



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE WESTERN RESPONSE:
THE CHANGING TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore was one who awakened the West to the knowledge of the East in an era when England was steeped in imperialistic designs. The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 came as a surprise to Tagore as much as it did to the world. In this paper I shall analyse the factors that influenced the flowering of the creative genius of Tagore and the fickleness of fortune that brought a serious blow to his reputation. I shall first throw light on the factors that influenced his creative writing and then proceed to his journey to the West, the possible reasons of the rise and fall of his reputation and in the end briefly discuss his place in the literary world today.

Tagore's language of literary creation truly was Bengali-the sweetness of the diction, the simplicity of emotion could alone be rendered in his mother tongue. The translation of *Gitanjali* into English was not with an intention but it just happened when due to ill health he was on his way to England. He received wide spread applause from the West which was followed by the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. But soon after this, there was a sudden and sharp decline in his reputation in the West. Towards the end of the twentieth century once again there has been a definite increase in his reading public. In this era of Globalisation, we still are seeking the values of peace and harmony in the world that been voiced in his works.

Key Words: Reputation, response, criticism

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Tagore once rightly said, "It is with literature and art that countries come to know one another"¹. The West recognised the literature and art of India through the works of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a poet, a musician, a dramatist, novelist, a painter, an educationist, a social activist, a historian and above all one whose religion was his nation. He awakened the West to the knowledge of the East in an era when England was steeped in imperialistic designs. The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 came as a surprise to Tagore as much as it did to the world. In this paper I shall discuss the factors that influenced the flowering of the creative genius of Tagore and the fickleness of fortune that brought a serious blow to his reputation. I shall

first throw light on the factors that influenced his literary works and then proceed to his journey to the West, the impact and response of the West, the possible reasons of the rise and fall of his reputation and in the end briefly discuss his place in the literary world today.

Tagore was born at the dawn of the Renaissance in India and the era of enlightenment in Bengal. He grew up in a Bengal where social reformers Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar (1820-1981), Ram Krishna Paramhans, (1836-1886), Raja Ran Mohan Roy (1772-1883) and many others had raised their voices against prevalent superstitions and evils like child marriage, bigotry, sati, and promoted widow remarriage and women education. Art and literature in Bengal, through the efforts of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-73) Din Bandhu Mitra (1829-74) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) were already blossoming when he was young. His family was free from the bonds of orthodoxy and steeped deep in the pursuance of knowledge. In his autobiography he writes, "The greatest man in Modern India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was born in Bengal and was the best friend of my grand father ... My father was fortunate in coming under the influence of Ram Mohan Roy from his early years which helped him to free himself from the sectarian barriers, from traditions of worldly and social ideas that were very rigid, in many aspects very narrow and not altogether beneficial."² Tagore's father Debedranath (1817-1905) was a Sanskrit scholar also well versed in Persian, Indian and Western Philosophy. He, later in life became a Maharshi, a great sage who turned to the Himalayas and compiled excerpts from the Indian scriptures *Brahmo Dharma*. Tagore turned to these scriptures often.

Tagore's family was highly gifted with a rich literary and cultural ambience. All members of the family were exponents of art and culture involved in literary, dramatic, musical activities. Dwijendra Nath, his elder brother composed *Svapna-Prayan* (Dream Journey) which Tagore as a boy had memorised. He read a collection of Vaishnav lyrics, the early lyrics of Bengal and the *Geet Govind* of Jaidev at the age of twelve. These have immensely influenced Tagore's works. Jyotindranath, Tagore's brother and his wife Kadambari Devi, ran a literary club and his other brother Satyendranath Tagore was the first member of Indian Civil Service while his wife started the magazine *Balak*. Though creative inspiration was drawn from his family yet it were his own experiences in life and his genius that made his works so special. European literature attracted him and in his young age he was fond of Romantic and Victorian English poets. Shakespeare was as close to him as was Kalidas.

Tagore's image in the West initially rested on *Gitanjali* (the English version). He wrote the poems of the original *Gitanjali* between 1907 and 1910. It is one of the best known works of Tagore and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Most of the compositions were hymns written in Shantiniketan at a time when his life was facing a crisis. Between the years 1902-1907 he lost his wife, daughter, father and son. Through the creation of *Gitanjali* he was also trying to overcome his personal grief and sought shelter in the Divine.

"In sorrow after sorrow, it is his steps that press upon my heart,

And it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy shine. (*Gitanjali* XLV)

Tagore's language of literary creation truly was Bengali-the sweetness of the diction, the simplicity of emotion could alone be rendered in mother tongue. His experiences and his knowledge were beautifully captured in his own language. He himself was never too sure about his own English. In a letter to Indira Devi dated May 6, 1913 he says:

"You have alluded to the English translation *Gitanjali*. To this day I have not been able to imagine how I came to do it and how people came to like it so much. That I cannot write English is such a patent fact, that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it."³

The translation of *Gitanjali* into English was not with an intention but it just happened as he was on his way to England. Due to ill health he perhaps did not have the energy to compose new poems and therefore he started translating them

".... I had not the energy to grid up my loss and sit down to write. So I took up the poems of *Gitanjali* and set myself to translate then one by one... I simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium

of another language the feelings sentiments which had created such a joy within me in the days gone by".⁴

Of the 157 items in the Bengali *Gitanjali*, only 53 have been included in the English *Gitanjali*. It consists of translations of poems contained in books-*Naivedya*, *Kheya* and *Gitanjali*. The 103 items of English *Gitanjali* are collection of miscellaneous songs of which many are on seasons. Tagore was rather apologetic for undertaking this task and he wrote "If anybody wrote an English note asking me to tea, I did not feel equal to answering it.... that I have written in English seems to be a delusion."⁵ It was this translation that took the Western world by surprise. The translation of some poems reached Sir William Rothenstein, the English painter through the nephew of Tagore when in manuscript Tagore later wrote "I could hardly believe the opinion he (Rothenstein) expressed after going through it."⁶ These poems were passed on to Yeats. In a letter to Kshitimohan Sen he was happy over the appreciation from Yeats :

"Last night I had dinner with the poet Yeats. He read out from the prose translations of my poems. He read beautifully and in the correct tone. I have hardly any confidence in my English-but he definitely said that anybody who thought my English needed improving had no sense of literature.... My work had been received with great enthusiasm here".⁷

Rothenstein, on reading the poems said, "here was poetry of a new order. Which seemed to me on a level with that of the great mystics." Andrew Bradley a friend of Rothenstein said "It looks as though we have at last a great poet among us again".⁸ on reading the *Gitanjali* Yeats was full of enthusiasm. In the Introduction to he later wrote "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics-which in the original, my Indian friend tells me, are full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention -display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture..."⁹

Tagore was the first Indian to bring Oriental culture through Literature to the mainstream of intellectual life in the West. He himself had travelled widely. His works were translated into English, Spanish, French, German and many Asian Languages. After 1912, he started writing in English as well. But Tagore's rise to fame also matched with his sudden decline. There are several reasons of the sudden apathy of the West towards Tagore. A major reason could be inefficient translations of his original works. He understood well the shortcomings of translation. In 1930, he remarked "My poetry is for my country men my paintings are my gift to the West". Tagore's novels and other prose works did not arouse much interest in the West. In a letter to his friend Edward Thompson , he said

"In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. I know I am misrepresenting myself as a poet to the Western readers. But when I began this career of falsifying my own coins I did it in play. Now I am becoming frightened of its enormity and I am willing to make a confession of my misdeeds and withdraw into my original vocation as a mere Bengali Poet."¹⁰

In a letter to Thomas Sturge Moore, in 1935 ,who was a poet and a book designer and one of Rabindranath Tagore's close circle friends in England ,he said

"I ought never to have intruded into your realm of glory with my offerings hastily giving them a foreign shine and certain assumed gestures familiar to you. I have done thereby injustice to myself and the shrine of Muse which proudly claims flowers from its own climate and culture".¹¹

Translation could never bring out the element of sublimity that so elegantly adorned the original works of Tagore. He was either not understood by the Western intellectuals or they on purpose tried to marginalize his literary works. The disregard for his genius came in time when the West was in the throes of war . At such a time the poetry of Tagore that preached universal brotherhood did not have much meaning. Amidst death and destruction his poetry of peace was rejected .Peace was a myth and love was difficult to seek. Truth of the times was far away from the belief of his poetry and therefore it probably was irrelevant for the West.

Another reason was that Tagore was misunderstood by the West when it first reached them. They were highly impressed by the religious element in his English *Gitanjali*. It was Yeats's Introduction to the English *Gitanjali* that Tagore emerged as a religious prophet in the West whose works were expounding Christian faith. He observes,

"Since the Renaissance the writing of European saints -- however familiar their metaphor and the general structure of their thought -- has ceased to hold our attention. . . yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, . . ."

A word spread that India was highly under the influence of Christian faith. The English were pleased at this achievement that along with political power the English were also capturing India's religion. The Christian establishment also held the same view. *The Baptist Times*, February 2, 1914 reported :

"The poems of Rabindranath Tagore are valuable for their performance, but still more valuable for the promise they afford of a coming dawn. We have been waiting anxiously for some indication of the effect of Christian ideas on a truly representative Hindu mind. Here, surely, is the person we have been longing for -- one sent before the chariot of the Lord to make His path straight. And when we remember that this poet's every word is eagerly caught up by waiting millions, may we venture to assert that the new, the Christian India, is already at the door?"¹²

The early critics of Tagore were not much exposed to Indian Literature both Sanskrit and Bengali nor did they have enough knowledge of Indian philosophy. Those who did understand Tagore knew that he was influenced not only by his father's religious writings but also by the Vaishnav lyrics. Yeats, Rothenstein and Pound were unaware of the influence of ancient classics on Tagore's works and therefore they promoted him as spiritual poet who according to the English was close to Christianity. He himself claimed

"If you ask what gave me boldness when I was young I should say that one thing was my early acquaintance with the old 'Vaishnava' poems of Bengal, full of freedom in meter and expression. I think I was only twelve when these poems first began to be reprinted. I surreptitiously obtained copies from the desks of my elders. . . I must. . . admit that the greater part of these lyrics was erotic and not quite suited to a boy just about to reach his teens, but my imagination was completely occupied with the beauty of their forms and the music of their words and their breath, heavily laden with voluptuousness, passed over my mind without distracting it."¹³

Vaishnava verses were most un-Christian literary compositions. According to Amiya Chakravarty, poet and Tagore's one-time literary secretary wrote that erotic tendency of some Vaishnava poetry had aroused opposition amongst serious minded Hindus.¹⁴

But Tagore portrayed romantic love in a sensitive manner without disrupting the moral sensibility of his time. This was not understood by Yeats who criticised him for talking too much about God. In England he was sometimes even insulted. G.B. Shaw called him Stupendranath Beghor., as he was raising funds for his university, Shantiniketan. D.H. Lawrence called the "wretched worship of Tagore" as "sheer fraud". He further said "East is marvelously interesting, for tracing our steps back. But for going forward, it is nothing. All it can hope for is to be fertilized by Europe, so it can start on a new phase."¹⁵ He was in the 1912-13 lauded for being a representative of a more 'harmonious' and 'unified civilisation', one which the elite Europeans actually desired for the West. Yeats was only trying to recover the lost European culture. But when Tagore's voice rose against the West and when he tried to educate them more about Indian philosophy, the West retaliated. He established the superiority of east over west through his lectures and writings. This sparked off disapproval of Tagore. This was followed by outright insult. They became offensive in their defense. Pound said "why should India be always thinking of peace-*shanti*? Life is a conflict-"¹⁶. In a letter To Edmond Gosse, Yeats says that honouring Tagore in those early years was 'wise imperialism'¹⁷. This statement is rather controversial as it may have been given to support his later apathy or maybe in reality giving the honour was just an imperialistic design.

The later reactions to Tagore's work in the West reveal that it was disgust and anger for which ever reason Romain Rolland, too, was critical of Tagore's preaching tours. Greene, remarked in 1937: "As for

Rabindranath Tagore, I cannot believe that anyone but Mr. Yeats can still take his poems very seriously."¹⁸ But already in 1935, Yeats in a letter to Rothenstein said

"Damn Tagore. We got out three good books, Sturge Moore and I, and then, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought."¹⁹

D. H Lawrence too wrote in May 1916: ". . . this fraud of looking up to them -- this wretched worship-of-Tagore attitude -- is disgusting."²⁰ Bertrand Russell even more irritated over Tagore's speeches wrote "It was unmitigated rubbish - cut-and-dried conventional stuff about the river becoming one with the ocean and man becoming one with Brahma. . . "²¹ Later, when asked about his opinion on a letter Tagore wrote to him on the essence of religion, he curtly wrote, ". . . His talk about the infinite is vague nonsense. The sort of language that is admired by many Indians unfortunately does not, in fact, mean anything at all."²².According to Amartya Sen the denunciation of Tagore by Yeats was partly because he wanted to fit Tagore into the narrow box in which he wanted to place—and keep—him. Yeats found it difficult to place his later writings in the image that he had himself created.²³

In later years Yeats' sharp criticism of Tagore could have been due to Tagore's insistence of Indian cultural superiority in his lectures and writings. Tagore always held Indian culture superior to the Western which he revealed in his writings explicitly. His persistence on this belief and his criticism of colonialism in a way led to the strained relationship with his former admirers. Tagore argued that British colonialism found its justification in the ideology of nationalism, as the coloniser came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nation. They were never sincere in developing colonised countries/nations, as to convert their "hunting grounds" into "cultivated fields" ²⁴ would have been contrary to their national interest. Like predators (and nationalism, as we saw above, inherently cultivates a rapacious logic), they thrived by victimising and violating other nations, and never felt deterred in their heinous actions by the principles of love, sympathy or universal fellowship. The logic is simple but cruel, and is sustained by a privileging norm, that in order to have rich and powerful nations, some nations ought to be left poor and pregnable.

Tagore's criticism of the British administration of India was extremely sharp. In 1941, in a lecture he gave on his last birthday, he distinguishes between opposing Western imperialism and rejecting Western civilization. While he saw India as having been "smothered under the dead weight of British administration" Tagore recalls what India has gained from "discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all...the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century English politics." The tragedy, was that the West had all that was needed for a civilized nation but in the sway of imperialism they overlooked their ideals. They were "truly best in their own civilization, the upholding of dignity of human relationships, has no place in the British administration of this country."²⁵

A major cause of the decline of his reputation in the West could have been incomprehension. Either it was not possible for then to understand the philosophy or it was translation that could not exactly take forward the meaning of what he had originality put in his mother tongue, Bengali.

Tagore had attracted Germany also. There was considerable enthusiasm towards Tagore between his first and last visit to Germany (1920-1930). But during the Nazi Era there was considerable sourness towards his works. Those who were full of appreciation in 1918 considered him disappointing in 1937. This was a result of the liberal attitude that he had for the Spanish Republic against Franco's assault. A top Nazi Officer, Joseph Globbels in his early days was impressed by Tagore. In 1922 referring to Tagore in his Doctoral Thesis he wrote that the young people are in need of a leader with Russian spirit or the Indian Man. But even in worst times his books were spared from public burning as were many others. His paintings were included in Nazi's category of "degenerate art". His reputation both in England and Germany was losing its shine. Even in the post-war period of reconstruction the response was cold. It is quite understandable that the countries that had faced such

widespread destruction could not find place for such poetry and writings that were giving the message of love, brotherhood and peace. It should be noted that the age between the wars and the aftermath was disenchanted towards Tagore. The spirit of the people was shattered and their faith in values preached in Tagore's works must have seemed meaningless to the sufferers of the War. The most disgraceful comment came from Philip Larkin in 1950.

Summing up the circumstances that Tagore was caught up in Alex Aronson says: "A great scholar would expound the philosophy of Rabindranath in terms of metaphysics and mysticism; a politician would elucidate his position in European politics; litterateurs would establish comparisons and parallels; and priests of various denominations would exalt or debase his spiritual message. Everyone of them had his own axe to grind, and Rabindranath became a useful and innocent tool which they knew how to handle for their own ulterior purposes. So it came about that he was unknowingly made to represent certain tendencies in the party-politics of various nations...The interviews were after uncritical and outrageously condescending. In addition to all this an atmosphere of sensationalism was being created around him symptomatic of mental equilibrium, and perhaps also of the losses of all beliefs in the West"²⁶

In the 60's Tagore was once again attracted the reading public William Radice the English translator of Tagore says, "Thus to the children of the Neo-Romanticism of the 60's, my own era, he is a sympathetic voice. His educational ideals, his anti materialism, his feminism, his version of the spiritual are all to my own generation familiar In these he is near." With the dawn of the new age of Globalisation Tagore's works once again touched the hearts of the reading public. Though the global transformations were in the economic front both Art and Literature has been largely affected. The world as a global village and the trade treaties encouraged the feeling of universal brotherhood only to encourage new market by the western world. This renewed interest in the Eastern world was only for commercial reasons encouraged by the leaders Europe and the United States. Interest in Tagore has increased after 1990.

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