mother-in-law, sets herself on fire and dies. Society is indifferent to the death of this inconsequential woman. For Mrinal, the tragedy brings home the final realization that she cannot live under such oppressive codes for women. She must design her own liberation. Saying that she is proceeding on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Puri, she is able to leave home and is determined to never go back. Poised at this juncture she writes her letter to her husband, beginning with the words, “My submission at your lotus feet.”

Can a male writer successfully inhabit the female mindscape is a question often asked. Virginia Woolf famously declared that “the great mind is androgynous”, but fell into the trap of identifying the creative artist as male gendered. Closer to our time, Judith Butler called her book *Gender Trouble* and questioned the very basis of defining ‘sex’ as biological and ‘gender’ as sociological. Rabindranath, astutely able to enter the woman’s consciousness through his acts of extended sympathy, relied more on Hindu traditions for a cross-gendered perspective. He observed, “Our nature holds together, inseparably linked, a willfully itinerant male, impatient of all bonds, and a shut-in home keeping female being.... The one leads us outward, the other draws us back home.” Hence, “we are all *ardhanarishvar* [a deity conjoined of male and female]: sometimes half and half, sometimes in unequal proportion.” (Chaudhuri 2000: 22).

This model of gender understanding allows Tagore to give his authentic voice to Mrinal through whom he brings up the sociopolitical trope of a woman’s place in social formations, as in the institutions of marriage and family. Two essays by Tagore can be read in conjunction with *The Wife’s Letter*; *The Indian Ideal of Marriage* (1925) and *Women’s Place in the World* (1933). Citing traditional sources, but giving nontraditional explications, Tagore associates women with the principle of *Shakti* or primordial energy but calls it “the joy-giving power of woman as the Beloved.” (Das 1996: 536) Further he refers to Shankaracharya’s poem *Ananda-lahari* but connects *Ananda* (the principle of Joy) with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Intellectual Beauty’ (Das 1996: 536) configured as a ‘Spirit fair’. In Shelley’s (1817) *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, he takes his vow addressed to “Whom, Spirit fair, thy spells did bind/ To fear himself, and love all human kind.”¹ I suggest that Mrinal is this ideal of ‘Intellectual

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, stanza 6
 I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
 To thee and thine-have I not kept the vow?
 With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
 I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
 Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers

Beauty,' a persona for whom the patriarchal spaces allow insufficient opportunity for free expression. She tells her husband, "It did not take long for you to forget that I had beauty—but you were forced to remember at each step that I had brains. This intelligence is so much a part of my nature that it has survived even fifteen years in your household". (Chaudhuri 2000: 207) Denied scholarly pursuits and creative writing, because such activities for women were frowned upon in upper class homes in Bengal, Mrinal turns to mentoring the hapless girl-woman Bindu, bringing about one of Tagore's numerous representations of a nurturing sisterhood. In the essay, Tagore had declared, "woman cannot be pushed back for good into the superficial region of the merely decorative by man's aggressive athleticism. For she is not less necessary in civilization than man, but possibly more so." (Das 1996: 678) Mrinal in the story presages much the same arguments:

I did not suffer in your household as suffering is commonly understood. In your house there is no lack of food or clothes... but I will never again return to your house.... I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it. (Chaudhuri 2000: 217)

Mrinal's intelligent comprehension of Bindu's tragedy of dependence becomes Tagore's agency for critiquing the patriarchal mind set. However, one is hard put to imagine a viable future for Mrinal left thus on the white sands of Puri. In the historicized context, well-born women had no means of leading independent, self-determined lives. They could not live on the dole of temples, they could not take up manual labour nor surrender to a romantic attachment. It is precisely the Intellectual Beauty, in this story and also in his novel, *Chokher Bali*, who is the displaced individual with no location. In his own household young Rabindranath had witnessed Kadambari's loneliness and seen the neglect. She had killed herself in 1884. He had helplessly mourned his beloved sister-in-law, his companion and his muse. Robi contended with the grief of Kadambari's loss and visited the trope of the gifted, unfulfilled woman many times in his fiction. In reality, though some women in the Tagore family had gained freedom from the ancient customs he saw others still confined by the shackles of their inherited traditions. Tagore's social activism came through his writer's pen. Mrinal would not die. *The Wife's Letter* positions his

Of studious zeal or love's delight
Outwatched with me the envious night-
They know that never joy illumed my brow
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
This world from its dark slavery,
That thou-O awful Loveliness,
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.
(Shelley; Shelley 1817)

extraordinary entry into the interiority of women's worlds through a woman's voice and her agency.

In the discourse of the Other, if Tagore overcame the differentials of gender through asserting the selfhood of women in this narrative, he took up the challenge of exploring race prejudices in the short story *Kabuliwala*. Set again in Calcutta, it speaks of a time when traders from Afghanistan spent many months selling petty merchandise and also dry fruits. A little surreptitiously, some functioned as moneylenders too. Although the story of Rahmat Kabuliwala's attachment to the five year old Mini is well known through Tagore's popular text and a film made in Bengali by Tapan Sinha in 1956 and in Hindi by Bimal Roy in 1961, I wish to focus on a few issues to make my point.

For instance, the stereotype of the Afghani is initially maintained by Rabindranath Tagore. The writer/narrator who gives us the story says, "dressed in loose, soiled garments, turban on his head, a cloth bag on his shoulder, a few boxes of grapes in his hand, a tall kabuliwala was walking slowly down the street." He had been called in by little Mini, the daughter of the narrator and he proves to be a patient listener to the prattling child. Occasionally he gives her gifts of almonds and pistachios. When the 'Babu', Mini's father, offers to pay, the Kabuliwala finds ways of evading a commercial transaction. Mini's mother is worried and watchful of the repeated visits and fears that he may be a kidnapper who will bundle Mini into his large sack.

Tagore was perfectly aware of the racial markers that ordinary people used to domesticate or foreignize their contacts. The tall man with the gunny sack squatting on the floor, arriving from somewhere else and speaking another language is the stranger that one fears and is also fascinated by. The Kabuliwala's interaction is primarily with the child Mini but also indirectly with the indulgent father who is a struggling stay-at-home writer spinning his own romantic yarn about Pratapsingha and Kanchanmala. The visitor's strangeness permits his imagination to roam in other worlds:

Sitting at my desk inside my little room, my conversations with this man from Kabul were like virtual travel for me. I imagined a caravan of camels laden with goods, traversing a narrow desert lined on both sides by tall rugged, inaccessible mountain ranges, sun scorched and blood red. Some of the turbaned merchants and travelers moved on camel-back, others on foot... the Kabuliwala would talk of his own land in broken Bengali. (Chakravarty 2010: 151)

They chat about Afghan history, of Abdur Rahman Khan made the Amir by the British, of political relations with Russia and so on.² The Kabuli's interactions with Mini are at a level of play. She asks what is in his sack, and he says "*Hanthi/ Elephant*" and the pair dissolve into laughter. At other times the Afghani teases the little girl, "*Soshur bari jabi?! Will you go to your in-law's home?*" and the child would give him the same question in return, unaware of the meaning of '*Soshur bari*'.

In Lawrence Venuti's usage 'foreignization' and 'domestication', though factors of translation, are also indicators of cultural assumption. The translator makes a choice about initialing the origins of the text by emphasizing the target language, or s/he retains certain vocabularies from the original language to bring attention to its foreignness. (Venuti 1995, 1998) It is a linguistic as well as political choice related to the concept of the 'Other.' In Tagore's text, the phrase '*Soshur bari*' in Bengali, playfully taken up by the Kabuli holds connotations well beyond its obvious meaning 'the in-law's home'. Under patriarchy, and in the cultural history of Bengal, a young girl's entry into her marital home denotes loss of freedom and surrender to household duties. It is a kind of incarceration out of which the girl can periodically emerge only if permitted to do so. Tagore uses this cultural meaning effectively in the story. Rahmat, when he wants to raise money to return home to Kabul, sells his merchandise on credit and waits to collect his dues. A person owing him money turns rough; the Kabuli stabs him injuriously. Racial prejudices come at once to the fore. Rahmat is immediately arrested and summarily put in jail for eight years. While leaving he shows his handcuffs and tells Mini "I am going to my *soshur bari*," here indicating the prison house. I reiterate that Tagore's creative writing can be usefully linked to his prose texts. In the context of *Kabuliwala*, I am reminded of words from his essay titled, *Race Conflict*: "(Men) are still burdened with the age-old inheritance of a suspicion of aliens which is the primitive instinct of animals. They still have a lurking ferocity ready to come out at the slightest provocation when in contact with people outside their social boundaries." (Das 1996: 359)

The last part of the story rests on the multiple signifiers of the untranslatable term '*Soshur Bari*'. Rahmat is released after eight years. Mini has grown up and on the day of her wedding, coincidentally, the Kabuliwala comes in search of his little friend who is no longer little. The father is reluctant to bring his daughter out to meet this scruffy Afghan but then relents. Mini, demure in her bridal attire looks blankly at the Kabuliwala, completely forgetful of the past. The Kabuli gently asks "*Soshur bari*

² According to W. K. Frazier Tyler, M. C. Gillet and several other scholars "the word Afghan first appears in history in the *Hudud ul-'Alam* in 982 AD." Al-Biruni referred to Afghans as various tribes living on the western frontier mountains of the Indus River. Ibn Battuta, visiting Kabul in 1333 writes: "We travelled on to Kabul, formerly a vast town, the site of which is now occupied by a village inhabited by a tribe of Persians called Afghans." (Afganistan)

jabi?/ Will you go to your in-laws?' Minnie blushes deeply and leaves. And the Afghan sinks to the floor, suddenly aware that his own little daughter would have similarly grown up and forgotten him in the eight long years he has been away. He pulls out a crumpled sheet of paper from his deep shabby pocket. We see a bereft father carrying the palm imprint of his own little child he had left behind in his mountainous homeland. In this heart-wrenching scene Tagore reaches out in empathy to the emotions of the Kabuli and gives us an unforgettable image across cultures, the perennial father and his endless paternal love.

Rabindranath Tagore's projection into other worlds, whether that of the bereft Kabuliwala or the determined Mrinal is a remarkable feat of encompassing the Other. While it is known that his concept of the '*Jiban Debata*', a 'divine life force' enjoined right action and a deep spirituality, it is seldom that one finds philosophy transferred to action. He reached out to the underprivileged, the vulnerable and the socially marginalized. One may count women and destitute foreigners among them for which reason I have brought these two stories to attention. Beyond the evident literary quality of the stories lies a domain of contemporary contexts in which Afghanistan and woman's rights provide keys to a global discourse. Tagore is *chiro nutan/* always new. I conclude with his words which convey his relevance today:

We have our social body in which we come into relation with other men. Its obvious wishes are those connected with our selfish impulses. We want to get more than others and pay less than is our due. But there is another wish, deeply inherent in our social life, which is concerned with the welfare of our community. He who has social wisdom knows this and tries to bring all his clamorous wishes about personal pleasure, comfort, and freedom under the dominion of this hidden wish for the good of others. (Das 1996: 54)

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Using a Poet's Archive to Write the History of a University: Rabindranath Tagore and Visva-Bharati

Uma DAS GUPTA*

Abstract

The poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was the founder of an institution that we know today as Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan in rural southern Bengal. The making of this institution was central to his concerns to the end of his life. He offered it as an alternative to the colonial system of education then prevailing in India. Starting it as an experimental school in 1901 he added an international university and an institute of rural reconstruction in 1921–1922. It was an education to bring city and village together by combining traditional knowledge with scientific experimentation. This endeavour is a relatively unexplored dimension of Tagore's biography. In this presentation I shall examine how the making of this institution was a source of dialectical tension in Tagore's life, and how he engaged with this tension in thought and action.

Keywords: Santiniketan, Sriniketan, Visva-Bharati, education, national, international

The poet Rabindranath Tagore was the founder of an institution that we know today as Visva-Bharati University in the twin campuses of Santiniketan and Sriniketan in rural southern Bengal about a hundred miles north west of Calcutta. Starting it as an experimental school in 1901 he added an international university and an institute of rural reconstruction in 1921 and 1922. The making of this institution was central to his national and international concerns throughout his life. It was an education which sought to work for a common humanity, locally and globally, an institution unhindered by the territorially bounded model of the nation-state – India's entry into the universal, as it were.

* Uma Das Gupta, Historian and Tagore Biographer; formerly: Professor in the Social Sciences Division, Indian Statistical Institute. Calcutta, India. E-mail: udasgupta@gmail.com.

But this endeavour is a relatively unexplored dimension of Tagore's biography. He is feted as a literary genius, which he certainly was, but not seriously remembered as an educationist and rural reformer. By his own admission, the work he did for education and rural reconstruction was vital to him even if it meant living with a dialectical tension or a tension of opposites in his life. But the sad fact is that while Tagore continues to be celebrated, and rightly so, his cosmopolitan educational project in the Santiniketan and Sriniketan schools and Visva-Bharati 'one-nest-world' university has been marginalized by the imperatives of a competitive capitalism and nationalism.

He took up the work when he was about forty years of age, till which time he had only been following his literary pursuits.¹ He believed he had no gift for practical work and acknowledged he was no leader of men nor was he a moral preceptor. Why then did he do it? Even to himself, he was first and foremost a poet – and to his nationalist contemporaries, except for Gandhi and Nehru, his educational work and his idea of an inclusive nationalism were only a 'poet's fancy'. (Ohdedar 1986: 10, 27–28, 52, 54, 59; also see Chakrabarty 2000: 156–157)

I would like to submit that Tagore thought and worked on three focused goals in experimenting with his ideas of education and nationalism. Firstly, education rests where there is a natural field for the growth of scholarly learning; the purpose of a university is to produce scholarship and to spread it; to do this it was necessary to invite intellectuals and scholars who were devoted to research and discovery and creativity in their fields. A meeting-place of those minds was conceived to be the right venue for a true university. He believed with certainty it would not work to imitate a foreign university. Secondly, in every nation education is intimately associated with the life of the people; but for us in modern India, the colonial education was applied only to turning out clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates, munsiffs and policemen, which were the few favourite professions of the gentle folk. This education did not reach the majority of Indians like the farmer, the oil-grinder, the potter, because our new universities had not been a growth from the soil; they were like "parasites feeding on foreign oaks," he wrote.² Tagore argued that a truly Indian school must from the very beginning implement its acquired knowledge of economics, of agriculture, of health and all other everyday sciences in the surrounding villages; then alone can that school become the centre of the country's way of living. This was the *viswakarma* approach of his Visva-Bharati institutions at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, or the

¹ Standard biographies all tell this story: Kripalani 1980; Dutta and Robinson 1995; Das Gupta 2004; Das Gupta 2006. Also see: Mukherjee 1962; O'Connell 2002.

² Tagore (1913) to Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty, 30 January 1913. Translated by Uma Das Gupta. Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty (1886–1918), early teacher of the Santiniketan school, 1904–1918.

approach of total activity. Thirdly, Tagore held that the Indian National Congress followed a faulty policy of petitions and pleas for favours from the colonial government, which he critiqued as the ‘politics of begging’; he recommended instead the need to plunge into constructive work by taking responsibility for one’s own state and society both as individuals and as collectives so that change could happen.³

Tagore was convinced that all these goals could be approached through a new and alternative education to address three main issues: societal, pedagogic, and the need to connect with the gateways of learning, nationally and internationally. Even with being a critic of imperialism and the West’s display of greed and violence, his critique represented just one aspect of a balanced appraisal of Western civilization in which he found much to admire. His evaluation of the East included the denunciation of the hierarchical and static elements of its culture. Therefore, he was concerned not just with the cultural domination that grew out of colonial hegemony but equally with the cultural domination that had evolved from his country’s own past and was gathering momentum as a divisive force between city and village in early modern India due to the spread of colonial education and the rise of a somewhat dehumanised professional class.

We move now, very briefly, to the historical facts about Santiniketan. It was discovered as a serene place in the early 1860s by Tagore’s father who bought a spot of land there and built a guest house on it in 1863 which he named Santiniketan, meaning an abode of peace. It was there that Tagore set up his school in 1901 at a time of great nationalist fervour in Bengal, acknowledged by historians as Bengal’s call for ‘constructive *swadesi*’. (Sarkar 1973) Tagore took to constructive *swadesi* at his Santiniketan school. He wrote, “The growth of the Santiniketan school was the growth of my life” and continued to experiment with his ideas for a new education in which city and the village, nation and world, the local and the global, would become partners in learning from each other’s life-experience. (Tagore 1951: 6–7)

Tagore’s Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and his world travels while Europe was experiencing the carnage of the first World War of 1914–1918 led him to plan a wider educational venture for a civilizational meeting of the ‘races’. He believed that conflicts and aggressive nationalism could be diffused by the study of each other’s histories and cultures and the exchange of higher learning. This venture materialised into Visva-Bharati, his international university in 1921, with a logo taken from the Vedas, *yatra visvam eka nidam*, meaning, ‘where the whole world meets in one nest’. Visva-Bharati was kept away from the nationalist Non-cooperation movement, also

³ Tagore (1967: 30–33) to Dinesh Chandra Sen, 17 November 1905, in Bengal. Translation mine. Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866–1939), historian and contemporary of Tagore. Also see Tagore 1997: 58.

launched in 1920–1921 under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership without losing friendship. A final experiment came in 1922 with the establishment of a school of scientific agriculture and an institute of rural reconstruction named Sriniketan, meaning an abode of wellbeing, that was located in the villages surrounding the Santiniketan school. (Das Gupta 2004)

With these basic facts in the background, I would like to move to an enumeration of some of Tagore's key statements in explaining why he started a school in the lap of nature where children could assimilate what they were taught with joy and creativity. (Tagore 2002: 141)



Photo 1: Early Santiniketan Landscape



Photo 2: The Santiniketan House

He wrote: “What weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of the system of education which prevailed everywhere.” (Tagore 1999: 67)

He wrote: “We may become powerful by knowledge but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.” (Das Gupta 2009: 88)

He wanted two changes, firstly, to bring about at least an awareness of traditional knowledge among the English-educated urban Indian milieu, and, simultaneously, to bring the fruits of science of technology to the common populace and not just to the English educated milieu. (Tagore 1973: 299–300)⁴

There was great stress laid on locality and atmosphere and a simple life (Tagore 1941b: 333–334).⁵

He described the Santiniketan school as an indigenous attempt to adapt modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment.⁶

Since his award of the Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore became a world traveller. His successive tours in the aftermath of the First World War convinced him of the necessity of a wider educational venture. Europe was in turmoil, its old ideals shaken. The enthusiasm with which his messages of international cooperation were received convinced him of the need for an international centre. And where else could that be but in Santiniketan?



Photo 3: Audience at a lecture Tagore gave in Carnegie Hall, New York, 1921

⁴ Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

⁵ Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, subtitle in pamphlet *Visva-Bharati*, Santiniketan, 1929.

Doors were opened to men and women to collaborate in intellectual companionship and creative activity without opposing interests and without national boundaries. In 1921, Visva-Bharati was officially instituted as an international university in Santiniketan.

Visva-Bharati's keynote ideal was cooperation and that is why Tagore stayed away from Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement. "Is it not an irony of fate", Tagore wrote, "that I should call for cooperation when my country has given the call for non-cooperation?"⁷

Gandhi understood Tagore and they remained friends for ever.⁸ Tagore wrote, "Where truth is concerned there can be no East nor West" (Tagore 1963: 31).⁹ Tagore, Gandhi, C.F. Andrews all felt alike about Visva-Bharati.

The final experiments in Visva-Bharati's education for an inclusive humanism through total activity came with the establishment of the rural reconstruction programme in Sriniketan in 1922, as a twin institution of the Santiniketan school.

Visva-Bharati as an international centre of learning and Sriniketan as a practical experiment in rural reconstruction flourished in the 1920s and 30s with activists from the world joining hands with the teachers and the villagers. (Das Gupta 2008: 992–993)

The two essential features of Tagore's endeavour as educationist was Visva-Bharati's ideal of a total approach to education by combining the local and the global cultures and along with that its ideal of total activity, *viswakarma*. (Tagore 1962: 98–103)¹⁰

But there were not many takers for his ideas in his country. He wrote: "It is difficult to come completely out of the net in which the system of education has enmeshed our country" (Tagore 1992: 133).¹¹ But Tagore did not give up.

⁷ Tagore (1929: 132) to C. F. Andrews, 5 March 1921. Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940), Anglican missionary, friend of both Tagore and Gandhi, lived and served in Santiniketan from 1913 to the end of his life.

⁸ See letters and exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and M. K. Gandhi in Bhattacharya 1997. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), or Mahatma Gandhi, apostle of Non-violence, who led India's freedom struggle, is widely regarded as the father of the nation.

⁹ Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

¹⁰ In English translation, "The History and Ideals of Sriniketan" (Tagore 1941a) translated by Marjorie Sykes.

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Sum ergo cogito: Tagore as a Thinker and Tagore as a Poet, and the Relationship between the Two

William RADICE*

Abstract

With special attention to Tagore's two plays *Bisarjan* and *Acalāyatan* the paper considers to what extent Tagore's thought as expounded in his lectures and essays in English and Bengali is relevant to the understanding of his literary works. Are there dangers in reading his works through the filter of his ideas and ideals? Would his creative works seem different if we pretended that his discursive writings did not exist? The paper addresses such questions in order to suggest a fresh approach to Tagore in his 150th anniversary year (2011).

Keywords: Tagore, Tagore's thought, Tagore's paintings, Tagore's plays, *Sacrifice*, *Acālayatan*

The folio of paintings and hand-written verses *Chitralipi* is among Rabindranath Tagore's very last creative works. Published in 1940, the year before he died, its contents may date from various earlier times, but unified by the poet's frail handwriting in both Bengali and English it comes across powerfully as an enigmatic late testament. Leafing through it as I thought about this lecture, I was struck by two verses in particular, with their accompanying paintings:

The black and white threads

weave the destiny of man

into a mystery of entanglements. (Tagore 1940a: 18)¹

* William Radice, Senior Lecturer in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, UK. E-mail: r@soas.ac.uk

¹ In Bengali:

ghaṭanāy bedanāy mānuṣe cirakāl

and

The dark takes form

in the heart of the white

and reveals it. (Tagore 1940a: 26)²

These *kabitikā* (brief poems³) express something of the same bafflement that I feel on attempting to write this paper on my proposed theme, though the second one gives me hope that light may eventually be revealed by the daunting and confusing darkness it contains. I am trying, as the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth approaches, to come up with new ideas and a fresh approach, and it is not easy. I want a new approach not just because I am temperamentally averse to recycling clichés and old ideas, but because in my reading of books and articles about Tagore I constantly come across statements that I disagree with. I am, however, only at the beginning of this arduous process of reassessment and questioning of old assumptions. If in this paper you find just tentative, speculative first steps, you must forgive me. One has to start somewhere.

Let me begin with three things that I have recently read that instantly made me think, "No, that can't be right." The first is from Flavia Arzeni's recent book, *An Education in Happiness: The Lessons of Hesse and Tagore*, published in Italian in 2008 and in English the following year.⁴ The book is an elegantly written and well-intentioned account of Hesse and Tagore as idealistic thinkers and writers, who have lessons for us all about how to live a balanced life in harmony with nature and free of materialism and selfishness. In a chapter about Tagore's paintings called *Which art to choose?*, Arzeni writes:

What is most surprising, apart from the sheer mass of the work, is that it went in a completely different, indeed radically opposed direction to that which he pursued in his literary work. In his poetry, as in his prose, Tagore always kept to the model of beauty and harmony which he himself advocated and which he expressed faithfully in both content and style. His painting seems to come from a different world, as if it were the product of someone else's mind. His visual universe is dark, often anguished, his self-portraits cruel and grotesque, his figures disturbing,

sādākālo suto diye cāridike bonā hay jāl.

se jāle pareche gāthā asamkhya itihās

jāni nā jagat-porā kena e prakāś aprakāś.

² *asīm sādāy kālo yabe pare*

sr̥ṣṭī sīmāy bādhā,

takhan to sei kālor rūpei

āpnāke pāy sādā.

³ The term I use in my book: Rabindranath Tagore: *Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems* (2001). A new edition is forthcoming from Penguin India (in print).

⁴ Pushkin Press, London, 2009. Translated by Howard Curtis.

his landscapes crepuscular. Parallels could be drawn, with some justification, with certain styles of the European avant-garde, especially German expressionism. (Arzeni 2009: 178–179)

This idea – of a disjunction between Tagore’s paintings and his literary works – is not new. I was aware of it when I wrote the Introduction to my Penguin *Selected Poems* of Tagore, in which I called the paintings “something of an embarrassment to the Tagore cult,” though I went on to say, “The element in Tagore that found its clearest and most unfettered expression in his paintings was always present in him.” (Radice 1985: 83) I thought then, and I think even more strongly now, that the notion of a disjunction, of ‘two Tagores’ as Arzeni (2009: 179) puts it, is wrong. I do not believe that a creative genius can ever be entirely different in one genre or medium from how he is in another, as the brain and imagination he employs will be the same. The verses and paintings in *Chitralipi*, brought so movingly together in a single volume, are alone sufficient to refute the idea.

The second statement that brought me up short recently was in Partha Mitter’s admirable book on 20th-century Indian art, *The Triumph of Modernism*. There is a section on Tagore’s paintings and on the ‘vision of art and the community’ that was promoted at Santiniketan, which I mostly found perceptive and informative. But I was taken aback when Mitter comes on to the erotic elements in Tagore’s paintings, and writes of the painting *Untitled Cowering Nude Woman*: “One of his strangest paintings is of a submissive androgynous figure that hints at an ambiguous sexuality which none of his literary works ever does.” (Mitter 2007: 77) Androgyny? Ambiguity? Is not the whole universe of Tagore’s songs, in which gender is seldom explicit (thanks partly to there being no gender in Bengali pronouns) full of it? In new translation of *Gitanjali* I am currently doing, I have to be alert to constant shifts of voice from male to female. Take poem No. 26, in which a strange figure comes and plays a veena while the poet sleeps but does not wake up. I first made the figure female because of the associations between the veena and the goddess Saraswati and also the references to perfume ‘filling the dark’. When I turned to Tagore’s own translation I found he had made the figure male (and cut out the perfume). But Bengali friends have explained to me that the speaker has to be female and the visitor male, because the speaker describes herself as *hatabhāginī* (unfortunate, miserable) – a female adjectival form; and the word I understood as ‘perfume’ (*gandha*) is not as specific as that, and could indeed mean ‘scent of his body’ or maybe just ‘aura’. In this poem, Tagore is drawing on the Bengali Vishnava tradition in which songs of ‘yearning’ (*biraha*) are usually addressed by Radha to Krishna.⁵ But when these

⁵ Like many poems in *Gitanjali*, No. 26 is actually a song. I read my draft translation of it at the Evening of Poetry in Celebration of Rabindranath Tagore, Jazz Club Gajo, Ljubljana, 20th March 2010 that

mysterious, sensed-but-not-fully-seen figures are identifiable – as they often are – with Tagore’s concept of the *jīban-debatā*, the ‘life-deity’ guiding and harmonizing everything that he did, then the gender can be very fluid. As Reba Som (2009) rightly says in her recent book on Tagore’s songs, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and the Song*, “Rabindranath’s *jeevan devata* appeared to him in different forms – masculine and feminine. In the first few years it was feminine, which came to him quite naturally.” (Som 2009: 71)

Reba Som’s book is a most valuable contribution, the first book on Tagore in English that focuses throughout on his songs. I learnt a great deal from it, and agreed with most of her analysis. I very much liked, for example, the way in which she finds in *Chitralipi* ‘deep resonances of several songs of Tagore’. (Som 2009: 161–164) But when I read her chapter on *Gitanjali*, I found myself thinking strongly that this was not the book I was currently experiencing through the creative act of translation. In fairness to Reba, she is describing here how *Gitanjali* was perceived and received, and is certainly aware that there was plenty that was not understood well, particularly the profound relationship the book has with music. Nevertheless, it is tempting to assume from her account that the understanding of *Gitanjali* in 1912–1913 was broadly correct:

To a reserved British people Tagore’s simple lyrics touched deeply their emotional core. Rabindranath recalled how Tagore’s poetry readings would be greeted by an ‘almost painful silence’ but then would come the flurry of congratulatory letters the next day. One such letter was by May Sinclair dated 8 July 1912, who wrote: ‘You have put into English, which is absolutely transparent in its perfection, things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language.’ Stopford Brooke wrote to Tagore about the *Gitanjali* poems, ‘they make for peace, peace breathing from love and they create for us, too storm-tossed in this modern world, a quiet refuge... It is well for us to have a book which, without denouncing us, leads us into meadows of peace and love and refreshes us where we are weary.’ (Som 2009: 108)

Simple lyrics? A quiet refuge? The most recent poem in *Gitanjali* that I have translated, No. 27, begins in my version:

Where’s the light, the light?

Ignite it with the fire of longing

The lamp is there, but no flame

followed the Symposium for which this paper was written. The audience seemed happy with my translation, but may have been puzzled that in Tagore’s own version – which I also read – the genders were different. The Bengali participants afterwards convinced me that Tagore was right and I was wrong.

What is this doom on my brow?

Death would be preferable

Light the lamp with the fire of longing. (Radice in print)

and ends

Where's the light, the light?

Ignite it with the fire of longing

Clouds thunder, wind howls

Time passes, but this deep night,

Black as a whetstone, doesn't pass

Light love's lamp with my breath

Ignite it with the fire of longing (Radice in print)

For anyone feeling 'too storm-tossed in this modern world', this is hardly going to be the right poem.

To understand why I felt dissatisfied by this and the previous two characterizations of Tagore, I need some kind of working hypothesis as to why people got him wrong – and continue to get him wrong: why they find the paintings at odds with the literary works; why they seem to assume that the literary works are simpler (and less ambiguous) than they are; why they think – even if they know that his novels, say, are complex – that in *Gitanjali* we find nothing but simplicity, harmony and calm.⁶

In Tagore's lifetime, quite a lot can be attributed to his extraordinary aura and charisma. When people met him, they felt – as with Mahatma Gandhi – that they were in the presence of someone of immense inner balance and self-control. They did not seem to understand that for both Tagore and Gandhi life was an unending struggle, a

⁶ In *This Song of Mine has Thrown Away All Ornaments*, my Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Lecture for the Netaji Subhas Open University, Calcutta, 2 December 2009 (NSOU, Calcutta, forthcoming), I considered and rejected what I called '*Gitanjali* exceptionalism', the notion that whatever the complexities of Tagore's other works, *Gitanjali* stands apart. I quoted, for example, Michael Collins's view (in a draft article he sent me, based on his Oxford D.Phil thesis) that "Yeats assumed that the devotional *Vedantic* poetry of *Gitanjali* was all there was to Tagore." I think Dr Collins is right about Yeats but wrong about *Gitanjali*.

relentless *sādhanā*, in which glimpses of the absolute perfection and truth that both so deeply craved came rarely and fleetingly. Of course that aura lives on, though with Gandhi knowledge of his inner battles and torments is quite widespread now, thanks to the labours of innumerable biographers. But I do not think that the *Gurudev* aura alone is enough to account for the problem in the perception of Tagore that I am trying to probe. Much more significant, I suspect, is the enormous corpus of writings in both Bengali and English in which Tagore expounded his religious, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic ideas.

Tagore was unusual, but not unique, in being a creative writer who was also a thinker, and gave many talks, lectures, sermons that were later published in journals or ultimately in books. Add to these all the carefully crafted letters that he wrote, his responses to reviews, and the conversations and interviews with him that were written down, and you have a formidable intellectual oeuvre, on top of many volumes of poetry, fiction and drama. Quite a large proportion of this was in English, giving it immediate international accessibility, and in recent times many of his discursive writings in Bengali have been translated, and brought out especially by Oxford University Press in Delhi in the Tagore series edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri. Essays and speeches that before were somewhat scattered were in the 1990s brought together by Sisir Kumar Das (1996) in the third volume of his massive, Sahitya Akademi edition of Tagore's English works. In 2007 a fourth volume, 811 pages long, was added, edited by Nityapriya Ghosh.

Let us compare this situation with two other writers of equivalent greatness and copiousness, Leo Tolstoy and William Shakespeare. In a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* on two films based on Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Last Station*, the writer and critic A. N. Wilson wrote:

The story he wrote, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, represented, in the words of his biographer Aylmer Maude, the fact that 'he had returned to art'. After years in which he had written nothing but pacifist or vegetarian tracts, 'his train has at last come out of the tunnel'. It was an age since the man who wrote *War and Peace* had given up art in favour of preaching. In that time, Tolstoy had slowly turned himself and his family into characters not from his own fiction but from Dostoevsky, eaten up with irrational passions and hatreds and religious obsessions. *The Kreutzer Sonata*, being the frenzied account of a wife-murderer muttered aloud during an overnight train journey, is the most Dostoevskian of Tolstoy's writings, though naturally the way it was written, and the gospel it preached, were flavoured with his own unmistakable pungency. (Wilson 2010: 17)

Although Tolstoy was certainly not without influence as a thinker, having a profound effect on Gandhi, and carrying off what A. N. Wilson rightly describes as "the twin trick of being one of the greatest novelists ever, and the conscience of the Western

world,” (Wilson 2010: 18) it has always been possible to enjoy his novels without bothering much with his ‘preachings’, even if the two came together in a late work such as *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Indeed, his two greatest novels were written before the preaching started.⁷ With Tagore, it is much less easy to detach the creative works from the discursive or didactic writings, not only because the two ran in parallel throughout his long life, but also because he himself tended to comment on his works in terms of the messages they conveyed, giving the strong impression that his prime purpose was to convey, through poetry, fiction, drama and even songs, ideas that were presented more abstractly elsewhere.

What about William Shakespeare? Although his plays are packed with ideas and many of them have intellectual, moral or philosophic aspects that will engage critics and directors for as long as his plays are studied or performed, he left behind no discursive writings, letters, autobiography or diaries whatsoever. This seems to me to have worked hugely to his advantage. It has forced actors, directors and critics to focus wholly on the works themselves, without being distracted by what Shakespeare himself may or may not have thought about them.

I have found myself asking recently, has the existence of such a vast discursive Tagore oeuvre come between readers and his works? Has it promoted a tendency to read his poems, songs, stories, novels and plays through the filter of his thought? Might it be possible – and both refreshing and healthy – to pretend that the discursive writings do not exist, in order to come closer to what the creative works actually are and what they are actually saying?

I can think of two main reasons why a critical experiment of this kind is daunting to contemplate. One is that Tagore the thinker has a unity and consistency – and a broad simplicity and penetrability – that his infinitely complex and many-layered creative works may lack. This is possibly a controversial view. In recent studies, much has been made of Tagore’s variety and changeability as a thinker. Falvia Arzeni, for example, writes:

Tagore was, in fact, a dazzling, enigmatic figure, an enlightened but profoundly contradictory mind. One of his most authoritative biographers, Krishna Kripalani, who knew him well when he was alive and married his granddaughter, has recalled that once, when Tagore was already well advanced in years and laden with honours and celebrity, he was asked what he considered his best quality.

⁷ It was, however, foreshadowed by the reflections on destiny and free will in the Epilogue to *War and Peace*.

Tagore replied, 'Inconsistency.' When asked what was his greatest failing, he replied, 'The same'. (Arzeni 2009: 114)⁸

At the more academic end of the spectrum, Sumit Sarkar (1973) in his seminal study of the Swadeshi movement, helps us to understand the evolution in Tagore's political ideas, and this has also been explored thoroughly by Ana Jelnicar (2009) in her recent London University PhD thesis on the concept of universalism in Tagore and Srečko Kosovel. Maybe in the sphere of politics or nationalism changeability and inconsistency are only to be expected, because Tagore was responding to changing circumstances and events. In Gandhi's political ideas – on, for example, whether Indians should support the British war effort in both the First and Second World Wars – we also find inconsistency, for the same reason.

But in the religious, philosophical and ethical sphere we find, I believe – though it would take another paper to argue this effectively – in Tagore (and in Gandhi) a remarkable, unflinching unity and consistency. Moreover, it is possible to take almost any essay, and lecture, any sermon from the two volumes entitled *Śāntiniketan*, and find immediate connections with almost any of Tagore's creative works. I did this when I wrote the notes to my Penguin *Selected Poems*, connecting the poems with Tagore's main books of English essays and lectures, from *Sādhanā* (1913) to *The Religion of Man* (1931). This is actually the easiest thing for an interpreter and critic of Tagore to do. It is partly because I have done it myself in the past that I do not want to do it again now.

The other reason why reading Tagore through the filter of his thought is tempting, and the alternative – ignoring his ideas in favour of the creative works themselves – is daunting, is one that to a Bengali native speaker will sound lame, but which no foreign student of Tagore, however experienced and dedicated, can evade: namely that the thoughts – even in translated versions of Bengali texts – are more 'treatable' and accessible than poems, songs or plays, which for full and confident understanding need close attention to the Bengali original. With novels, the foreigner can feel a little more confident, and in my teaching at SOAS I do not have any compunction about asking my students to write essays on *Gora* or *The Home and the World* without reference to the original. But his short stories, being so lyrical and poetic, are more problematic, and with poetry and song even the best translations leave the non-Bengali reader uncertain whether he is really gaining access at all. Far easier, therefore, to focus on Tagore as a thinker, and bring in his creative works only when they seem to reflect or back up his abstract ideas.

⁸ In trying to account for the apparent disjuncture, between Tagore's paintings and literary works, Arzeni concludes that this "must be classed as just one of his many inconsistencies" (2009: 179).

Let me now take two of his creative works, his plays *Bisarjan* (*Sacrifice*, 1890, 1940b) and *Acalāyatan* (1912), try to understand their relationship to Tagore's ideas, consider whether his ideas are sufficient to explain all that is going on in these two plays, and finally determine what gains in understanding would arise if we detached them from his ideas altogether. My choice of these two particular works is rather random: I happen to have read them both recently, the first because I was asked for a scenario (a complete scene-by-scene summary) to be used by Tara Arts, London in a workshop that may lead to a complete new translation and production, the second because I was curious to know the original context of the song *Ālo, āmar ālo* (*Light, my light*), which Tagore selected as poem No. 57 in *Gitanjali* and changed somewhat in its tone and effect in his own English translation. (I will say more about that later.) Both plays seem to me to lend themselves well to the testing of my basic hypothesis in this paper, as by their very nature – their conflicts between characters, the arguments they contain representing different ideologies and points of view – they are unlikely to convey an unalloyed message or a single, unified philosophy.

Derived by Tagore from the first part (and from some later sections too) of his novel *Rājarsi* (1887), *Bisarjan* was first published in 1890 and went through several versions and editions before settling into the text as printed in the *Rabīndra-racanābalī*. (for details, see Pal 1987: 132–133) It has been universally recognized as one of Tagore's most powerful and performable plays, known outside Bengal through Tagore's own (truncated) English version, *Sacrifice* (1917).⁹ It presents the consequences of a decision by Gobindamanikya, King of Tripura, to ban animal sacrifice in the Kali temple in his kingdom. This brings him into conflict with his wife Gunabati, who has been desperately making offerings to Kali in order to bring her the child that she has been unable to conceive, and with Raghupati, chief Brahmin priest of the temple. Jaysinha, Raghupati's adopted son and assistant in the temple, finds himself torn between loyalty to Raghupati and his love for Aparna, a beggar-girl who has sought refuge in the temple and whose distress at the sacrifice of her pet goat inspires Gobindamanikya to issue his edict against animal sacrifice. Raghupati instigates a plot against the King involving the king's younger brother Nakshatra Ray. The overthrow of the King is, however, reversed when Jaysinha sacrifices his own life not only to escape from his torment but also (though this may not be a conscious motivation) to shock Raghupati and the Queen into seeing the cruelty and bigotry of their orthodoxy, and the superior morality and deeper religious insight of Gobindamanikya and Aparna.

It is not difficult to connect *Bisarjan* to Tagore's most deeply held moral and religious ideas, some of them derived from his Brahmo heritage and its rejection of

⁹ I compared the English version with the Bengali original in *Visarjan* and *Sacrifice* (1979: 10–32).

idolatry. In *An Artist in Life: A Commentary on the Life and Works of Rabindranath Tagore* (1967), still one of the best books on Tagore in English and one which I frequently turn to, Niharranjan Ray writes:

If proof were ever needed as to which side the contemporary ideologies in conflict the poet's sympathies lay, Visarjan gave it eloquently and once for all. They were decidedly against hatred and violence, against social and religious bigotry, against superstition and obscurantism, and squarely and committedly on the side of love and humanity, of piety and non-violence, of reason and progress. Incidentally, Visarjan was to be the first indictment of animal sacrifice as sanctioned by Hinduism, and since the indictment took an aesthetic form it proved very effective. The emotional and formal vigour of the drama came directly from the strength of conviction and the depth of feeling of the author. (Ray 1967: 142–143)¹⁰

This is true, and such is the force of the play's moral message that I await with some trepidation the effect of a new production of the play, in these days when God-based fanaticism presents such an international challenge and the appeal of *Hindutva* in India is by no means dead.

But if the main dramatic point of the play is its moral message, then it needs to leave its audience or readers with a feeling that the conflicts that it presents have been resolved. Yes, in the final scene of the play both Gunabati and Raghupati see the light, with Gunabati replacing Kali with her husband as her 'only god', and Raghupati saying over Jaysinha's self-slain body, "This is the last innocent blood in this sinful temple. Jaysinha has extinguished the flame of bloodshed (*hiṃsārakta-śikhā*) with his own blood." The King is able to pronounce: "Sin has gone. The goddess has returned in the form of my *debī* (i.e. my wife)."

But consider the cost of all this. Raghupati – along with the entire religious orthodoxy that he represents – has lost all authority, power and status. Gunabati has lost her defiance and independence of action, adopting at the end a stance of total obedience to her husband – and she still has no child. Jaysinha has lost first his faith and moral bearings and then his life. Aparna has lost the man she loves and – arguably, and depending on how the play is acted – her sanity, with her final invitation to Raghupati – "Come, father" being the last and most puzzling line in the play. Come to what? Has Aparna become the embodiment of the 'true' goddess of love and compassion, as opposed to the vengeful and illusory goddess Kali and thus the goddess that Raghupati, acknowledging her as *jananī amṛtamayī* (Mother that is full of nectar), must now serve? Is she in that case a human being any more, or merely a symbol? At a human level, her apparent replacement of the man she loved by the

¹⁰ Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay in his *Rabīndrajībanī* (1988: 287) quotes similar ideas from Niharranjan Ray's Bengali book, *Rabīndra-sāhityer bhūmikā* (1951).

‘father’ who was, by his bigotry, duplicity and cynicism, directly responsible for Jaysinha’s suicide, seems quite unbelievable. Yet played with sufficient intensity – hysteria? Irony? Ophelia-like madness? – I have no doubt that the departure of Ragupati and Aparna at the very end of the play can, and will in the planned new production, create an indelible effect. It is not an effect that can be reduced to a clear moral message. But in great drama, morality is seldom clear, seldom black and white, but a tangled mixture of the two.

That is what the verse from *Chitralipi* I quoted at the beginning tells us, and the other verse that struck me, about the dark taking form in the heart of the white in order to reveal it, seems equally relevant not to the message of *Bisarjan* but to its dramatic effect.

Consider the moments in the play when challenging, disorientating negatives are presented. Tagore often does this: key moments in his works – moments of maximum turbulence and intensity – often come when he is saying that something “is not”. Sometimes what is false is denied in order to assert what is true. One thinks of the moment in his great poem *Shah-Jahan* in *Balākā* (1916) when he rounds on the emperor for imagining that his dead beloved can be preserved forever in the beauty of the Taj Mahal (“Lies! Lies! Who says you have not forgotten?/ Who says you have not thrown open/ The cage that holds memory?” (Tagore 1985: 80)) Or of a similar turning-point in *Chabi (Picture)*, the famous poem in the same book about the memory of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari, when he says:

kī pralāp kahe kabi?

tumi chabi?

*nahe, nahe, nao śudhu chabi.*¹¹ (Tagore 1942b: 13)

In *Bisarjan*, moments of denial come with both positive and negative effect. In Act 3 Scene 1, when Jaysinha challenges Ragupati to admit that he has manipulated the crowd by turning the image of Kali round to make them think she has rejected them, the Brahmin argues in a speech of violent nihilism that everything in this world depends on falsehood and illusion, that words are not true, writing is not true, images are not true, thought is not true, and that no one knows what truth is or where it is. This sweeps Jaysinha into a ‘shoreless ocean’ of moral confusion in which “There is no truth, no truth, no truth; everything is lies, lies, lies.” That is, of course, a false perception: Tagore certainly does not want us to think that there is actually no such

¹¹ What madness does the poet speak?
Are you a picture?
You are not, not, not just a picture!

thing as truth. But at the end of the play, after the death of Jaysinha, when Gunabati asks Raghupati – her guru – to confirm whether the image of Kali contains the goddess or not, his grief-stricken answers resonate with a shattering force that seems to me too powerful to overcome wholly the play’s message that idolatry is false but divinity is true:

Gunabati: Gurudeb, do not confuse me.

Tell me truly again. Is there no goddess?

Raghupati: No.

Gunabati: No goddess?

Raghupati: No.

Gaunabati: No goddess?

Then who is there?

Raghupati: No one is there. Nothing is there.

In reading these words, I am looking ahead to how they might play out on the stage in a new production for our own age. Tagore’s *message* in the play may not be atheistic, but among the many layers of his great play is a seam of pure scepticism. Any contemporary audience will include a good number of people who do not believe in God at all – any kind of god, whether expressed by an image or icon or not. That layer may well connect more strongly with a twenty-first century audience than Tagore’s desire in discursive writings and his creative works not to deny that God exists, but to redefine what or who God is. His play – and this is true of most of his works – may indeed be saying much more than its apparent ‘message’. And frankly, if what it said was limited to a message, I do not think most people today would find *Bisarjan* either relevant or interesting.

I am not enough of a Jungian to know whether the word ‘shadow’ is appropriate, but for me one of the chief fascinations of Tagore the artist – as opposed to Tagore the philosopher – is that for anything positive, in almost any work of his, a negative can also be found: light has an undercurrent of dark, joy always has a substratum of sorrow. One can argue that such mingling of opposites can also be found in his philosophic writings, which are certainly full of an awareness of darkness as well as light. In this paragraph from an address on ‘Truth’, for example, given in 1924 and included in Volume Four of the Sahitya Akademi’s collected edition of Tagore’s English writings:

It is to the person, who keeps his eyes solely fixed upon this aspect of the world which is an increasing series of changes, that the world appears as delusion, as the play of Kali, the black divinity of destruction. To such a one it becomes possible for his dealings with this world to be superficial and heartless. The world being, for him, an unmeaning progression of things and evolution that goes blindly jumping from chance to chance on a haphazard path of survival, he can have no scruple in gathering opportunity for himself, dealing cruel blows to others who come in his way. He does not suspect that thereby he hurts his own truth, because in the scheme of things, he recognises no such truth at all. A child can tear, without compunction, the pages of a book for the purposes of his play, because for him those pages have no serious truth. (Tagore 1924: 516)

This way of thinking is quite close to Ragupati's nihilism, or to Jaysinha when in Act 2 Scene 3 he first joins in a Baul song about cutting all ties, and then calls on Aparna to come away in a similar spirit, because "O Aparna, you and I are nothing that is true at all – so let us be happy... let us go away for ever and float together over the world like two pieces of weightless cloud in the empty sky!" But the difference is that, in his address, Tagore is telling us about such ideas in order to reject them; in the play, the ideas become part of the fabric of the drama. We cannot forget them or reject them purely because the play's message at the end tells us: they remain with us, as part of our total experience of the play, just as Gunabati's passionate defiance, Raghupati's malicious cynicism, or Jaysinha's tragic suicide will stay with us. In *Othello*, Iago's malevolence is as real – and as lasting in our minds – as Othello's gullibility and Desdemona's innocence. The tragedy cannot be reduced to a moral message about trust or love. Nor can *Bisarjan* be reduced to a message about non-violence and idolatry. Drama, literature, poetry do not work like that, and I suggest it is only the ubiquitous and compelling presence of Tagore's copious discursive writings that encourages us to forget this basic fact.

Acalāyatan is a later play, first published in the journal *Prabāsi* in 1911 (*Āśvin* 1318) and in book form the following year. Derived (though not in any great detail) from a story in Rajendralal Mitra's book of 1882 on *The Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, (see Pal 1993: 224) it is set in a rigidly orthodox ashram whose name 'Acalāyatan' suggests immobility.¹² It is not a tragedy like *Bisarjan*; indeed it seems to me essentially a comedy, though it may be that awareness of its 'message' has blinded some critics to its humour. Niharranjan Ray describes it as "a seriously satirical allegory aiming a frontal attack on our meaningless and antiquated socio-religious rites, beliefs and taboos, in a word, on our absurd Hindu orthodoxies" (Ray 1967: 177). He goes on to complain that it is rather too didactic:

¹² *Acal* (unmoving) + *āyatan* (abode, institution).

No one would object to a ‘message’ in a work of art so long as it is worked out in a creative, that is, in an artistic manner. In *Achalāyatan*, however, the didactic element is so loud and insistent that it affects the workmanship; the social awareness, so real in the context of the times, is so powerful that it obtrudes on the unity of design in the play. (Ray 1967: 178)

It did not strike me as quite like that when I read it, though, as with *Bisarjan*, it is certainly not difficult to relate it to Tagore’s philosophic and religious writings. Prasantakumar Pal links it not only to sermons in *Śāntiniketan* such as *Sāmañjasya* (*Balance*), *Karmayog* (*Karma yoga*) and *Brāhmasamājer sārthakatā* (*The significance of the Brahmo Samaj*) but to poems in *Naibedyā* (1901) including the most famous poem in the English *Gitanjali*, “Where the mind is without fear” (No. 35) with its references to places (unlike the Acalāyatan ashram) “Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.”

The temptation to read the play as a moral tract has been exacerbated by Tagore’s own comments on it, in response to severe criticism by Professor Lalitkumar Bandopadhyay that was published in the journal *Prabāsī* after the play itself appeared there. Judging by Tagore’s lengthy rejoinders, reproduced in the *Granthaparicay* section at the end of the volume of Tagore’s collected works that contains the play, (Tagore 1942a: 504–511). Professor Bandopadhyay had objected to the play’s assault on orthodoxy. Tagore replied: “It is a universal truth that, where rules and ‘rites’ (*ācār*) overwhelm ‘religion’ (*dharma*) with their importance, they block the ‘human heart’ (*mānuṣer citta*). The pain of this blocked heart is the subject of the play,¹³ and as a corollary the ugliness of dry ritualism is inevitably conveyed.” (Tagore 1942a: 505)

Tagore goes on to take particular issue with the Professor’s charge that the play implies the destruction of orthodoxy without anything constructive being put in its place:

You ask what I am proposing. Can ‘just light, just love’ fill human stomachs?
That is, if the discipline of rites and rituals is removed, will man be fulfilled? If that is so, why do we see in history no clear example of it? (Tagore 1942a: 506)

But the writer of *Acalāyatan* has himself decided to ask this same question. Does the Guru of Acalāyatan end with a message of destruction? Does he not talk about building? When Pancak wants to quickly sweep away all controls, does the Guru not say, “No, that will not do – what has been torn down must be built up again in a better way” (Tagore 1942a: 506).

Pancak and his elder brother Mahapancak represent opposed points of view in *Acalāyatan*. Pancak is impatient with learning mantras and carrying out religious

¹³ Tagore actually uses the word *kābya* (poetry) here rather than *nāṭak* (play).

duties, whereas Mahapancak is a master of them. Pancak slips out of the ashram to meet communities that lie beyond the grip of its orthodoxy: the ‘Shonpangshus’, whose cheerful commitment to work is compared by Tagore’s biographer Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay to a Western-style obsession with work for work’s sake, (Mukhopadhyay 1988: 333)¹⁴ and the Darbhakas, a community of untouchables.¹⁵ In their different ways, these two communities offer him an alternative to the stifling regime inside the ashram, but he is not himself a revolutionary, merely a light-hearted teaser of his brother for his strictness, and a mildly anarchic influence on the less studious of the ashram’s pupils.

The cohesion of the ashram starts to break down when a boy called Subhadra commits the heinous sin of opening a window in its wall in order to look outside. The *Upācarya* (Deputy Minister) of the ashram, who is as strict in his orthodoxy as Mahapancak, insists that Subhadra will have to atone for this with an awesomely demanding and complicated penance that will be a deliberate threat to his life. The *Ācarya* or Chief Minister, however, reveals liberal tendencies and puts a stop to the penance, telling his colleagues that the ‘Guru’ of the ashram – who has not been seen there for a very long time – will arrive soon to point the right way forward. The *Upācarya* and his supporters start to machinate against the *Ācarya*, but the Guru arrives before they can complete their overthrow of him. (This is similar to the way in which the overthrow of King Gobindamanikya in *Bisarjan* is aborted.)

¹⁴ Prasantakumar Pal confirms the Western analogy, and says that when a revised version of the play was published in 1918 under the new title *Guru*, ‘Shonpangshu’ was changed to ‘Yunak’, which by its closeness to *Yaban* (a term for a Greek or Westerner, though later falsely applied to Muslims) made the analogy more explicit. (Pal 1993: 227)

¹⁵ As regards the meaning and connotations of the names Tagore gave to these two communities, Ketaki Kushari Dyson comments (private correspondence):

Shona in Skr means ‘red’ (hence *śonita* = blood). Pangshu as noun can be crumbling soil, dirt, dust, ashes, but in Bengali it can also be an adjective meaning ‘pale, ashen’ and is more often used as an adj. than as a noun, while the domesticated form *pāś* is the more common form of the noun (thus *chāi-pāś* = dust and ashes, dirt, rubbish). So the whole word literally means ‘red and ashen’ or ‘red and pale’. Shona (pronounced as end-stopped Shon in Bengali, Hindi etc) is also the name of the river (often written Son in English-language maps), so the compound word could also be broken down as ‘dust/sand of the Shon river’.

From the context of the play the Shonpangshus would seem to be an outcaste tribe living on the margins of society. Perhaps ‘red and ashen’ would point towards an identification with chandalas. There is also a faint suggestion of Tagore’s wry ‘colour humour’.

Darbha is the name of a grass, often identified with the ‘sacred’ kusha grass (the sharp grass referred to in my maiden surname). So it stands for something lowly but sharp, with the potential to become sacred. Darbhaka is also the name of a king or prince. In the play they also seem to be a lowly community with radical potential. Both the Shonpangshus and the Darbhakas are positive forces in the play, as differentiated from the people of the Acalāyatan.

Intriguingly, the Guru when he arrives turns out to be not only ‘Dadathakur’, the free-spirited leader and preceptor of the Shonpangshus, but also the ‘Gōsāi’ or spiritual leader of the Darbhakas. The light and freedom that he brings unites all communities, the orthodox, the foreign and the untouchables.

I only have time here to scratch the surface of this complex play, but what I find particularly interesting and relevant to the argument of this paper is that the composite Guru’s arrival is preceded by thunder, clouds and torrential rain, as well as the violent destruction of the walls of ashram. Then as light pours in, ‘as if the whole sky is rushing into this abode’, the boys of the ashram sing the song to the light that Pancak has taught them – the song that Tagore made into No. 57 in *Gitanjali*, changing the repeated *O bhāi* (‘O brothers’) to ‘my darling’, which give the poem a rather different tone and reference. I have never seen *Acalāyatan* performed, so I can only imagine how the climactic scene of the Guru’s arrival would work on stage, but I feel that its effect would be like dark (the clouds, thunder and destruction) emerging from white (the sky) in order to reveal the white, as in the verse in *Chitralipi* I quoted earlier. The dark would not be dispelled by the white or light, but would remain bound up with our perception of it, just as the horror of Jaysinha’s suicide stays in our minds at the end of *Bisarjan*. The Guru’s gesture towards construction (mentioned by Tagore in his comments) would not, I think, displace the lingering impression of destruction. His arrival would also have a touch of the absurd or (if you’ll pardon the pun) the camp, for Tagore gives the surprising direction, *Yoddhr̥beṣe Dādāṭhakurer prabeś*, “Enter Dadathakur in martial dress.” As he has led the military assault that has smashed the walls of the ashram, the martial dress seems logical enough, but imagine its effect! Whether one conceives it as traditional costume – the martial dress of the Kauravas and Pandavas in Bollywood films perhaps – or as modern battle fatigues, it seems at a stroke to subvert and complicate the idealistic message that, in his response to criticism, Tagore himself claimed he wanted to convey. If we cling to the notion that the play, despite its touches of fun and humour, is essentially ‘a seriously satirical allegory’, then not only the Guru’s martial arrival but also his exchanges with the boys in the ashram would probably seem inept and laughable. But if – as I am sure any modern director would – we were to revel in its absurdities, then the play becomes interesting, ambiguous, multi-layered, and irreducible to any straightforward message.¹⁶ The absurdities of the end of *Bisarjan*, would, I think, be absorbed by

¹⁶ Another question about it that I might consider in a future paper is whether it covertly expresses Tagore’s own worries about his *Gurudev* status and the new kind of educational community he was trying to create at Santiniketan. Prasantakumar Pal (1993: 225) writes about the fears Tagore had that the rules at his school were too strict: his correspondence in the year before he wrote the play reveals fears that he later expressed through the character of the *Ācārya*. I myself would relate the ambiguity of the ‘Guru’ when he arrives to the Vairagi Dhananjay in later play, *Muktadhārā* (1922). I have written elsewhere

intensity, poetry, tragedy, just as the absurdities at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies are absorbed and legitimized. King Gobindamanikya can get away with saying, *Geche pāp* (Sin has gone) because everything is in a state of emotional meltdown. But when the Guru at the end of *Acalāyatan* says something similar about sin, the only way in which it could possibly work would be to find absurdity in the whole play, and to see that absurdity as a rich and fascinating part of its meaning:

All: Guru!

Dadathakur: Come, my dears, come.

First boy: When shall we get out?

Dadathakur: Not long to go – you will soon have to come out.

Second boy: What shall we do now?

Dadathakur: Something has been prepared here for you to enjoy.

First boy: O *bhāi*, these are *jām*-berries – what fun!

Second boy: O *bhāi*, sugar-cane – what fun!

Third boy: Guru, is there no sin in this?

Dadathakur: None at all – it has virtue.

First boy: Shall we all sit here and eat?

Dadathakur: Yes, right here.

Indeed, the more one thinks about it the more one realizes that the mining of Tagore's plays for their messages, whether by critics or by the author itself, is always going to be at odds with the way actors and directors are likely to deal with them, for so much is left undefined. Stage directions are minimal, descriptions of characters are non-existent. His dramaturgy is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the plays of George Bernard Shaw, who certainly did aim to define his characters and convey messages and ideas, and made it absolutely clear in his elaborate stage directions and prefaces exactly what those characters and messages were.

I admire Shaw, but think of him as the ultimate in *prose* drama, whereas Tagore, in his plays, as in everything else, is always a poet. And this brings me to my concluding a point – a basic one and an obvious one that I have often made before and

about how 'Dhananjay is aware of the dangers of his own *gurugiri*.' See *Never not an educator: Tagore as a poet-teacher* (Radice in print).

will go on making in the future. If he was – as he himself repeatedly said – a poet first and foremost, then his philosophizing and preaching, however noble and inspiring it may be in itself, will always be secondary to the poetry. It is not the engine of the poetry, but a by-product of it. To return to the questions I raised at the beginning, my conclusion is that reading his creative works through the filter of his thought has misled us because it has distracted us from the *poetry*. In his discursive writings, Tagore often seems to imply that poetry is a simple thing, an expression of the spirit, an ultimate harmonization of the good, the true and the beautiful. That may be true of the *spirit* of poetry, the transcendent quality that lifts the heart and distinguishes poetry from prose. But it is not true (to use two of Tagore's favourite terms) of the finite forms in which the infinite can be expressed. Poems, plays, songs as *finite* entities are exceedingly complex.

My reading of *Bisarjan* and *Acalāyatan* certainly encourages me to believe that pretending Tagore's discursive writings and explanations do not exist might indeed help us to understand those plays – and many of his works – better. It would bring us much closer to his *poetry*. It would help us to see that he was a thinker not in order to plan, inform or drive forward his creative works, but as a *consequence* of those same works. He thought, because his restless, endlessly probing poetic and creative mind – dedicated always to the truth – obliged him to think, to think about everything, from God to Nature to science to society to politics to education. He knew that the actual truth was always more complicated than anything he could say about it in a lecture, essay or sermon, but was *not* too complicated for the media of poetry, drama, fiction, song or painting. The complex, strenuous 'truth of art' and Tagore's fundamental commitment to it was summed up in a famous poem in *Śeṣ lekhā*, his last book of poems:

satya ye kathin,

kathinere bhālobāsilām –

*se kakhano kare nā bañcanā.*¹⁷ (Tagore 1947: 48)

It may be a daunting prospect, trying to understand and describe the hard truths of Tagore's creative works, and it is always easier to reach for one of the essays or addresses that possibly gave him relief from the demands of his art. But I am certain we will remain forever ignorant of those works if we do not make the attempt.

¹⁷ Truth is hard,
I have loved the hard –
It never deceives.

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The Phenomenal Legacy of Rabindranath Tagore

Ketaki KUSHARI DYSON*

Abstract

Belonging to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an acknowledged classic of their tradition, I grew up reading his books, listening to his music, watching his dance-dramas, and writing poetry under the inspiration of his words. This youthful appreciation of Tagore eventually led to a deeper understanding of his stature as an artist and thinker, but it was only when I entered Tagore studies in a more formal manner that I realized how truly spectacular his achievements were from an international perspective. Tagore was fortunate in that his time, place, and circumstances allowed him to give a good run to the natural versatility and fecundity of his genius. He has thereby secured a rich and diverse legacy for us, which tends to mean different things to different groups of people.

Keywords: Tagore, Bengali, literature, poetry, music, drama, legacy, influence

I happen to belong to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an acknowledged classic of their tradition. I grew up absorbing his influence and trying my hand at writing poetry under the inspiration of his words. In my family, myself and the sister immediately after me had been named by our parents after two of Tagore's favourite flowers, sealing a kind of bonding with his memory. The fact that my first year on this earth and Tagore's last year had coincided was like a sign telling me that the great man had secretly given his blessings to my scribblings.

The first Tagore book I ever read was *Shishu*, the poems for children he wrote after his wife's death. This was followed by the narrative poems of *Katha o Kahini*. I then moved on to *Sanchayita*, the fat anthology of his poems selected by himself; *Galpa-guchchha*, the short stories in three volumes; the Bengali *Gitanjali*, which I got as a school prize at the age of ten; the collection *Mahua*, specializing in love poems, which my parents had received as a wedding present; and the remarkable dramatic poem *Chitrangada*. Later still I discovered novels like *Gora* and *Shesher Kabita*. The

* Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Independent scholar, Kidlington, Oxon, UK. E-mail: ketaki.dyson@virgiliolibro.com

thrill of those discoveries is still with me; I even remember the position in which I used to sit in a favourite cane sofa as I read the two novels at weekends or during school holidays, the mid-morning kitchen smells and street cries mingling with my consciousness. The first two Tagore songs I ever heard were in my mother's voice, sung during moonlit nights, sitting on the veranda, one of which I later translated, so deep was my attachment to this childhood memory. Tagore's dance-dramas came to me thanks to Lady Brabourne College, where I spent two years at the pre-university stage and where I saw them performed. At the age of fourteen I went with a group of Lady Brabourne girls to the Poush Mela festival in Santiniketan, where I had the thrilling experience of hearing the noted singer Debabrata Biswas singing Tagore songs. He was sitting just a few feet away from me, and as is the custom in Santiniketan, at the end of each song the audience exclaimed '*sadhu sadhu*' instead of clapping. I am including these personal details to remind my audience in Ljubljana that Tagore's works came to some of us from childhood onwards like a natural heritage, like personal gifts left to us by the man himself, or as the poet Keats might have put it, as naturally as leaves come to a tree.

Of course this youthful response to Tagore did mature into a deeper appreciation of his genius as I grew older, but it was only after I entered the field of Tagore studies in a more formal way that I realized how truly spectacular his achievements were. Tagore was the most brilliant product of the Bengal Renaissance, and his long life straddled the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth: times which witnessed earth-shaking events and the explosion of new ideas in every sphere of human activity – from the arts and sciences and technology to major social and political movements. His entire life was lived under the aegis of the British Indian Empire. *Pax Britannica* provided a certain stability of background to his social class, giving his genius the space and time and material means to flower. The unlocking of India's past by the researches of the great Orientalist scholars nurtured in him a feeling of pride in his own cultural heritage. At the same time, membership of the native elite class of an international empire internationalized him, enabling him to see the British as the harbingers of important new ideas, who opened India's doors to the West. It enabled him to travel, exposing him to the ideas of the eminent thinkers of his time in other countries, and especially after the event of the Nobel Prize, allowing him to meet and interact with them. He could therefore attempt a synthesis of the best elements of his own heritage with what he could learn from other countries. The experience of the First World War caused him to turn away decisively from the political model of competitive, mutually antagonistic nationalisms and move towards a philosophy of universal humanism. He witnessed the surge of the Indian independence movement, and while he regarded non-violence as the better political strategy for attaining it, he

disagreed with the Gandhian tactics of non-cooperation, preferring cooperation between different human groups as the best strategy for all times. He founded his university with the noble dream of making it an international meeting-place of minds. The artist in him joined hands with a far-sighted social thinker. He believed in self-help, self-sufficiency, development from the grassroots level, and much of the thinking of this lover of nature foreshadows the thinking of the Green movement of our times.

Tagore was fortunate in that his time, place, and circumstances permitted him to become an East-West person and to give a good run to the natural versatility and fecundity of his genius. He has thereby secured a rich and diverse legacy for posterity, which is there for the whole world to claim and tends, quite naturally, to mean different things to different groups of people. Certainly, we should be proud of it and celebrate it, but it is also our serious responsibility to look after this heritage. How best can we do it? What are the different ways in which we can relate to it?

When I try to explain Tagore's greatness to Westerners, I find myself referring to an oft-quoted statement of Goethe's in a different context. Goethe said that one could not appreciate what a human being was capable of achieving until one stood in the Sistine Chapel and looked up at Michelangelo's work on the ceiling. Adapting Goethe's words, I say that one cannot appreciate what a human being is capable of achieving until one knows Tagore's formidable *oeuvre*. But of course in every such achievement it is not just one person delivering the goods on his own. A segment of the achiever's society has always played a crucial role in the story, helping to make it possible. The same is true in Tagore's case, but his legacy is phenomenal because he did so many different things so well and with so much passion, not only writing in every genre, but also composing, directing his own plays, bringing modernism to Indian painting, and founding a school, a university, and an institute for rural development. And he has profoundly influenced and inspired numerous distinguished contemporaries from Spain's Juan Ramón Jiménez and Argentina's Victoria Ocampo to Germany's Helene Meyer-Franck, England's Leonard Elmhirst, and Slovenia's Srečko Kosovel.

Tagore's formidable legacy begins with his actual works: his books, music, plays, dance dramas, drawings and paintings, and the institutions he built, charging them with so much of his love and faith, hopes and dreams – Santiniketan, Sriniketan, Visvabharati. To that we must add his archives: his manuscripts, unpublished correspondence, and similar items. Sadly, due to poor security at Visvabharati, we have recently lost, in one daring nocturnal burglary, a number of these small museum items, including the original Nobel medallion. To those burglars, Tagore's legacy only meant the value of the little bit of bullion they stole. Tagore's drawings and paintings,

because they are mostly done on fragile paper, are both his works of art and a part of his archives, a part of his papers in the comprehensive sense. To preserve his papers we need care, far-sightedness, and the intelligent application of relevant technology. It is not enough to preserve items as in a tomb: scholars must be given access to the storehouse. Books must be kept in print; music must be available for people to buy; his haunting drawings and paintings, which brought the influence of Primitivism and Expressionism to Indian visual art, deserve to be disseminated in digital format and to be listed in a comprehensive *catalogue raisonné*. Why not a gallery of his art on the Internet?

We have a heavy responsibility towards the institutions he founded. The danger they face is that of stagnation, a turning away from the founder's enlightened humanistic ideals, a suicidal immersion in internal politics and in the easy business of dispensing formal qualifications and jobs for ex-students. No institution can survive in a healthy condition unless it grows and evolves, engaging in a creative dialogue with the changing times, innovating and experimenting, attempting what seems difficult *now*, in order to achieve a better result in the future. Tagore's ideas and experiments pertaining to education, rural reconstruction, and international cultural and intellectual exchanges, as enshrined in the institutions he founded, are, by any standard, a heritage worthy to be cherished and shared with all the world, but a more dynamic approach is needed in these campuses to carry on the work he so bravely initiated.

Researchers will necessarily want the freedom to conduct research on him. The nature of research projects will change with the times; lines of inquiry in consonance with our times are to be encouraged, not stifled. And we must always remember that the right to work on him does not belong to insiders alone. As his works receive more international dissemination in the coming years, scholars from all over the world are likely to want to work on different aspects of him, or on issues relating to his reception in different countries. We must welcome all research which gives us a better insight into his life, time, works, and interactions, and allow such researchers access to necessary material. From the campuses housing his archives international scholars will expect an enlightened administration and an openness to modern methods of communication. There must be rights and responsibilities on both sides. In the mid-nineties I had a tough time in securing permissions for the book *Ronger Rabindranath*, which embodies some major research on Tagore's colour vision and its effect on his works, which I did with other scholars. To facilitate the publication of an academic book on Tagore in Bengali, with an art component, the estates of Western artists generously waived reproduction fees for their copyrighted material, and gave their permissions in a matter of days, while for the very same publication Tagore's own estate charged full fees and took one whole year to grant the formal permission in two

separate steps. It was quite an ordeal. But now that the copyright has expired, the situation may be better. People embarking on a serious project on Tagore which is a little off the beat may find that there is initially some opposition, or a negative reaction, from some quarter or other, but they should never give up because of that. If one is patient and persistent, it is usually possible to complete a project, for everywhere there are some wonderful people who are cooperative.

In the presentation of his work through the performance arts, performers have to be granted some freedom of interpretation. In that way his works will flow through our times as a living tradition that continues to fire and inspire us, instead of becoming a collection of precious items locked up in a box. Tagore valued creativity, and likewise we should value creativity in those who perform his works in front of the public. Life would be dull if only boys were allowed to take on the roles of women in Shakespeare's plays. It was so in Shakespeare's own time, but it is not a custom that has to go on for ever. From time to time Western composers are likely to want to set some of Tagore's work to music, in their own styles, as they did in the past, and they should be free to do so. William Radice helped to develop a libretto in English from a poem he had translated, which was set to music by the composer Param Vir, to become the fascinating opera *Snatched by the Gods*.

We are in an age of mass culture, dominated by the mass media. People pay lip service to the classics, but read them less and less. Tagore's texts are certainly not being read as much as they deserve to be read, even by Bengalis, though films have brought a few of them to a larger public. To disseminate his books amongst those who do not read Bengali, we need to encourage the work of able literary translators. It is through the art of literary translation that the classics of one language become the heritage of all the world. Ideally, such texts should be translated directly from the original language, but in many cases in the real world, unless an intermediate version is used, nothing will get translated at all, so the intermediate version has to be reliable. Tagore needs to be translated into several languages to reach his potential audience even within India. One hopes that he will be translated into the other languages of India directly from the original, for that way he can reach his widest possible audience in India. Through the medium of English, he can only reach the English-reading elite. I am uneasy about the way English now dominates the translation scene in India. It discourages direct cross-fertilization between the Indian languages. To encourage the other language groups to translate him, Bengalis need to set an example themselves by learning other Indian languages and translating into Bengali the literary treasures available in those languages. At present, they are not doing enough in this respect. Multilingual India with its rich storehouse of literatures has the potential for becoming

an exemplary workshop for literary translation. India should celebrate her linguistic diversity, not crush it.

Among diasporic Bengali communities living abroad, English translations can be of value in reaching out something of Tagore to the second generation, who usually cannot read serious literary texts in Bengali. The same holds true for other diasporic communities from the subcontinent. In some programmes in Britain, I have read out my translations of Tagore songs first, then a singer has sung them. Non-Bengali members of the audiences have expressed great delight in being able to follow the meaning of a song at last, which has enhanced their appreciation of the music as a whole. Song-lyrics, being relatively simple in structure, can, when translated, help to bring the music over to an audience who do not follow the original language. Nowadays when an opera in a foreign language is presented in Britain on television, it is common to provide subtitles. In a live performance, lines may be presented on an electronic screen above the stage. This is called 'surtitling'. These visual aids have increased the appreciation of opera from other European languages. Translations of song-lyrics do increase the appreciation of vocal music from a language not known to us. They also whet our curiosity about the whole cultural tradition behind it. I myself became attracted to Spanish as a language by following the translations provided on record sleeves when listening to Spanish songs. In different parts of India, Tagore's songs could be recited in the language of the region first, followed by the songs sung in the original Bengali.

The potential is also great for bringing more complex poems to a new public through the combination of a dance-sequence and a recitation of the text in translation. Two British-based dancers did this with two of my own Tagore translations. Piali Ray of Birmingham presented a beautiful dance-sequence in the New Jersey Rabindra Mela of 1993, based on my translation of the poem *Parishodh (The Repayment)*. In London in 2000 Bithika Raha did the same with my translation of the dramatic poem *Karna-Kunti-Sangbad*; in fact I translated this poem at her special request.

But the definition of what constitutes Tagore's heritage has to be broadened further. The modern Bengali literary language is itself, in some important respects, a legacy from Tagore. By taking off from where he had led it, the post-Tagore writers enriched Bengali prose and poetry further from the thirties onwards. They built on the foundations he had laid, and Tagore lived long enough to see this new generation emerge, welcoming them. In a profound historical sense, therefore, our wider Tagorean heritage includes the achievements of the post-Tagore writers. This is something that the Old Guard of Tagore devotees often failed to grasp, even in the recent past, setting up a false opposition between Tagore and his literary successors. But by nature's law the Old Guard generation are now disappearing. In song-making

the snobbery has sometimes been even worse, with the Old Guard failing to realize that the spirit of Tagore, himself an innovator, lives on in the creative experiments of the moderns. Just as Tagore himself was profoundly influenced by the Bauls in his song-making, so also without Tagore Kabir Suman, Nachiketa, Anjan Dutta, or Mousumi Bhowmik of our times would not have emerged. These singer-songwriters of today are his successors. From poetry and drama to music and painting, we would not be doing things the way we now do, if Tagore had not given these activities tilts in certain directions. Had he lived a little longer, he would have undoubtedly tried his hand at making films also. He was a Renaissance man, and that urge to have a go at everything is also his legacy. Many of us have been inspired by his example, telling ourselves that if he could do it, we could too.

To discharge our debt to Tagore's legacy in the new century we have to support the writers, artists, thinkers, and activists who are carrying his torch forward. I myself feel very deeply that by writing in Bengali I repay Tagore the debt I owe him. He was one of the early shapers of my sensibility. By writing in Bengali I remain affiliated to the effort to carry Bengali writing forward. Writing in one's mother tongue may seem no big deal – until we ponder the realities of our times, when so many Indian writers are vying with one another to write in English and capture the global market. I have been in diaspora for many decades, but continue to write in Bengali and take great pleasure in it. I try to bring my diasporic life-experiences to this language and to make creative experiments with forms and genres. The language *does* matter, because packed in it are those values and those ways of looking at the world which identify us as Bengalis.

I had fondly hoped that with the new era of Tagore translations ushered in towards the end of the last century, the stature of his language abroad would improve, that there would be more curiosity about what else is written in it. Sadly, that has not really happened. Only those Indians who write in English get known abroad. I have been a British citizen since 1965, but though I am now regarded as a meaningful Bengali writer of my generation by both mainstream and diaspora Bengalis, I can expect no support from either the academic or the arts establishment of Britain for any book I write in Bengali.

Within India language politics has become a problem. Obviously the subcontinent needs link languages, but the term 'regional language' is beginning to signify an inferior status. Squeezed between the hegemony of English in the elitist circles and the dominance of Hindi in film and television, writers in the other mother tongues are often feeling marginalized. The English-language media of India do not, as a general rule, review books written in the native Indian languages. If today I write a book on Tagore in Bengali, no matter how path-breaking it may be, it will not be reviewed in

an English-language paper, not even in Calcutta, though if I am lucky, I may be interviewed about it. To be reviewed in such a paper the book has to be in English. What can one say about this kind of neo-colonialism?

In 1997 after the book *Ronger Rabindranath* (to which I have referred before) was launched in Calcutta, a television journalist had the bright idea of interviewing me and my husband, who had also been part of the research team as a scientific consultant. We gave an entire evening to her project and were assured that the English-language interview would be part of cultural news coverage from Delhi. Alas, Hanif Kureishi arrived from London and stole the limelight, and our carefully recorded interview was never broadcast! We could not compete with an author who wrote only in English! Viewers were not given a chance to hear one line about a major research project on Tagore spanning half a decade. How are we going to make Tagore a genuine part of the pan-Indian heritage if India's media have this kind of neo-colonial attitude?

Tagore's name has become a sacred national symbol, but becoming a symbolic figure is a curse for a creative artist or thinker, for he is then treated with idolatry. People pay him homage as to a figurehead, but pay little heed to the actual details of what he had said and believed. This is happening right now and is the last point I shall make. Tagore was a far-sighted social and political thinker who knew that India's weakest point was in the high degree of stratification and hierarchization of her society. The dance-drama *Chandalika* delivers a powerful humanistic message in this context. In a prophetic poem written a century ago and included in the Bengali *Gitanjali* Tagore said emphatically that those whom we keep backward will drag us back. In text after text he said that the humiliation and marginalization of the underprivileged had to end if India wanted to move forward in the modern age. India has not yet taken this project fully on board, thus generating tragic insurgencies and futile, retaliatory counter-insurgency tactics from the state. In West Bengal, this cycle of violence is traumatizing a young generation of intellectuals and activists who see the present political set-up as having sold out to global capitalism and consumerism, sacrificing the interests of the most vulnerable: the dalits, adivasis, and small farmers. They know that Tagore's cherished ideals are being abandoned. He had always believed in development from the grassroots up, and had preferred consensus, cooperation, and reconciliation to violent confrontation. No matter how much lip service is paid to Tagore as an iconic figure, they see this as a betrayal of his legacy.

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Wherever We Find Friends there Begins a New Life: Tagore and China

Jana S. ROŠKER*

Abstract

Tagore made a deep impression upon the Chinese culture and society. In 1923, the Jiangxue she 講學社 (Beijing Lecture Association) invited Rabindranath Tagore to deliver a series of talks. The Jiangxue she Association was established in September 1920 and represented one of the many institutions that came to life in China during the May Fourth Movement. Since then, almost all of his works in English have been translated into Chinese. He came to China just when the latter was beginning her Renaissance and his visit certainly gave a great impetus to this new movement. His poems of *Stray Birds* and *The Crescent Moon* have created new styles of prosody in the new Chinese poetry. A Crescent Moon Society (for poetry) and a Crescent Moon magazine were started immediately after this event by Hu Shi 胡适 (Hu 2002: 90). During his visit, Tagore raised two basic questions, one about the relation between tradition and modernity, and the other about the usual identification of modernisation with Westernisation. Since the May Fourth Movement, China has also been concerned with these questions and Chinese intellectuals have come out with different answers. These questions, however, were important not only for China but for India as well. Such debates and the revaluation of various answers represented the most important condition for a consolidation of new ideologies, which formed a political basis for the changing societies of both countries.

Keywords: Tagore in China, Chinese translations, intercultural interactions, modernization, westernization, the May 4th Movement

1 Introduction: China and India at the Doorstep of the 20th Century

During the first half of the 20th Century, most of the Asian countries were confronted with specific issues of colonialism and modernisation within a framework of new,

* Jana S. Rošker, Full professor of Sinology and head of the Department of Asian and African Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia. E-mail: jana.rosker@guest.arnes.si

globally defined economic and political trends (Meissner 1990: 11). In China as well as in India, these issues naturally afforded a rethinking of traditional values (Yu 2001: 22). The requirements of the new era, determined by changes in elementary social conditions, demanded their reevaluation. This reevaluation represented the most important condition for a consolidation of new ideologies, intended also to form a political basis for the changing society and for its new economy (Rošker 2008: 27). A look at the cultural and intellectual responses to colonialism in Asia, especially in India and China shows this contrast to be conspicuous. Colonialism successfully determined the terms of discourse in India but failed to conclusively shape the discourse in China. Let me begin with a short exploration of the reasons behind this divergence in the struggle over terms of discourse in India and China.

After the decline of the Empire and the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, Chinese thought developed in the spirit of confronting Western ideas while simultaneously attempting to modernize the autochthonous Chinese philosophical tradition (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121). Most of the Chinese intellectuals of the period followed the aim to adopt Western technology (applicability, 用) while simultaneously preserving China's own essence (體). In addition to this group, whose approach can be epitomized by their slogan “preserving the Chinese essence and applying the Western sciences (中學為體, 西學為用)”, two more radical currents began to take shape among the Chinese intellectuals of this period. The first of these advocated a complete elimination of the Chinese tradition and complete Westernisation of culture and thought (全盤西化), while the second advocated a renewal and rebirth (復古主義) of the tradition in the form of a new, leading culture (中國本位文化).

Politically, the period of the First Republic was still characterized by a profound crisis and general instability. Under the guise of parliamentary democracy, governmental policies were determined by authoritarian ambitions and power struggles among rival generals. With the start of WWI, the Chinese became witness to the bankruptcy of European political theories as the major Western powers entered into a protracted spiral of devastation and bloodletting. These events naturally dampened the previous Chinese enthusiasm for progressive European thought, and those who had seen in Western philosophy and science the most advanced stage of human civilization were profoundly shaken by this development (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121).

The demands for a sweeping reform of thought and culture that had emerged from the various rejections of the outmoded Confucian tradition (Chan 2000: 250) finally exploded in the so-called May Fourth Movement (五四運動). This movement, which began on May 4th, 1919, with student demonstrations in the Square of Heavenly

Peace in Peking¹, would come to play a crucial role in the cultural, political and ideological modernization of Chinese society. Its main publication *The New Youth* (新青年), which had been founded by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 in 1915, soon became the most influential journal of its kind for a new generation of Chinese intellectuals. The spirit of the new China was expressed in its demands for the abolition of obsolete Confucian thought and conservative structures, which were seen as hindering the free development of individuals and society. It also advocated equality between the sexes and free love², and the end of economic and political domination by the privileged classes. For the New intellectuals, these demands formed the basis and precondition for a more equitable distribution of the material and ideal resources of Chinese society. All these demands were naturally connected to the need for fundamental changes in the general mentality. *New Youth*, for example, published its articles in colloquial language (白話), thereby giving a major impulse to the gradual abolition of ancient Chinese (文言) as the only acceptable form of public writing. Ancient Chinese was an archaic language which differed radically from modern Chinese, and could only be learned through the lengthy and costly process of a classical education. The exclusive use of ancient Chinese, which was only accessible to the tiny minority of the privileged classes, resulted in the vast majority of the Chinese population being completely cut off from any form of written culture, even if one were not completely illiterate. The so-called ‘colloquial movement’ (白話運動) thus became a cornerstone of the new Chinese culture. This spiritual offspring of the May 4th Movement first manifested itself in the flowering of the new literature, which was produced by the so-called New intellectuals and deeply influenced by Western literary forms and canons. This new literature differed greatly from traditional literary production, not only in terms of language, but also in its contents and subject matter (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121).

In India, however, the situation was completely different. British rule in India claimed the role of a ‘civilizing mission’. It established institutions of the state which included civil service, judicial magistrates, police and clerks for managing the organization of society. It introduced European educational system to promote European ideas of arts and sciences. Imposition of English language through the educational institutions and operations of governmental machinery and especially in the realm of culture and media finally shaped the terms of discourse in favor of the interest of the colonial power. Indigenous institutions of politics, economy and culture

¹ The direct cause of this demonstration was the decision of the Versailles conference to cede the Chinese Shandong province to Japan.

² These demands did not signify a sexual revolution based upon promiscuity, but only the free choice of marriage partners, as opposed to traditional weddings based upon agreements between different families or clans.

were by no means ideal. They were also arenas of struggle as evident in the course of many uprisings and cultural and religious reform movements. But the colonial regime subdued these struggles and declared its view of the world as modern, scientific and rational, and thus a bearer of advanced civilization. That it had a specific class, race and ethnic basis and was subject to struggle in Europe itself was not conveyed to the colonial society.

The struggle against the colonial imposition continued to erupt from time to time in India but it lost the battle each time. After the May 4th movement and especially through the writings of Lu Xun and others and through the political struggle during the anti-Japanese War, the centre of discourse was moved in the direction of the common people of China.

Unfortunately, in intercultural research, it is still common to project elements of the contents and forms of discourse largely determined by the dominant political (and thus also economic) power upon the object being considered (Mall 1996: 23). Despite the tendency towards openness and an interdisciplinary approach, the discourses of modern science and the humanities are still predominantly determined by the paradigmatic network which serves the interests of the 'New World'. The relation between India and China, however, has been unique in the history of the world. The fact that for thousands of years, not a single conflict between the two immediately neighbouring countries erupted is in itself almost inconceivable. Moreover, instead of displaying brutal force, India and China had exchanged their cultures and civilizations, religions and philosophies. (Shen 1999: 1)

Somebody may attribute this to the sky-pointing barriers of the Himalayas. But no explanation would be complete if it ignored the peace-loving nature of the two great peoples in the East, which is the real and fundamental reason underlying the fact. For aggression is the symbol of barbarism, which has long been cast away in these two nations; and without this brutal symbol, clash can never occur. (Shen 1999: 1)

2 Tagore's Visit to China

Evaluating the impact of these intercultural contacts and exchanges has proven difficult. Unfortunately, the periods when Fa Xian 法顯, Xuan zang 玄奘 and Yi Jing 義淨 went to India, and Kasyapa Matanga, Kumarajiva and Bodhidharma came to China, were not everlasting. After the Song Dynasty, the Buddhist culture in China was hampered by the interposition of superstition and degenerative forces, while its existence on the other side of the Himalayas had long been discontinued. Given the fact that the link between the two countries at the time chiefly depended upon

Buddhism, and taking into consideration that Buddhism had died out in India, the Chinese culture was severed from the Indian one. In the later centuries, specific political developments additionally prevented any close interactions between India and China. It is therefore not surprising that in the last six or seven hundred years both countries knew very little about each other in any respect. Their old friendship was not resumed until 1924, when the Indian poet and thinker Tagore came to China (Shen 1999: 1).

The *Jiangxue she* 講學社 (Beijing Lecture Association) invited Rabindranath Tagore in 1923 to deliver a series of talks. This Association, established in September 1920, was one of the many institutions that came to life in China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement (Tang 2002: 18). Its main objective was to invite foreign scholars and to arrange lectures by them for Chinese intellectuals (Das 1989: 1)

The Association had earlier invited John Dewey (1859–1952), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Hans Driesch (1862–1941). They spoke to a limited number of scholars, but their lectures were more or less well received and Russell certainly made a great impression on Chinese intellectuals. The invitation to Rabindranath Tagore, however, created an unprecedented uproar which eventually culminated in strong hostility against him as well as against Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), President of the Association, by the radical student circles and some ultra left-oriented political leaders. (Das 1989: 1)

Thus, interest in Tagore notwithstanding, there were voices in China – and many in number – that clearly were not impressed by the global stature the poet had by then attained. It was a sentiment that did not come as a big surprise, for the visit quickly revealed the existence of a group of Chinese intellectuals not quite ready to accept Tagore as the voice of his country owing to the perceived passive role he had adopted in the struggle for Indian independence from under the British colonial rule. And how did the Bengali poet deal with such questions? He told one gathering of Chinese men of letters that he was first and foremost a poet; that he was not a philosopher or a prophet. He had obviously been riled by what he thought were pointless attacks on his ideas of life. And it was men like Mao Dun 矛盾 who made him feel that way. The Chinese wrote in the journal *Juewu* 覺悟 (The Awareness): “The poet-saint of India has arrived at last. No sooner did the noble poet dressed in a flowing saffron robe and a red cap set foot in Shanghai, the gateway of Western imperialism, than he was welcomed with thunderous applause.” (cf. Sun 2007: 112)

In spite of several conflicts, he made a deep impression upon the Chinese people, especially on the intellectuals (Sun 2007: 89). He loved China and was loved by the Chinese. In his works, Tagore presupposed the universal nature of all forms of learning. This presupposition is also evident in his views on the confrontation with

Western thought, and he was one of the earliest exponents of intercultural relativism, stressing the need to overcome culturally determined prejudices and valuations in intercultural discourses. His search for most reasonable interactions between different discourses was much more complex and subtle than it first appeared. Since his first visit, almost all of his works in English have been translated into Chinese, one after another. He came to China just when the latter was beginning her Renaissance and his visit certainly gave a great impetus to this new movement. His poems of *Stray Birds* and *The Crescent Moon* created new styles of prosody in the new Chinese poetry. (Shen 1999: 1) A Crescent Moon Society (for poetry) and a Crescent Moon magazine were started immediately after this event by the late Mr. Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 and Dr. Hu Shi 胡适. During his visit, he toured all the big cities in China to the extreme south, and wherever he went, he was cordially welcomed and anxiously asked to deliver speeches on Indian culture and civilization. During this visit, he negotiated with Chinese cultural leaders on exchange of scholars and professors (Shen 1999: 1). In his speech *China and India*, he made it very clear that the central aim of his visit was to re-establish peace and friendship between the two countries.

The most memorable fact of human history is that of a path-opening, not for the clearing of a passage for machines or machine-guns, but for the helping the realization by races of their affinity of minds, their mutual obligations of a common humanity. Such a rare event did happen and the path was built between our people and Chinese in an age, when physical obstruction needed heroic personality to overcome it, and the mental barrier a moral power of uncommon magnitude. The two leading races of that age met, not as rivals on the battlefield, each claiming the right to be the sole tyrant on earth, but as noble friends glorying in their exchange of gifts. Then came a slow relapse into isolation, covering up the path with its accumulated dust of indifference. Today our old friends have beckoned to us again, generously helping us to retrace that ancient path, obliterated by the inertia of forgetful centuries and we rejoice. (Tagore 1989: 3).

Sources of information about the Chinese response to Tagore are divergent and varied. A few publications from the Visva-Bharati at that time, however, offer valuable information about the poet's sojourn in China. Four years after the death of the poet, Kalidas Nag edited a slender volume, *Tagore and China* (1945). Leonard Elmhirst and Kalidas Nag, who accompanied Tagore to China, both maintained diaries – they are, however, still not available to general readers. The most detailed and valuable work on the subject can be found in the revised version of the doctoral thesis of Stephen Hay, an American scholar. It was published under the title *Asian Ideas of East and West* (1970). The main idea of this author is that Tagore went to China to propagate an ideal of the Orient, an ideal of one Asia and the agenda of spiritualism which could, in his opinion, serve as an effective alternative against Western materialism. According to Stephen Hay, Tagore did not realize that the idea of the Orient was a gift of the

western Orientalists, which was more a myth than reality (Said 1995: 98). All Asian countries, especially the present and former colonies, had their own versions of the ‘Orient’ and Tagore’s idea of Asia was different from that of the Chinese. According to Hay, Tagore’s idea of a spiritual rejuvenation of Asia was critically doubted by most Chinese intellectuals. The younger ones rejected his ideas with crude vehemence and the elder ones with gentle indifference (Das 1989: 2).

Thus, various interpretations of his visit differ in ideological, as well as in respect to their content. Thus, it is very difficult to present a clear and objective overview of this event. First of all, it is by no means easy to locate all the lectures that Tagore delivered in China, since most of them are available in abridged or in distorted form. Some of them were reproduced in the *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* and *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. The majority, however, are to be found in Tagore’s *Talks in China*, published soon after his return from China in 1924 (Das 1989: 2). His impressions of the great neighbour come across with a fair deal of enthusiasm:

Can anything be more worthy of being cherished than the beautiful spirit of Chinese culture, that has made them love the things of this earth, clothe them with tender grace without turning them materialistic? They have instinctively grasped the secret of the rhythm of things – not the secret of power that is in science, but the secret of expression. This is a great gift, for God alone knows this secret. I envy them this gift and wish our people could share it with them (Tagore 1989: 10).

Some of his researchers (cf. Das 1989: 3) allege that Tagore’s knowledge of China was not confined to a superficial acquaintance with Confucianism alone. During his visit, he also wrote: “I had in my mind my own vision of China, formed when I was young, China as I had imagined it to be when I was reading my Arabian Nights, the romantic China, as well as the China of which I had caught glimpses when I was in Japan” (Tagore 1989: 4).

Before departing to China, Tagore told the journalists that when he received the Chinese invitation he felt that it was an invitation to India herself, and as her humble son he felt he had to accept it (Das 1989: 4). He hoped that his visit would re-establish the cultural and spiritual links between the two cultures: “We shall invite scholars and try to arrange an exchange of scholars. If I can accomplish this, I shall feel happy.” (Tagore 1989: 5)

These words were not only pleasantries; they came perfectly naturally to the man who had always nourished great love for China and who visualized a centre of learning where the whole world would meet as if in a nest (Das 1989: 4).

3 Reception of Tagore's Literature in China

According to Sisir Kumar Das (1989: 3), many articles that appeared during Tagore's visit to China in different newspapers and journals are difficult to locate, some of them are already lost or destroyed. A volume entitled *Lun Taige'er 論泰戈尔 (On Tagore)*, containing many articles on Tagore written by various Chinese scholars and political activists during the period between 1921 and 1924, published by the Institute of South Asian Studies of the *Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 中國社會科學院* (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) at Beijing in 1983 provides interesting materials. Das points out that the long article by Ji Xianlin 季羨林, the Director of the Institute and an eminent Chinese Indologist, also the President of the Comparative Literature Association of China, seems particularly valuable as it gives a scholarly analysis of the factors responsible for the controversy surrounding Tagore's visit. According to this author, the main reason for the conflict and its implications was the inherent duality in Tagore's work and philosophy (Das 1989: 3). On the one hand, Tagore was doubtless an anti-imperialist and intensely patriotic; but on the other, he was also a religious poet and a mystic (Das 1989: 3). His poems and songs did inspire the Indians in their struggle against foreign rule, his poems and short stories indeed breathed a universal spirit, but Chinese intellectuals also strongly felt that his writings were full of escapism, which they considered to be a dangerous and misleading path, unable to lead oppressed people out of the current crisis.

Still, Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924 must have been a moment of realisation for him. There were those in the country, scholars as well as students, who saw in him an august presence already made famous by the Nobel Prize for literature. Soon after the news of the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore reached China in 1913, various Chinese scholars described Rabindranath Tagore as a great poet and thinker, wholeheartedly dedicated to his motherland and to the welfare of the mankind (Das 1989: 2). Many young Chinese who were studying in the USA, England and in Japan, were very familiar with his writings. Many eminent Chinese thinkers of that time, such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Hu Shi 胡适 and Xu Zhimo 徐之末, also read Tagore in English when they were abroad. Naturally, many young Chinese, who stayed in their own country, but could read English also came under the spell of the *Crescent Moon*.

Tagore's works were translated into Chinese as early as in 1915 and his first translator was Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China. In the second issue of the influential journal *Xin Qingnian 新青年* (New Youth), edited by him, Chen published translations of four poems from Tagore (Nos. 1, 2, 25 and 35) with a note that he was a mystic but also a mentor of the Indian youth. (Das 1989: 3)

In 1916, the oldest and most widely circulated Chinese journal *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (*The Eastern Miscellany*), also published one of the lectures of Tagore delivered in Japan. This talk might have created an impression in China that Tagore was a sharp critic of modern Western civilization and a man of spiritual temper (Das 1989: 3). But on the other hand, other aspects of Tagore's thought could not be totally unknown to the Chinese reading public as:

several young writers of promise had translated his poems, short stories and plays. *Gitanjali* was translated, though not the whole of it, and published in various journals (apart from the *New Youth*) by Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎, Zhao Jingshen 赵景深, between 1920 and 1923. In 1923 Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎 published his translation of *The Crescent Moon*. Its publisher, the Commercial Press, came out with a second edition of this translation the following year which competed with another translation of the same book by Wang Duqing 王獨清 published by the Taidong Press of Shanghai. (Das 1989: 4)

Translations of Tagore's stories began to appear in Chinese magazines at the latest from 1917. *Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌 (Women's Magazine) published two stories of Tagore, *Home Coming* and *Vision* in 1917. *Chuti* was translated three times before Tagore visited China, and *Kabuliwala* was translated six times; four of the translations appeared in journals before 1924. At least four plays – *Chitra*, *Sannyasi*, *The Cycle of Spring* and the *Post Office* – one novel (*The Home and the World*) and two volumes of essays (*Personality* and *Nationalism*) were available in Chinese translations (Das 1989: 4).

Although it is difficult to obtain detailed information about all the translators, some of them, such as Wang Duqing 王獨清, Xu Dishan 許地山, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, and Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰 (more well known as was Mao Dun 茅盾), belonged to the most promising writers of the time. Wang Duqing (1898–1940), one of the founders of *Chuangzao she* 創造社 (The Creation Society), has studied in Paris and was a fine poet. Xu Dishan 許地山 (1893–1944), primarily a scholar and famous essayist, studied Indian philosophy first at Oxford and then he visited India in 1925 to study Buddhist philosophy and Sanskrit. Many of these literati were professors at the best Chinese universities. Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), for example, belonged to the founders of the *Wenxue yanjiu hui* 文學研究會 (Society for the Research of Literature). He was also the chief editor of *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (The Fiction Monthly) and belonged to the most popular writers and a scholars of Chinese literary history. It is important to remember that *Xiaoshuo yuebao* with which Mao Dun 茅盾 and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 were associated, published at least eight

stories, three plays and a large number of poems of Tagore – many of them translated by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, – before 1924. (Das 1989: 4)

According to Tan Chung, it was not at all surprising that Chinese poetic geni should have focused their attention on Rabindranath Tagore. The main reason is to be found in the fact that Tagore won the Nobel Prize for his masterpiece in poetry. His *Gitanjali* and *The Crescent Moon* won ovations in the poetry circles across the world, including Britain then considered to be the leader in modern poetry. Besides, this Indian poet was a fellow-Asian, therefore his symbolism was easier to understand and was more attractive to Chinese writers.

Tagore's example of being a writer of a humble, defeated culture raised to the fore-front of world literature was all the more inspiring to those who were searching for a new form of Chinese poetry in order to create a new Chinese culture so that the nation could keep abreast with the modern world. Moreover, Tagore's visit to China in 1924 and the 'Tagore wave' created by this visit also contributed to the writers' enthusiasm in emulating Tagore (Tan Chung 1989a: 1).

4 New Friends and New Prospect for the Future

With Tagore's visit to China, much interest was aroused both in China and in India for the revival of Sino-Indian cultural collaboration, and many private, as well as official agendas were realised in this direction (Shen 1999: 3). Here, we have to mention the exchange of research scholars between the two countries, the establishment of scholarships by the Chinese government in India for Indian students to study Chinese history and culture, the opening of departments of Indian languages in at least three universities in China, Sir S. Radhakrishnan's visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese government in 1945, and the exchange of missions of various subjects of science (notably, agricultural and medical).

If one day the cultural relationship between our two countries can reach the same extent as in the glorious days when Buddhism entered China, let us not forget Gurudev, for he was the pioneer and the very symbol of this revival of international cultural collaboration (Shen 1999: 3).

According to Sisir Kumar Das (1989: 18), Tagore raised two basic questions when visiting China. The first question referred to the relationship between tradition and modernity, while the second was connected to the usual identification of modernisation with westernisation. China was deeply concerned with both questions, especially since the May Fourth Movement. Many Chinese intellectuals came out with different answers or solutions. The majority of the new intellectuals were very critical of their own Confucian tradition; in their opinion, the essence of the ancient Chinese

civilization was responsible for China's material degradation. Therefore, it was most natural to them to question its relevance. If, on the other hand, materialism was so degrading, as claimed Tagore, his audience had a right to ask for the ways and means to reduce human suffering.

Tagore did not give any practical programme, nor could he convince anyone how to reconcile the spirit of the ancient culture with the forces of modernisation. He only intensified the crisis by raising questions. These questions could be ignored for some time, but not for all time. These questions were important not only for China but for India as well. "I have done what was possible – I have made friends", said Tagore before leaving China (Das 1989: 18).

He surely continued to do what was possible for him and devoted much of his energy in the last years of his life to furthering Sino-Indian contacts. Thus, *Cheena-Bhavana* (Institute of Chinese Language and Culture) was founded in 1937 at Visva-Bharati University. It flourished under the guidance of Tan Yunshan 譚雲山, who was a native of Hunan 湖南 province and a school-mate of Mao Zedong 毛泽东. In 1940, one of the most well known Chinese artists, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 came to Santiniketan.

Tagore urged Indians to learn the Chinese language and history and painting to live up to the spirit of the symbolism he witnessed in China: an Indian monk accepting offerings from a Chinese (Das 1989: 6).

It is surely of utmost significance that six months before his death in 1941 (Das 1989: 20), Tagore celebrated the day he was given a Chinese name in a poem concluding with the sentence: "Wherever we find friends there begins a new life."

Such recognition of the possibility to co-create and to co-form our world is, as indicated indirectly by Rabindranath Tagore, closely linked to the relations of which we all form a part. This recognition, however, is not conditioned only by the understanding of relations as such, but also by the conscious acceptance of relationality as the basis of human existence (Rošker 2008: 389). The permanence and the transience of relations which make up our lives can be accepted as a crucial axiological challenge facing us. Their heterogeneity, multifariousness, reliability and questionableness can be seen to lie at the core of our changing the world, and thereby imparting meaning to it. In such insights one can detect the courage to change our common world. In this sense the new, challenging life can also help us confront differences by transcending the frameworks of deep-seated, ingrown prejudices.

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From 82-year-old Musicologist to Anti-imperialist Hero: Metamorphoses of the Hungarian Tagore in East Central Europe

Imre BANGHA*

Abstract

Tagore's reception in various countries in East Central Europe has long been the subject of academic studies. Making an attempt to observe the similarities and dissimilarities of Rabindranath's reception in these culturally very rich countries the paper investigates two understudied phases of Tagore's reception in the region, namely the initial puzzlement at the announcement of the Nobel Prize in 1913 and the repercussions of world politics on Tagore's image in the early years of Indian independence, which coincide with the early years of Communist rule in East Central Europe.

Keywords: Tagore, Hungary, reception, East Central Europe, communist block, orientalism, translation

1 Tagore in East Central Europe

The cultural encounter between 'East' and 'West' has been the subject of an enormous amount of scholarly work in recent decades. Most studies, however, investigate British, French and German 'Orientalisms' while the cultures of East Central Europe, roughly the Eastern part of the European Union, with languages hopelessly decorated with diacritics and inaccessible for most of the academic cosmopolis, have received relatively little attention in post-colonial discourse. However, this colourful region, often perceived to be part of the Orient during past centuries, has much to offer to a student of cultural encounter or of reception history.

* Imre Bangha, Lecturer in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, The Oriental Institute, Oxford, UK. E-mail: imre.bangha@orinst.ox.ac.uk

The response to Tagore in various countries in East Central Europe has long been the subject of academic studies done mostly in a national framework. (See for example the writings of the Tagore in Other Lands (Radhakrishnan 1961: 297–367); as well as Petrović 1970; Wojtilla 1983; Shurbanov 1989; Bose 1956, 1991; Neacșu 1998; Walter 2006; Nikolaev and Nikolaev 2009 etc.) In 2007 I also produced a book that included investigating Tagore's connection to Hungary (Bangha 2007). In this article, partly relying on some recently discovered material, I am revisiting the question of Tagore's reception in a broader light. Using the high amount of 'national' Tagore studies I intend to encourage my colleagues to move forward from the national framework by taking into consideration the similarities and dissimilarities of Rabindranath's reception in these geographically small but culturally very rich countries.

A cursory look at the national studies shows that Tagore's popularity in the region came in three waves between which there were periods of amnesia. The Indian poet was discovered right after the Nobel Prize in 1913 and celebrated as a person who heralds the end of Europe's cultural hegemony and widens the cultural horizon of the Europeans. During the years of the First World War not much attention was given to Tagore.¹ In the years following the war he was celebrated not just as an outsider who denounces the warmongering of the Europeans but rather as a 'Sage, Prophet and Poet' with a message from the spiritual East. His visit to the region in 1926 was the last phase of a popularity that hardly any intellectual enjoyed in Europe. In sharp contrast with the early 1920s, he fell into oblivion in the region up until 1955.² The third wave of popularity came when Rabindranath was rediscovered in 1955 under entirely different circumstances. At his centenary in 1961 he was celebrated as an anti-imperialist hero in the communist block. The interest since then has been moderate again.

The following figure illustrates the popularity in the region in terms of Tagore-books published up to 1961.

¹ The staging of his *Post Office* in October 1915 in Zagreb is an important exception.

² One should, however, mention that in countries such as Bulgaria and Latvia many new translations appeared between 1927 and 1930.

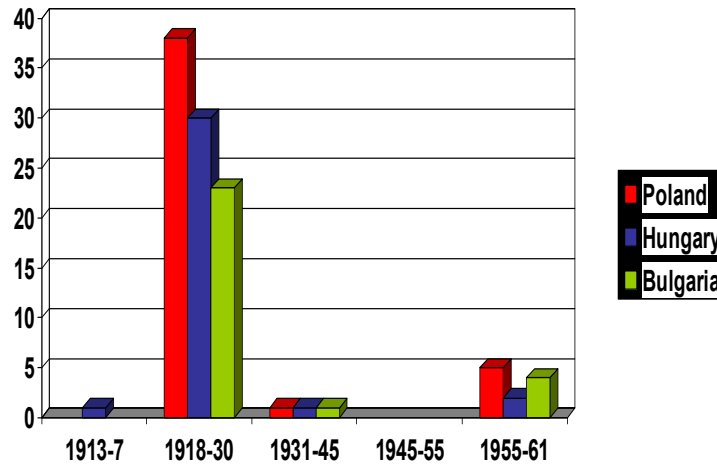


Figure 1: First editions of Tagore books published in Poland (44), Hungary (34) and Bulgaria (28) between 1913 and 1961.³

As can be observed from Figure 1 the initial enthusiasm for Tagore in East Central Europe was rather modest in the three countries examined here but they made up for their lack of interest in the twenties. The amnesia at the wake of World War II is in sharp contrast with the Tagore cult after the First World War. However, Tagore witnessed a renaissance there after 1955.

2 The First Reactions

In this chapter, focussing on Hungary, I am going to talk about some of the first reactions to Tagore's Nobel Prize. The Indian poet had been so unknown at that time that the first articles about him misspelled his name, misread his age (52) and confused him with the musicologist Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore (1840–1914),

The Nobel Prize for literature, this year, was awarded by the committee to Rayen Dranatto Tagore. Tagore is a musical composer and a historian of music. He lives in Calcutta and he is eighty-two. (*Világ* 14 November 1913 and *Pesti Hírlap* 14 November 1913)

Although the next day the correct details arrived it is not without interest to reflect on this short piece of news. European discourse on the Orient at that time was not

³ The list of Hungarian books was prepared by me. Statistics for Poland rely on Walter 2006, while that of Bulgaria on Nikolaev and Nikolaev 2009.

inclined to acknowledge that Asia can possess a living modern culture. As has been spectacularly emphasised by Edward Said to the global public in his *Orientalism* the ‘Orientalist discourse’ worked with such stereotypes about the Orient as timeless or old, effeminate, anarchic etc. The image of an 82-year-old Oriental fitted well into the stereotypes of the age. Moreover, Tagore, who just a few years ago looked like a middle-aged man full of strength, accepted the role of the old prophet Europe cast upon him, even if at times he felt uncomfortable in it. (Radice 2005)

After the initial reports of the Nobel Prize, Hungarian intellectuals reflect on the change in the scene of world literature initiated by Tagore's Prize.⁴ Two weeks after the announcement a leading Hungarian poet, Mihály Babits, published the prose translation of three poems from English and wrote an article about Tagore, whom – following Yeats – he compared to St. Francis of Assisi (Babits 1913). Another leading poet, Dezső Kosztolányi, without reading much from Tagore, meditated on the end of the hegemony of the European culture (Kosztolányi 1913). After the Nobel Prize the strange-sounding name of Rabindranath Tagore started to feature in Hungarian life. So much so that a way of testing drunkenness became to pronounce the poet's name: the person who was able to do it was proven not to be drunk.⁵ Soon, in 1914 Ferenc Kelen, the Hungarian translator of Schopenhauer and Oscar Wilde, produced a volume of Rabindranath's poems in Hungarian (Kelen 1914).

As we are going to see, it was not easy for Rabindranath to be detached from the aged Calcutta musicologist. Sándor Kégl (1862–1920), the Vienna-, Paris-, Oxford- and Cambridge-educated professor of Persian at the University of Budapest, wrote an article on Tagore. According to Kégl the poet's father, Mohun Rabindranath Tagore, was a “well-learned nobleman who is expert in music and who laid the scientific foundations of Indian musicology.”

Kégl's article (Kégl 1914) was produced with mixed feelings. Kégl was among the first Hungarians to acknowledge that Indian literature was produced not only in Sanskrit but also in modern languages such as Hindi, Hindustani and Bengali. According to him “Bengali literature is in such a boom that one and a half thousand works appear on it every year” (Kégl 1914: 450). Along with this he also mentioned that the English and European influence is present in the Bengali novels and that Bengalis are full of national pride. Kégl's writing shows that Bengali culture was so unknown to the Hungarian public that even one of the leading Orientalists was full of mistakes and prejudice when he wrote about it. According to Kégl, Rabindranath

⁴ The English translation of the five early responses, those of Babits, Kosztolányi, Gerő, Kégl and Karinthy, will be published in Bangha (in print a). A detailed analysis of these responses is in Bangha (in print b).

⁵ *Világ* 5 March 1914. This custom survives till the present day.

Tagore was the author of *Bande mataram*, “the Sanskrit poem which gathered entire India under one flag” (Kégl 1914: 453). Kégl recognised the meeting of East and West in Tagore, however, he was sceptical about its outcome saying that “the Eastern mind accepts Western ideas with difficulty and when it takes them, it assimilates them badly” (Kégl 1914: 452). Although he was far from enthusiastic he had to account for the Nobel Prize saying that Tagore was not a bad poet since “there is sincerity in his poetry”. Tagore’s mysticism was praised but also considered a limitation in his art,

It is obvious that he did not read European poetry in vain, yet he is following the way of his ancestors. Although it gained enrichment from the West, Tagore is strongly permeated by the spirit of old Indian poetry. He is almost completely occupied with that one strong feeling, the deepest possible for an Easterner: religious mysticism. This makes the reading of his poems tedious for a European, and they will mostly be enjoyed sporadically in anthologies. (Kégl 1914: 453)

Kégl’s last idea is puzzling at first reading. Due to their mysticism why should Tagore’s poems be best enjoyed in anthologies? This preconception of the Hungarian Islamologist is a late echo of the approach of the influential French Arabist, Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838). According to de Sacy Eastern culture cannot stand the touchstone of European taste and therefore it needs to be presented and interpreted for Westerners, and because of its vastness it can only be approached in chrestomathies (cf. Said 2003: 128–129). According to Edward Said “every major Arabist in Europe during the nineteenth century traced his intellectual authority back to him” (Said 2003: 129).

The dominant literary movement of the first half of the 20th century was the one marked with the name of the literary magazine *Nyugat* (Occident) that endeavoured to modernise Hungarian literature by taking inspiration from the best achievements of modern Western European literature. Even if the leading exponents of this movement, Babits and Kosztolányi, were enthusiastic about Tagore in their first reactions, their generation did not pay much attention to Eastern literatures; East of Hungary only Russian literature formed part of their literary horizon. The Western orientation of this powerful movement can be taken as one of the reasons responsible for the emerging negligence or antipathy towards Tagore.

The most interesting piece of the emerging Tagore-antipathy is to be found in the writing of Frigyes Karinthy, the best Hungarian literary parodist of the 20th century. Karinthy has produced excellent caricatures of the leading literary figures of his time and later collected them into the volumes of *Így írtok ti* (*This is how you write*).

In his short piece *Pályázom a Nobel-díjra* (*I am applying for the Nobel Prize*)⁶ (given in the Appendix) Karinthy produced a parody of Tagore. Although in the English translation of the *Gitanjali* there is hardly any Indian word or cultural reference, the Hungarian humorist explains the success of Tagore's poems by the exotic nature of his poetry.

3 Popularity and Amnesia between the Wars

The second and the highest wave of Tagore's popularity came shortly after the First World War. This period of his fame has been exposed to relatively more research than the preceding and the subsequent phases and I am not going to discuss it in detail. It is, however, interesting to compare the first two phases of popularity. Unlike the third wave in 1956–1961 that markedly disconnected itself from the approach in the twenties, the second peak in the early twenties remained unselfconsciously linked to the still remembered reputation of Tagore established in 1913–1914.



Photo 1: Tagore listening to Gipsy music in Budapest in 1926.

Notwithstanding the continuity, several major differences can be observed between the two phases separated from each other by war and reputation. In 1913–1914 only Tagore's Nobel Prize and poetry was commented upon – and it was mostly done by leading progressive writers. An extraordinarily high number of his books representing a wide range of genres were made available in 1921–1922 mostly by indifferent translators who saw in Tagore a business opportunity. Earlier Tagore was celebrated as a mystic writing about the human soul's search for God but in the twenties he also became a prophet, who could show the way forward to an entire

⁶ I was not able to find the first publication of this text. The reference to Tagore's recent Nobel Prize indicates that it must have been written in 1913 or early 1914. The text I consulted is from Karinthy 1921.

civilisation devastated by war. After a short phase of enthusiasm in 1913–1914 the self-assured orientalism returned to discourses about Tagore. In the twenties, a disillusionment within European culture did not allow orientalist discourse to creep in so easily. There were also a small number of writers from Hungarian territories lost in the war who found in Tagore a powerful critic of Western warmongering and imperialism. As has recently been demonstrated by Ana Jelnikar, the positive approach to Tagore of people who felt oppressed by Western Imperialism was an example of what Patrick Colm Hogan calls situational identification, “where we develop an immediate sense of intimacy with someone as we intuit shared feelings, ideas, references, [and] expectations.” (Hogan in Jelnikar 2008: 15; see also Jelnikar’s paper in this volume.)

This phase of extraordinary popularity was followed by a period of amnesia starting in the late twenties. It is however, important to mention that this amnesia also had remarkable exceptions. In 1937 Karel Čapek’s radio-broadcast *Message of Goodwill* from Czechoslovakia was addressed in Asia to Tagore and in 1942 the Polish-Jewish children’s author and pedagogue Janusz Korczak staged Tagore’s *Post Office* in the Orphan House of the Warsaw ghetto – just a few days before their evacuation to an extermination camp.

An important document of this period is Rózsa Hajnóczy’s voluminous book, the *Fire of Bengal* (1943), about her three years in Santiniketan as the wife of a visiting professor.⁷ The *Fire of Bengal* is a mixture of novel and travelogue and notwithstanding the author’s superficial acquaintance with Bengali culture the book has become the most popular Hungarian book about India and ran into eleven editions between 1943 and 1985. With a superimposed love story it gives a realistic account of the life in Santiniketan in the early 1930s. The author presents Tagore as a tired old man. The presentation of the poet as a vulnerable human figure would have been inconceivable in the 1920s. However, due to the popularity of the book this image has been presented to generations of Hungarian readers. With its sense of wonder at India, its exotic romanticism, mysticism and critique, the *Fire of Bengal* superseded Tagore’s own works in Hungarian as the most widely-read book about India.

4 Reception in the Communist Block

Another little-studied aspect of Rabindranath’s reception relates to his treatment in the Communist block after the Second World War. Right after the war there was a chance

⁷ The book has also been translated into English by Éva Wimmer and David Grant and edited by William Radice 1993.

for Tagore to emerge again as a figure that condemns European warmongering and helps people in their spiritual quest. The fact that he was included into the prestigious *Vigilia anthology of religious poetry* first published in 1947 and a booklet by Count Beatrix Széchenyi written in exile and published in 1953 hint towards this possibility:

If one studies Tagore's literary or philosophical works, in almost every chapter one finds Brahmanical or Buddhistic aspects... Not only do stars of ideas shine from Tagore's works, but also the pure wellsprings of a religious soul burst up as invincible geysers. They spring up from the depths to the heights. Those who want to bathe in these geysers gain cure for their illnesses. (Széchenyi 1953: 14)

During the first years of Indian independence (1947–1955) India was viewed with suspicion from the communist regimes. At that time the same ideas were repeated from various countries. One such idea was that India was not independent. “In 1949 Nehru declared India to remain part of the British Empire” (Makai 1952: 24) as it was declared in Budapest in 1952, while the following lines appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1953, “We firmly hope that this long-suffering and exploited nation achieves its independence... the day of the final liberation of the people of Bengal is approaching” (Blaskovics and Majumdar 1953: back cover). During these years Nehru was denounced as “the representative of the Indian high bourgeoisie” who “allied up with imperialism against the Indian workers and farmers” (Makai 1952: 23–24). The “deeply reactionary” Gandhi “glorified cow-worship and religious fanaticism and his foremost aim was to stop the strengthening of the class-consciousness of oppressed Indians” (Makai 1952: 23). The Bengali freedom-fighter Subhash Chandra Bose was none other than “one of the Japanese agents.”

There was, however, positive attitude towards the Communist Party of India and towards the Progressive Writers Association. Notwithstanding its negative dictatorial aspects it was the communist literary policy that discovered Indian realism and started translations long before the West discovered postcolonial writings. It was at this time that the first non-Tagore translations from modern Indian languages appeared. Now translations were done not simply from English or German but also from Russian and sometimes also from the original. The highly developed Indian realist writing fulfilled propagandistic purposes. They served as a more dramatic illustration of the suffering of the oppressed than contemporary Western writing could produce.

During these years Tagore was forgotten and that is why a Hungarian translation of Bengali short stories from Czechoslovakia introduces itself with the following words:

This is the first time that the Bengali nation, a nation of sixty million people, can express itself after centuries of oppression... For the first time Hungarian readers can have a work translated from Bengali and for the first time we can hear a

realistic message about the life of the Bengali people and about their fight for independence. (Blaskovics and Majumdar 1953: back cover)

The primacy of Bengali writing among the literatures of India was still asserted:

Bengali literature is beyond doubt the first among the literatures of the many modern languages of India. It is not only because of its extensiveness and technical accomplishment, which is greatly due to the elasticity and pleasing musicality of the Bengali language, but also because of the fact that Bengali poets and writers were the pioneers of Indian intelligentsia and the destroyers of the radically idealistic notion of literature and of its petrified traditions... (Blaskovics and Zbavitel 1953: 7)

Although Tagore was not translated during this period, he was not attacked as Gandhi or Nehru had been. The only voice in favour of Tagore in Hungarian translation was that of the Czech Dušan Zbavitel working in Prague:

This has already been proved by the writers and poets of the last century lead by Rabindranath Thakur, who was a fierce enemy of petrified traditions and of fascism. He was the friend of the Soviet Union, and a vociferous critic of British imperial oppression. (Blaskovics and Zbavitel 1953: 7)

In the mid-fifties, however, Soviet relationships with India underwent an unexpected change. The establishment of Indo-Soviet friendship was marked by Khrushchev's visit to India in 1955. Together with the political reconciliation came the rediscovery of Tagore as an emblematic figure of India's anti-imperialistic struggle. In the Hungary of 1956 Tagore had an outstanding career. In February a representative exhibition of modern Indian paintings included Tagore's art, in May an appreciative article was published about him in one of the leading dailies and in October a bust of his was installed and an alley was renamed after him in Balatonfüred near the sanatorium where he was recovering in 1926. The attitude established in 1956 was maintained at the Tagore centenary when Tagore, the progressive, anti-fascist writer was celebrated:

The way that Rabindranath Tagore later found viable was not the cloud-adventure of transcendentalist denial of life. He again made a commitment against colonial tyranny and threw his previously acquired knighthood down at the feet of the British. During a visit to Germany and Italy Rabindranath Tagore recognised with disgust and dread that Fascism was the greatest danger threatening mankind and leading to war. At the same time his visit to the Soviet Union made him a friend of the Soviet people... In his articles and poems he protested against Fascist aggression in Abyssinia and China... Tagore had come a long way from the Brahmanical thought to realise the only possible way for the writer, the artist to materialise his dreams about peace was only by joining the international front of people with his talent, with his enthusiasm and with the persuasive force of his art. (Franyó 1961: 8)

Some new translations of Tagore's poetry appeared presenting him as the poet of the workers. The following one is the retranslation of the Hungarian version of the *People at work (Orā kāj kare)*⁸:

Although their power grew enormous
Coincidence helped and later
The people cut through with united force
The dark web of colonies.

This fettered word is over for ever;
And in spite of useless rumbling of weapons
We take our people to the great perspective
Of centuries, where it will shine forth.

That never shirks — always, day and night,
For long centuries has been living on his work.
Glory to our workers! We will never
Forget how much suffering there was! (Franyó 1961: 8)⁹

Writing under strict censorship Tagore's love for freedom could also be evoked in coded messages against the hegemony of Marxist ideology:

The unquestionably pure, upright and lofty thoughts of Tagore are permeated by the idea of peace, mutual respect and understanding. He raises his ideas against blind, vindictive and partial rationalism... we should quote the words of the heroine of his novel *Gora*, 'It must not be expected that people are forced to renounce their faith, ideas, or community just in order to be together with people who are different from them'. (Csertői 1961: 5)

⁸ The original is poem Nr. 10 in *Ārogya (Orā kāj kare)*, which came out as Nr. 121 in the English *Poems* (Tagore 1943: 204–207. The Hungarian version by Zoltán Franyó was published in *Kisalföld*, the daily of the town of Győr (4 July 1961, p. 8).

⁹ Translated into English by I. Bangha.

5 Conclusion

Tagore's reception is approximately similar in most countries of East Central Europe. In this article I tried to examine some moments of reception in Hungary in view of a broader regional context.

In 1913 Rabindranath surprised European readership as an Oriental Old Man heralding the end of Europe's cultural hegemony. The initial enthusiasm lasting only for a few months in Hungary, when leading writers wrote enthusiastically about him, gave way to perplexity and then to oblivion. In the 1920s Tagore became a prophet with a spiritual message showing hope to a civilisation immersed in materialism and drenched in blood. In the 1950s he became an anti-imperialist thinker with a progressive social message.

The fluctuations in Tagore's fame show how vulnerable the reputation of the first bestselling modern Asian poet was to European fashions and to ideologies. At the same time, the fact that Tagore's oeuvre lends itself to interpretations so different from each other shows the truly universal nature of the Indian poet's writing.

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Appendix

Frigyés Karinthy: I am applying for the Nobel Prize

I can write without any fear that I am applying for the Poetry Prize of the Nobel Foundation and I can tell in what capacity I intend to apply. The committee in all probability does not know Hungarian. These days the committee only knows the Hindu language since they have given the Nobel Prize to the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore who was in this way declared to be the greatest poet of the world.

I have been eager for the Nobel Prize since my early childhood and my poems have been published under the pseudonyms Petőfi, Heine, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck and others. I imbibed my poems with that universal human what's-it-called that was expected as a condition by the founder of the Nobel Prize. I have tried in all living languages but I did not get the prize. Instead of me, Rabindranath Tagore, the Hindu poet, received it.

– Why did the Hindu poet receive it? – you are asking, respected madam. To what extent does this Hindu poet represent my or your sentiments, respected madam? Or those of the European gentlemen who decided, as a committee, to give him the award? Well, respected madam, I am going to explain it. Here is a wonderful poem by Rabindranath,

When I first climbed on the tamarix-tree in my childhood, my little heart was still like an akaju-boabob, on which the drugho-bird is chirping.

But now it is not the drugho-bird that sings in my heart but the great Mahadó-Biskája and it says: pivi-pivi.

I beg your pardon, respected madam, for a minute. Madam, you are asking the slightly perfunctory question, what the hell this slosh is? After all, this is not a poem; it has neither rhyme nor rhythm. And all considering, what on earth is this punk? I have to anticipate that the committee received these poems in English translation. And if Hindu poems are written like this, then they are like this. And why is this poem so beautiful and why did those gentlemen like it so much they awarded it the prize? Look here, respected madam, the beauty of this poem is that it has got exotic aroma.

And what does exotic aroma mean for us? Exotic aroma means that one has never in his life heard such words as ‘tamarix, boabob and Mahadó and that one is used to relishing poems in an entirely different way. One is impressed only by rhyme and rhythm. From all of this one can deduce how weird those people must be, those Hindus who rack their brains to produce such things. Well, respected madam, weren't

the deepest cords in your heart struck by the wonderful idea that when the poet climbed the tamarix-tree only the drugho-bird was chirping, but later the great Mahadó himself. When you were in love, when you were sad, when you were happy didn't you ever think with enthusiasm of the boabob? You didn't? I am deeply surprised.

But why am I talking so much. I am going home to work since my wife keeps staring at me with a strange look, ever since this Rabindra... dranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize. She has already announced in a dry admonishing tone that at the time of the announcement of the next Nobel Prize she would be in desperate need of two hundred thousand Swedish Kronas so I had better calculate our budget accordingly.

Here are a few experiments to submit... Here is my *Papuan Dreams* cycle which I am sending to the Nobel Academy tomorrow. If you allow me, I'll read one out for you

When I glimpsed you

There was a metal ring made of crixcraxo-wood
in your pierced nostril.

How tanned you got in the sun!

And you were almost white

How tanned you got in the sun!

You pofokatepe,

You pofokatepo.

True, it is nuts if one hears this and knows I wrote it. Nonetheless, I am sending it in with a Patagonian stamp and will sign it as Buaóbuo-Tsingula Papuan poet. You will then see how beautiful it will immediately become and how much it will impress those Nobels. How much charm, how much primitive strength, how much exotic fire and rough poesy it will possess... If only I could tell you all this. Then you could say that I had already told you that we would sometime come across this poem in English translation and it would be translated from English even into Hungarian... and perhaps I myself would then like it.

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Reception of Tagore's Work in Croatia¹

Klara GÖNC MOAČANIN*

Abstract

Tagore became popular in Croatia soon after he received the Nobel Prize. During the subsequent decades his fame spread in different waves. Mostly it did not depend on the artistic value of his works but was subject to external circumstances. Tagore's popularity reached its apogee in 1926, when he visited Zagreb. The interest in his creativity has persisted till the present day, as can be concluded from a number of published articles dedicated to his work.

Keywords: Tagore, Croatia, reception

Only a year after Rabīndranāth Tagore received the Nobel prize, the Croatian philosopher Pavao Vuk-Pavlović (1894–1976) translated his *Gītāñjali* into the Croatian language. It was one of the first translations after Tagore's own into English, and as far as I know, Andre Gide's into French, published in December 1913 in *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Vuk-Pavlović's translation was published serially in Zagreb's daily journal *The Morning Leaf* over a week in January 1914, to be published as a book in the same year with an introductory note by the translator.

Pavao Vuk-Pavlović also translated Tagore's play *Chitra*, staged in Croatian National Theatre in 1915. There were only three performances, and in 1927 one radio broadcasting. The translation was published in 1940. It is not clear whether the translator worked from Tagore's English translation or a German one published in 1914, or he may have combined the two. The famous Croatian composer Krešimir Baranović (1894–1975) wrote the music for the performance and the main characters were played by well-known actors. The public and critics were satisfied, but not so the famous Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981). In his journal *Davni dani*

¹ This article is greatly indebted to the article of Sveto Petrović, see bibl.

* Klara Gönc Moaçanin, Senior lecturer in the Department of Indology and Far Eastern Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia. Email: 29wisteria@gmail.com

(Bygone days) on 21 September 1915, at 3 p.m., while sitting in the Botanical gardens, he wrote:

I bother myself. Rabin-Dranath-Tagore. Alfons Verli. He directs *Chitra*. He makes out of it an Uraufführung in Agram. With all the rapture for Upanishads and Rigveda, Tagore, who with this suggestive picture of the East, India, Asia, the Ganges, Budha, reads as though full of spices, tunefully, crossing over to a quasi-lyric monotony, which slowly becomes bothersome like tropical rain, and then starts to irk more and more. What kind of reading is this? For snobs? Or is it that I do not understand it at all? (Krlježa 1915)

Whether Krlježa had read Vuk-Pavlović's translation or attended some theatre rehearsal, we do not know. But obviously, Tagore was not one of his chosen authors. Still, one may ask whether this staging of *Chitra* was not the first in Europe.

Pavao Vuk-Pavlović also translated two of Tagore's plays: *Malini* and *The King of the Dark Chamber (Raja)* – these translations remained unpublished.²

These first translations inaugurated Tagore's reputation in the former Yugoslavia, a reputation which came in three waves. The first wave came after the news of the Nobel Prize and it weakened during the 1st World War. One of Tagore's rivals – and Tagore was quite unaware of the goings-on in Stockholm – was Peter Rosegger, a German patriotic author and a symbol of Drang nach Osten, today completely forgotten, and unpopular in Croatia at that time. When the news came that Tagore won the prize, he was attacked in the German press and for that reason in Croatia all the sympathies went to Tagore. It was Christian intellectuals in particular who welcomed the Indian poet with enthusiasm, discovering some affinity with what they thought was Tagore's mysticism. Only very few of Tagore's admirers tried to understand his *Gītāñjali* as a literary work, and even so they tended to see in his poems predominantly words and feelings of a mystic in a way kindred to the symbolists of the time.

The second wave was sparked off after the end of the 1st World War and was sustained until 1921, with the interest for the poet resurging again in 1926, when Tagore came to Zagreb for a short visit. The liberal intellectuals were the ones now most interested in the poet, seeing in him a spiritual guide for a new civilisation which should replace the European one. Tagore's most famous work for this particular wave was his book *Nationalism*, translated into Croatian in 1921 by Antun Barac. Popular was also his novel *The Home and the World*, thought as a literary extrapolation of *Nationalism*. *Gītāñjali* was no longer in the foreground; instead *The Gardener* under the title *Gradinar* translated by the Serbian Jew David S. Pijade gained in popularity,

² I owe this information to his late wife Dr. Lelja Dobronić, who presented me with both manuscripts.

translated also into Croatian by Iso Velikanović in 1923. Tagore's *The Home and the World* was translated by an anonymous translator in Zagreb in 1922 and published serially, to eventually come out as a book in Miroslav Golik's translation in 1944. From Tagore's *Sādhanā* three essays were translated in 1923.

Tagore was not accepted by what one might call a wide-ranging public. In 1924, Ivo Blažević, a Catholic writer, tried to reject in his article Tagore's pseudo-mysticism.

One can easily conclude that the interest for the author was not connected with Tagore's literary value and most of the writers ignored him with the exception of the Slovenian writers Oton Župančič and Alojz Gradnik and the Croatian poets Tin Ujević (1891–1955) and Dragutin Tadijanović (1905–2007).

During his European tour, Tagore came to Zagreb from Hungary, where he had undergone medical treatment (Balatonfüred). During his two days in Zagreb he stayed in the Hotel Palace and gave his lectures in the Croatian Musical Conservatory hall. He was supposed to give his lecture only once, on 13th November, but due to exceptionally high interest he was asked to repeat his lecture the next day. He spoke in English but recited his poetry in Bengali. Pavao Vuk-Pavlović, his first translator in Croatia, was present at the lecture. Tagore signed Pavao Vuk-Pavlović's personal copy of his own Croatian translation of *Gītāñjali* (1914). In his article *Tagore in Yugoslavia* Sveto Petrović relates the events in Zagreb thus:

... On the morning of November 13th he arrived in Zagreb by train from Budapest. During a stroll in the city he was attracted by a shop exhibiting the products of folk handicrafts; he found the motifs of the embroideries extremely similar to the Hindustani ones, and bought a number of pieces. In the evening he lectured to the packed hall of the Zagreb Conservatory; it is difficult to ascertain the subject of the lecture – none of the numerous press reports mentioned it – but it seems it was broadly equivalent to the lecture on modern civilization he was to give two days later in Belgrade. Anyhow, the audience was enthusiastic; in particular, it warmly greeted the recital of his poems (from *The Gardener*), so he had to repeat it. The whole show lasted for a little more than an hour. As the interest was great and many people were left outdoors, Tagore repeated the lecture next morning. A part of the evening lecture was translated, but the translation was dropped as it irritated the poet. (Petrović 1970: 13)

After Zagreb, Tagore went to Belgrade and by 17th November he was already in Sofia. Tagore's stay in Zagreb was applauded in the press; there was no criticism, yet something was amiss. Sveto Petrović again:

Commercial papers made it the news of the day rivalling each other in thoroughness of information about Tagore's dress, his appearance, his countenance, about the people who came with him and his own wonderful ecstasies that started regularly at three each morning. In the periodicals numerous more intelligent and equally sympathetic accounts of his visit were published.

Discordant voices were hardly heard. Still, reading carefully between the lines of these accounts one may find out that a feeling of uneasiness was present; that only courtesy prevented some unpleasant words from being said. (Petrović 1970: 14)

The poet Dragutin Tadijanović remembered listening to Tagore in 1926, so that years later, for a small gathering devoted to the memory of Tagore's anniversary in 1981, he wrote a poem:

He had hair and beard as white as a fleece of a lamb,
And my hair was black as the wing of a raven,
While I have been watching him and listening,
As if in the mountain a small brook has been tumbling down
from stone to stone,
Until it would rest in a wide field
And in the silence joined the stream of a glittering river.
My hair today is white like the fleece of a lamb
And in my heart even now his silvery voice resounds.³ (Tadijanović 1981)

Tagore's visit to Europe at that time was not a fortunate one. Following his encounter with Mussolini, which was used for fascist propaganda, he went to Horthy's Hungary and after his trip to the former Yugoslavia continued on his tour to Boris's Bulgaria. There can be no doubt that initially Tagore had not the slightest inkling of fascism, and that many of the unfortunate events surrounding his visit and negative feelings about him were due to the fact that Tagore could not understand what was politically really going on in Europe. Another detrimental factor to the poet's reputation was that the organization of his travels was left to the impresarios for whom commercial assets were of key interest. In Zagreb cards with his signature were sold and the entrance fees for his lectures were unusually high. Tagore's impresarios tried to make the event more exotic and attractive to the fashionable society, involving also the head of the Theosophical Society in Zagreb. Tagore must often have felt the artificiality of the

³ "Imao je kosu i bradu bijelu kao vunu janjeta/ A moja je kosa bila crna kao krilo gavrana/ Kada sam ga gledao i slušao/ Kao da je u planini šumorio/ Bistri potok rušeći se s kamena na kamen/ Dok se ne bi smirio u širokom polju/ I u tišini se pridružio toku blistave rijeke/ Moja je kosa danas bijela kao vuna janjeta/ A zvonki njegov glas i danas odjekuje u mom srcu." He wrote the poem while participating at the round-table honouring Tagore's 120th birth anniversary, held in Croatian Writers Union in 1981. Published in the newspaper Vjesnik, 20.5.1981. (translated by Klara Gönc Moačanin)

atmosphere surrounding him, though he seems to have written nothing about his stay in Zagreb.

It is easy to notice that Tagore's popularity did not depend on his literary or his contemplative quality, which also explains why it simply vanished after his short stay. This phenomenon was not unique to Croatia but happened elsewhere in Europe. One can also add an objective reason for this dwindling of Tagore's literary fame in the West related to the problem of the language of the translations and the quality of translations, but this would require a separate treatment.

During 1930s and 40s Tagore was not in vogue in Croatia, but in 1954, with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement and with the establishment of political connections between the former Yugoslavia and India, there came the third wave of Tagore's popularity. *The Gardener* is popular again and in 1961, on the occasion of Tagore's birth centenary a new translation of *Gītāñjali* by the poet Vesna Krmpotić comes out (republished in a new edition in 1980). Even so, Tagore's *The Wreck* and again *The Home and the World* attracted more interest from the Croatian reader than his poetry.

In a big public library in Zagreb (*Gradska knjižnica*), Tagore was among some fifty most frequently read modern writers during 1959 and 1960, and *The Wreck* was one of the most widely read books.

As already mentioned, in 1981 there was a small round-table discussion dedicated to Rabīndranāth Tagore. The famous Croatian composer Bruno Bjelinski (1909–1992) played his compositions inspired by some *Gītāñjali* poems. Furthermore, a small exhibition of Tagore's paintings was held and I made some introductory remarks about his visual language. Satyajit Ray's film on Tagore was also performed.

In 1983, Vesna Krmpotić also published translations of some of Tagore's later poems. A new translation of *The Gardener* by the established Croatian translator Marko Grčić appeared in 1994. Some articles were published: in 1982 Ružica Čičak-Chand wrote about Tagore and his influence on the work of the poet Tin Ujević; Mislav Ježić published an article about Tagore's philosophical views in 1989; in 1991, Zdravka Matišić wrote about the supposed meeting of the Croatian writer Ivana Brlić Mažunarić with Tagore in Zagreb in 1926.

During these last decades, I have tried to rouse more interest for Tagore in Croatia. In 1981 I published an article on his life: *In the memory of the poet Rabīndranāth Tagore*. As I have never been able to fully understand why he was so criticised for his prose works, I wrote an article entitled *An apology which it is not: Rabīndranāth Tagore as a novel-writer and Sanskrit prose tradition*. In 1991 I put together an hour's long radio broadcast dedicated to his memory on the Croatian radio programme 3,

entitled simply *The poet Rabīndranāth Tagore* (the text for the show was later published in *Književna smotra*). I have translated also two of his novels, *Farewell, My Friend* and *Chaturanga*, his play *The Post Office*, and a selection of his short stories, *The Postmaster; The Living and the Dead, Wealth Surrendered, The Editor*, as well as some of his poems, due to different circumstance, these translations have not yet been published.

Recently, Robert Mandić from Spalato (Split), who owns a small editing house, from sheer love of Tagore, published his own Croatian translations of *Gītāñjali, Lover's Gift, Crossing, Fruit Gathering, The Religion of Man, Personality* and *Sadhana*.

It seems to me that the fourth wave of enthusiastic readers of Tagore is not going to appear any time soon. Every three years I teach a course entitled *Introduction to Neo Indo-Aryan and Dravidian Literature*, giving an overview of Bengali literature in which I try to emphasize the outstanding character, role and meaning of Rabīndranāth Tagore as a universal thinker, trying to get students to read *Gītāñjali*, but sadly there is almost no response from the Internet generations of our present-day globalised world. Most of my students seem to have no interest or understanding, or for that matter feelings, for the way Tagore expressed his experience of life and the world.

While talking about Hindī literature in the *chāyāvād* period I try to emphasize the role of Tagore's influence on the Hindī authors of that literary stream. I am even happy if in turn I hear from the students that Tagore was important for these poets. Though there is a kind of renaissance for Tagore in limited educated circles interested in literature and art, both in the West and in India, my feeling is that his sensibility as represented in his works is accessible only to those who, to some extent, share his way of experiencing life.

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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.¹ 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 Jelnikar, Translator, University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, SI–6000 Koper, Slovenia. E-mail: ajelnikar@yahoo.com

¹ 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).²

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)

² 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).³ 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

³ 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.⁴

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

⁴ 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.⁵

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,

⁵ 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 20th 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.⁶ 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).

⁶ 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).⁷ 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.

⁷ 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).⁸

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

⁸ 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.⁹

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)

⁹ 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)

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