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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'

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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 saktiyougat*…" 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

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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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