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RABINDRANATH TAGORE: MYRIAD INTERPRETATIONS OF FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

This article is an in depth study of the myriad Interpretations of the nuances of Freedom as they appear in the selected works of the Nobel laureate of India – Rabindranath Tagore. The study examines not only the author's own life experiences but also present how different characters in *Chokher Bali*, *Gora* and *Ghare-Baire* manifest the different aspects of freedom resulting in the growth of consciousness. Brought up in a modern Brahmo family and having strong roots in orthodox Hinduism, Tagore remained both a reformist and a traditionalist at the same time. The synthesis of the East and West was his answer to religious fanaticism and political despotism. We find that Tagore's concept of education, humanism, universalism, equality, finally gave shape to this multi-disciplinary term.

Keywords: Freedom, reformist, nationalism, humanism, myriad.

The Beginning

Freedom, an umbrella term has been subjected to multiple interpretations by various thinkers and philosophers the world over. Due to the assorted nature of the term, it has been analyzed from various angles such as personal, national, political, economic, cultural, et al While in political terms, freedom points largely towards individual's rights and liberties, in metaphysics *free will* is kernel of the notion, because the birth of freedom rose as a moral concept during the medieval times grounded in theology and metaphysics. The Western philosophers have defined freedom mainly in relation to *will* and *free-will*, beyond the rim of external factors; e.g. Schopenhauer, Rousseau, Nietzsche and Hegel define freedom as *free-will*, *general will*, *will to power* and *welfare liberalism* respectively. The French Revolution heralded the gospel of liberty, along with equality and fraternity." (Verma, p. 105) For Jean-Paul Sartre, freedom is the existence of will and is directly related to self-consciousness. He believed that "man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all." (Jones, p. 89) As opposed to the Western orientation towards the external socio-political freedom, India called for an inward perfection. Thus, in India "the emphasis has been on spiritual freedom or divine liberty obtained by self-realization and cosmic experience." (Verma, p. 115)

The Indian Perspective

In order to understand Tagore's multi-layered meaning of freedom, it is necessary to interpret the concept in its broader perspective as perceived by the famous social thinkers like S. Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo Ghose. A teacher philosopher and a champion of *advaita*, Dr. Radhakrishnan adopted a mystical idealism that advocated reconciliation between the East and the West. To him the goal of evolution was to reach pure bliss (*ananda*) or

freedom and it is possible only through education. He talks about preserving the self (*atman*) or the inner realisation, which should be free from sins, desires, restrictions or diversities. Purity of spirit is the base of Radhakrishnan's idea of Humanism. In the realisation of this divine nature, lies man's real freedom. Swami Vivekananda holds a similar view that the real objective of man is to attain freedom. He believed that, "freedom means the attainment of an attitude of equanimity towards all creatures and in this sense it was the foundation of all religious and ethical disciplines." (Verma, p. 111) A pioneer of the Indian National Movement, Sri Aurobindo "looked at the concept of freedom first through the eyes of a revolutionary political leader who was also a poet, and later through the eyes of the mystic and spiritual master that he became." (Dyne). He did not perceive India as a piece of land divided into different States on the basis of language or culture because his philosophy of patriotism extended to the love for its people as well. To him, independence of India was important not only for India but also for the entire humanity. Therefore his vision of freedom ran parallel to that of equality. We find that the spiritual thrust in Sri Aurobindo's theory of freedom was largely based on the *Bhagvad Gita*, "He who seeks freedom, thrusts fear aside, thrusts aside anger, and puts off desire, truly this man is made free forever." (Mohanty, p. 220). He believed that "absolute freedom within the bonds of the moral frame can be won if one makes a voluntary self-surrender to the supreme spirit and become an agent for the effectuation of the works of the divine." (Verma, p. 107).

### Tagore's Concept of Freedom

Tagore's earliest rendezvous with freedom came from the compulsory learning and subsequent self-understanding of the *Upanishads* that preached the ways to attain freedom (*mukti*) and he deciphered that a man's soul born in a world of freedom, must retain its freedom invariably. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, freedom became a personal philosophy for Tagore from its genesis till denouement. Arnold A. Blake writes, "his whole life-work is imbued with (an) appeal to freedom and simplicity, to the spontaneous and youthful élan which no conventions can bind." (Blake)

A myriad-minded man, Tagore's exposition about the concept of freedom is manifold., Freedom as a notion was always present in his works, but Tagore never discreetly defined what it meant to him .Tagore's freedom is not only multi-layered but also colossal because it is a curious amalgam of tradition and modernity. It was the fundamental belief of Tagore that a nation reposed its progress on the shoulders of education and man's all round development for gaining true freedom was based only on quality education. So the spread of education among the masses was according to Tagore, "the keynote of progress," (Dasgupta, T. 99). Tagore's characters are educated and enlightened, whether it is 'the parrot's training' for Ashalata by her husband Mahendra in *Chokher Bali*, or Bimla's coaching by Miss Gilby in *Ghare Baire*.. In *Chokher Bali* Mahendra, marries an innocent young girl Asha and decides to educate her .He is so happy with his own accomplishment to educate his wife that he completely forgets to ask her if she too wanted such a rigorous grounding. It was Tagore's firm belief that the essence of education lay in the complete development of an individual's personality and therefore the primary task of education was to develop the intellect and character of a person. Tagore desired his country to develop on the lines of Western liberalism and favored social progress through quality education rather than revolution because he knew that there was propinquity between education and the economic life of the people. Translating his theory, he established *Sriniketan* in 1912, for he believed that the mind realized its true freedom through service to mankind. Describing Tagore's innovation in the field of education, Cenkner observes that: "Tagore... sought a synthesis of East and West in both ideals and methods. His theory is marked by a synthetic, naturalistic, aesthetic and international character." (Cenkner, 45)

### Reflections of Freedom

*Ghare Baire* set against the backdrop of the *Swadeshi* (indigenous) movement in Bengal has all its characters educated as they directly communicate to the readers by writing their part of the story. It is Bimla's fate that she is married to a man who wanted her to trudge out of her *home* to understand the *world*. There is

Miss Gilby, an English lady, to instill the knowledge of English language that Bimla lacked. While describing her story, Bimla writes: "My husband...used to write to me almost every day, a few lines only, and simple words, but his bold, round handwriting would look up into my face.... Since then, I have been educated, and introduced to the modern age (G.B-P-4).

Tagore was an unmatched crusader against the social ills as he has analyzed problems of education, caste, gender and also tried to bridge gap between the 'East and the West' in his writings. Uma dasgupta writes: "Tagore [was] convinced that if India were to become free and independent, and recover self-respect, work must begin to overcome the weaknesses of poverty and division from within society... [for which he] chose education." (Dasgupta, U.). We find vivid descriptions of Tagore's admiration for nature in his literary as well as artistic works because he firmly believed in imparting education through nature for nurturing individual talent, creativity and an "openness of mind." (*Gora*, p. 27)

Tagore encouraged education through the medium of one's mother tongue but simultaneously he was also not opposed to the use of foreign language in India, as he was aware of its importance in the field of science, research, thinking, and creativity. The Nobel laureate, who received the award for the English version of *Gitanjali* (originally written in Bangla), was of the view that one could remain a staunch patriot despite the learning of the English language. Tagore's main objective behind the creation of a school like *Santiniketan*, its unorthodox and futuristic system of instruction prove that he was more inclined towards making education secular. Summing up Tagore's vision on education, his friend E.J. Thompson very aptly noted that "...all through his Santiniketan experiment, he has insisted on one thing, first and second, and all along the line — on freedom, more freedom, always freedom." (Thompson, p. 96)

*Gora* (1910) as a novel projects the difference of opinion between the orthodox Hindus on the one hand and the liberal Brahmos on the other. Tagore born as a Brahmin, took up the leadership of the *Adi Brahma Samaj* in 1911, choosing to bring the best out of the two. Reflecting his own self in the novel, he writes: "...Pareshbabu did not care for the boundaries between the Brahma and non-Brahma in his studies as well as in many small daily matters..." (*Gora*, p. 94). All the characters in this novel are knowledgeable: Gora and Binoy are educated in English language, Paresh Babu and Anandamoyee are experienced intellectuals, Sucharita and Lalita, "known far and wide that Paresh babu's daughters were well-educated." (*Gora*, p. 278) It was Lalita's revolutionary idea to open an all girls' school irrespective of caste discrimination because she was aware that women were oppressed due to their limited outlook. In his school, Tagore taught his disciples that man's true happiness was not in gaining but in giving himself up to the larger than life concepts of humanity, country and God. In the presidential address to the Indian Philosophical Congress established by Tagore and Radhakrishnan in 1925, the former asserted that the lack of freedom in man was the result of his dim consciousness and narrow perspective of his own self.

### **Blend of East and West**

The versatility of Tagore cannot be sized up in the narrow circumference of a poet or a political thinker, a teacher or an aesthetic, a humanist or an international visionary because he was a well reasoned man and hence his thoughts always clashed with anything coarse and ostentatious. Tagore's political and nationalist thoughts substantially grew in the interiors of his home, but it was the partition of Bengal in 1905, that actually made him jump into the political cauldron. Placing freedom of the self, above political freedom the unique nationalism of Tagore was greatly shaped by Ram Mohan Roy's comprehensive human perceptions as well as his life and thought. He unfurled his patriotism on pillars of truth, humanity, justice and non-violence, as he believed that, "...patriotism which claims the right to bring to the altar of its country the sacrifice of the people's rights and happiness will endanger rather than strengthen the foundation of any great civilization...." (Saumyendranath p. 57) Written in 1910, the epic novel *Gora* voiced Tagore's philosophy on religio-nationalism, followed by *Ghare-Baire* in 1914-15, promoting the idea of national resurgence coupled with universal humanism. In the novel Nikhil clarifies the author's stand, "It is my desire, to plant something greater than *Swadeshi*. I am not after dead logs but living trees – and these will take time to grow." (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 97). Tagore's continuous quest for freedom compliments his multi-dimensional disposition, as it is the expression of the subtle nuances of his thought. Freedom as a concept in his philosophy is quite nebulous; at times he has

indicated that nationalism and freedom were incongruous while in a piecemeal development he realized that nationalism was another name for freedom. Michael Collins presents his view thus: "Tagore is quite explicit that the nation-state has no meaning in an Indian context." (Collins, p. 88) In fact, Tagore's unconventional thought invited many reactions but he was clear in his vision of nationalism. He said, "I would know my country in its frank reality, and for this I am both afraid and ashamed to make use of hypnotic texts of patriotism," (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 19) because unlike his countrymen, he did not mix the two terms for a single-minded pursuit of gaining political freedom from the English. To him every nation's history was different and simultaneously their means and ends to nationalism were also distinct. "Nationalism – brought together by the centrality of politics within the nation state - was the driving force behind the regimentation and lust for power that Tagore saw as leading to the 'death of humanity' in the West." (Collins, p. 90) Tagore explained that "to tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country..." (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 80) Through Nikhil, Tagore voiced, "to worship my country as a God is to bring a curse upon it" (*Ghare-Baire*, p.12) and critically targeted those who were adamant on burning of foreign goods and manufacturing homespun clothes on the *Charkha*. In this regard, Collins writes, "Tagore saw no reason why all Indians should be engaged in the same activity and indeed felt this was a denial of the manifest diversity of human talent, thereby inhibiting the full expression of the human capacity for freedom." (Collins, p. 82) Nikhil's concept of freedom reflects Tagore's vision as he says, "My fight shall be against this weakness, this atrocious cruelty!" (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 98). Nikhil encourages the manufacture of indigenous goods in his estate, as he does not want foreign goods to sweep the Indian markets. Like Tagore, he too leads a simple life, although he could afford the luxuries of a better living. He was totally against the burning of the foreign clothes by the Indians, purchased with their hard earned money. On the other hand, his wife Bimla (symbolising Bengal) is thoroughly swept by the new wave of the movement and as an act of personal sacrifice instantly wants to get rid of her English teacher Miss. Gilby. She also burns her foreign clothes, but is irked when her husband asks:

NIKHIL: Why burn them? You need not wear them as long as you please.

BIMLA: As long as I please! Not in my life...

NIKHIL: Very well do not wear them for the rest of your life, then. But why this bonfire business? ...Why not try to build up something? (*Ghare-Baire*, p.11)

The pacifist Tagore spurned such non-violent ways, as he was aware that the spirit of violence was inherent in the body of nationalism, and said, "...this abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India" (Das, 422) In *Gora*, Tagore pronounced, "you can calmly consider a proposition so long as it is an abstract idea, but when you come to apply the same to a real human being you cannot retain that detached attitude... (*Gora*, p. 18). ) Many innocent lives were wasted away just for an abstraction because non-violent methods too enraged the people and incited antipathy toward the British. Collins writes that Tagore agreed...that freedom was the ultimate aim, but in [his] eyes... swaraj placed too much emphasis on politicized forms of nationalism. Tagore's argument was that...Satyagraha was motivated by negative intentions, even hatred.... It would naturally bring out violent and dark forces." (Collins, p. 83-84) .Tagore makes his argument clear and agrees to disagree with the popular concept of nationalism generating stark criticism, and cautions that, "...if fear is to regulate how people are to dress, where they shall trade, or what they must eat, then man's freedom of will is utterly ignored, and manhood destroyed at the root." (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 96) Nikhil's patriotism like Tagore's is sober. Sandip wants to bring about a revolution heedless about its outcome when he puts forth his argument, "my worship of Humanity is continued in the worship of my country.... Let us first fill our country's coffers with stolen goods and then take centuries...to answer for them...." (*Ghare-Baire*, 19-20) Sandip thus is the epitome of an arrogant nationalist. Tagore's main concern for his brethren was their self-enlightenment prior to seeking freedom from anyone else. Nikhil is filled with deep anguish to see his own wife Bimala (as Bengal) torn between the home/Nikhil (Tagore's freedom) and the world/Sandip (violent nationalism). He writes, "So long as I continue to suffer, Bimala will never have true freedom. I must free her completely; otherwise I shall never gain my freedom from untruth..." (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 61). In *Gora* too, the protagonist expresses this feeling of the author, "...If you have faith the very act of committed perseverance will make you happy". (*Gora*, p. 22) *Gora* engages in helping the educated

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youth of his country to recognize their duty towards the common people. He says, "...there is no greater sin than falsely abusing your own race." (*Gora*, p. 53)

### Tagore's Nationalism

What Tagore has conveyed through his novels is his unique idea of freedom as nationalism, which implies that before gaining outer freedom from the English, the people of India must achieve their inner freedom from within. To gain freedom through education was a persistent Tagorean trope. The novelist firmly believed that people in colonized India were not suffering so much at the hands of the Englishmen as from a 'veil of ignorance' put on them by the greedy moneylenders as well as sly religious and political leaders who were feeding them with slow poison. Frantz Fanon, a French philosopher aptly expresses Tagore's views that, "during the colonized period the people are called upon to fight against oppression; after national liberation, they are called upon to fight against poverty, illiteracy and under development. The struggle, they say, goes on." (Fanon, p. 74.) As a lover of human freedom, Tagore openly advocated the ideas of Western liberalism. He was of the view that complete freedom of a nation ultimately paves way for ample growth of its citizens in every sphere. He candidly moved beyond the concept of narrow nationalism, to a higher destination of humanism. In his letter to Srimati Abala Bose, a social worker and educationist, Tagore wrote, Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live. (Sen.p))

In his essay on Nationalism, Tagore explains that humanity is the Supreme religion and that no nation is above it. He was not opposed to the freedom of India but to the colonization of the East by the West, which he phrased as 'greed without shame' or egocentric nationalism whose cure lay only in universal humanism. Namrata Parmar writes, "In the galaxy of the prophets of humanism and one world theory, Rabindranath Tagore, the minstrel of Mother India, holds a prominent position." (Ghosh, p. 231) In *Ghare-Baire*, Nikhilesh conveys Tagore's message saying, "there should be no difference... between man and man and ...between country and country" (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 73). What Tagore chose to follow, as his ideal of a Universal humanistic-nationalism was the middle-path where freedom of every country was important. He recommended that the only thing that nations should borrow from each other should be learning and education in a climate of total equality where none would denigrate the other as inferior. Writing on Tagore's cosmopolitanism in a colonial world, Poloumi Saha observes that, "Tagore models in his speeches and writing a locally rooted globalism, committed to a universal humanism and an avowed love of country, and it takes a form that is explicitly neither nationalist nor cosmopolitan." (Ghosh, p. 151)

One of the unique features of Tagore's Humanism was that it stood on the sturdy foundation of Egalitarianism, as the Bengal sage upheld the ideal of gender equality. As a compassionate humanist, he defended the even-handedness of women with such ebullience that even they are mystified at this equation. In *Ghare-Baire*, Nikhilesh, an educated young man, considers his wife Bimala to be his equal, while on the other hand she believes in worshipping her husband. During his many visits, Tagore was absolutely wonderstruck to see the way in which men and women in the West shared an equal footing in society. The impact of his journeys to the Western world was so deep on his personality that he created very strong female characters in fiction: Binodini, Lalita, Sucharita and Bimla. Like the famous Shakespearean women, Tagore portrayed his leading ladies as educated and enlightened souls having independent thinking. One of the best traits of Tagore women is that they are exploratory characters as they participate in debates and discussions, exchange ideas, and more importantly, assert their own identities. Paresh Babu voices Tagore's mind stating, "...girls should mix with people of various opinions and mindsets. Otherwise we enforce a curb on their intelligence." (*Gora*, p. 56). In *Gora*, "...Lalita followed her own ways, and could give a piece of her mind to people if she so desired (*Gora*, p. 44). Anandamoyee, born and married into a typical orthodox Brahmin family surpassed all the Tagore women with her spirit of nationalism and universal humanism. She tells Binoy, "...people of our community brand me a Christian – I don't even join them in feasts on social and religious occasions. But even then, I don't see the point in accepting that I am a Christian just because they happen to call me Christian. I think it wrong to escape and hide for the sake of a cause which I know to be just." (*Gora*, p. 361) Widowhood at that time was considered a curse and widows were looked down upon. Binodini rebels against such social system and wants to assert her

rights on an equal footing with others. She is depicted as an educated and talented young girl starkly aware of the social implications of widow-remarriage. She declines to marry Bihari in a very decisive tone. Tagore's "notion of liberty and social justice espoused the true spirit of freedom that soared high above the narrow walls of racial or communal pride." (Ghosh, viii) Through Nikhil, he questions, "...is strength mere display of muscularity? Must strength has no scruples in treading the weak underfoot?" (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 22) Tagore believed that "we should always follow the path of truth and justice and must not resort to vandalism." (Dasgupta, T. p. 75) Tagore conveys his humane message through Nikhil who comes to the rescue of the innocent English people who were killed by the Indian revolutionaries. When in her over enthusiasm, Bimala without a thought wants to drive her English teacher Miss Gilby to requite the English savagery, she is reprimanded by her husband who says, "I cannot look upon Miss Gilby through a mist of abstraction, just because she is English. Cannot you get over the barrier of her name after such a long acquaintance? Cannot you realise that she loves you?" (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 11)

The best example of Tagore's humanism is the character of Anandamoyee in *Gora*, a Brahmin woman bound by the diehard unprogressive orthodoxies of the Hindu religion and society, but who is of the view that, "...nobody in this world is born with a racial identity." (*Gora*, p. 16) Not only she is an example of a progressive woman but is also a perfect "epitome of my motherland" (*Gora*, p. 20) when she says, "I will take my food and drink from members of all races of the world." (*Gora*, p. 16) A childless married woman, she embraced Gora, an orphan infant born of an Irish couple and nurtured him despite sundry uncomplimentary remarks from everybody. Her only question for all was, "Isn't a Christian a human?" (*Gora*, p. 32) She is close to Meursault from Albert Camus' famous novel *The Outsider* (1942)

Tagore's unique life is full of personal sacrifices for the sake of humanity. For instance, his school at *Santiniketan* offered free education to the students who were unable to pay the tuition-fees. He even used the Prize money of the *Nobel* received by him in 1913 as well as the royalty earned through his literary works for the development of his school and the adjoining village. After his recognition in the literary field by the Swedish Academy, the British Crown bestowed Knighthood on this World Poet in 1915, but he relinquished the title in May 1919 to register his tough protest against the killing of thousands of innocent unarmed civilians by the British army in the *Jallianwala Bagh* on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1919. The return of Knighthood by Sir Tagore was his retaliation against the dehumanized treatment meted out not only to his fellow countrymen but to the entire human race. He wrote, "I seemed to have come closer to the heartbeats of the great earth in all the simplicity of its daily life...where I, in my freedom, live in the freedom of all else." (*Ghare Baire*, p. 80).

### Freedom as Transcendence

Tagore conceptualized the universe as a single unit and firmly believed that the whole mankind shared a common heritage of unity in diversity because "the great world stretches far beyond, and one can truly measure one's joys and sorrows when standing in its midst." (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 62) During the course of a conversation in 1930 with Albert Einstein on humanity, Tagore said, "The infinite personality of man comprehends the universe...the truth of the universe is human truth... if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity...it is absolutely non-existing." (Gosling, p. 138) In fact, Tagore has been rightly called 'The First Global Citizen', because his perception was not circumscribed by the geographical boundaries and "a universalist humanism emerged with his international experience..." (Ghosh, p. 116) His ideal of nationalism, humanism and nuances of freedom including religious and socio-economic freedom never shook hands with factionalism, sectarianism, communalism, Brahmo nationalism or the revival of Hinduism in India. The underlying essence of his Universalism encompassed not only India but the whole world.

In many ways, he became an apostle of universal faith for humanity. He believed in the Upanishad's universal oneness of the Being. In this context Namrata Parrmar observes, "Tagore's humanism and internationalism are intertwined, because one world cannot be imagined without humanitarian values." (Ghosh, p. 235). Tagore established the world university called *Visvabharati*, a platform for the meeting of the 'East and the West,' where mass education could revive the essence of global civilization among the people of the world.

“Tagore was no ordinary nationalist.... He wanted India to smell the West, taste it and understand the differences within it.” (Visvanathan, p. 43).

He was of the view that Man has to realise the personal bond of his unity with the universe for the attainment of *ananda*. Tagore exemplifies this in his character when he says, “Pareshbabu’s aim was to become one with the cosmic being and so he always aspired after the best and the truest...in this way he had earned an inner freedom...” (*Gora*, p. 256) Tagore asserts the knowledge of the inner power of man in the *Religion of Man* (1930), the bonding of the self ‘I’ with the whole i.e. ‘the universe,’. Binoy explains this theory saying, “just consider, what the scripture says; it says *atmananam bidhvi* – know thyself. There is no emancipation without self-knowledge.” (*Gora*, p. 75). Tagore says: “If you want to be a master of the world then achieve your freedom. In order to be free one has to emerge from the narrow confining womb of petty desires....” Thus, “Renunciation awakens in man...creative force which steers him to freedom.” (Saumyendranath, 22-23)

Rabindranath Tagore transcends the borders of religion, community, race, nation, language and culture. Freedom as an idea and philosophy is a lifelong companion to him and he succeeded in inspiring the generation next with “the range of his vision and the depth of his understanding,” (Ghosh, p. vii). Be it education, nationalism, humanism or universalism, all amalgamate proportionately in Tagore’s world of complete freedom. He has ardently explored the nature of freedom and developed his own ideology which included his philosophy of education, nationalism, spiritualism, humanism, internationalism as well as universalism. one overlaps and without rescinding, complements the other Thus he was a practical visionary. Hailing freedom, Tagore describes ... ..I have gained freedom myself; I shall allow freedom to others. In my work will be my salvation...Let the drum-beats of Truth lead me to Victory. ” (*Ghare-Baire*, p. 80-81)

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