

## A STUDY ON RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN ENGLISH POETRY

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### Abstracts

*In this paper, Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, writer, philosopher was the ambassador of Indian culture to the rest of the world. He is probably the most prominent figure in the cultural world of Indian subcontinent and the first Asian person to be awarded with the Nobel prize. Even though he is mainly known as a poet, his multi-faceted talent showered upon different branches of art, such as, novels, short stories, dramas, articles, essays, painting etc. And his songs, popularly known as Rabindrasangeet, have an eternal appeal and is permanently placed in the heart of the Bengalis. He was a social reformer, patriot and above all, a great humanitarian and philosopher. India and Bangladesh - the national anthems of these two countries are taken from his composition.*

### Introduction

Rabindranath Thakur was a Bengali polymath who reshaped his region's literature and music. Author of Gitanjali and its "profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse", he became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. In translation his poetry was viewed as spiritual and mercurial; his seemingly mesmeric personality, flowing hair, and otherworldly dress earned him a prophet-like reputation in the West. His "elegant prose and magical poetry" remain largely unknown outside Bengal. Tagore introduced new prose and verse forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, thereby freeing it from traditional models based on classical Sanskrit. He was highly influential in introducing the best of Indian culture to the West and vice versa, and he is generally regarded as the outstanding creative artist of modern India.

A Pirali Brahmin from Calcutta, Tagore wrote poetry as an eight-year-old. At age sixteen, he released his first substantial poems under the pseudonym Bhānusiha ("Sun Lion"), which were seized upon by literary authorities as long-lost classics. He graduated to his first short stories and dramas and the aegis of his birth name by 1877. As a humanist, universalist internationalist, and strident anti-nationalist he denounced the Raj and advocated independence from Britain. As an exponent of the Bengal Renaissance, he advanced a vast canon that comprised paintings, sketches and doodles, hundreds of texts, and some two thousand songs; his legacy endures also in the institution he founded, Visva-Bharati University. Tagore modernised Bengali art by spurning rigid classical forms and resisting linguistic strictures. His novels, stories, songs, dance-dramas, and essays spoke to topics political and personal. Gitanjali (Song Offerings), Gora (Fair-Faced), and Ghare-Baire (The Home and the World) are his best-known works, and his verse, short stories, and novels were acclaimed or panned for their lyricism, colloquialism, naturalism, and unnatural contempla

tion. His compositions were chosen by two nations as national anthems: India's Jana Gana Mana and Bangladesh's Amar Shonar Bangla. Tagore's life as a "peripatetic litterateur" affirmed his opinion that human divisions were shallow. During a May 1932 visit to a Bedouin encampment in the Iraqi desert, the tribal chief told him that "Our prophet has said that a true Muslim is he by whose words and deeds not the least of his brother-men may ever come to any harm" Tagore confided in his diary: "I was startled into recognizing in his words the voice of essential humanity." To the end Tagore scrutinised orthodoxy and in 1934, he struck. That year, an earthquake hit Bihar and killed thousands. Gandhi hailed it as seismic karma, as divine retribution avenging the oppression of Dalits. Tagore rebuked him for his seemingly ignominious inferences. He mourned the perennial poverty of Calcutta and the socioeconomic decline of Bengal. He detailed these newly plebeian aesthetics in an unrhymed hundred-line poem whose technique of searing double-vision foreshadowed Satyajit Ray's film *Apur Sansar*. Fifteen new volumes appeared, among them prose-poem works *Punashcha* (1932), *Shes Saptak* (1935), and *Patraput* (1936). Experimentation continued in his prose-songs and dance-dramas: *Chitra* (1914), *Shyama* (1939), and *Chandalika* (1938); and in his novels: *Dui Bon* (1933), *Malancha* (1934), and *Char Adhyay* (1934).

Tagore's remit expanded to science in his last years, as hinted in *Visva-Parichay*, 1937 collection of essays. His respect for scientific laws and his exploration of biology, physics, and astronomy informed his poetry, which exhibited extensive naturalism and verisimilitude. He wove the process of science, the narratives of scientists, into stories in *Se* (1937), *Tin Sangi* (1940), and *Galpasalpa* (1941). His last five years were marked by chronic pain and two long periods of illness. These began when Tagore lost consciousness in late 1937; he remained comatose and near death for a time. This was followed in late 1940 by a similar spell. He never recovered. Poetry from these valetudinary years is among

his finest A period of prolonged agony ended with Tagore's death on 7 August 1941, aged eighty; he was in an upstairs room of the Jorasanko mansion he was raised in. The date is still mourned. A. K. Sen, brother of the first chief election commissioner, received dictation from Tagore on 30 July 1941, a day prior to a scheduled operation: his last poem.

*"I'm lost in the middle of my birthday. I want my friends, their touch, with the earth's last love. I will take life's final offering, I will take the human's last blessing. Today my sack is empty. I have given completely whatever I had to give. In return if I receive anything some love, some forgiveness then I will take it with me when I step on the boat that crosses to the festival of the wordless end."*

## Novels

Tagore wrote eight novels and four novellas, among them *Chaturanga*, *Shesher Kobita*, *Char Odhay*, and *Noukadubi*. *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) through the lens of the idealistic zamindar protagonist Nikhil excoriates rising Indian nationalism, terrorism, and religious zeal in the Swadeshi movement; a frank expression of Tagore's conflicted sentiments, it emerged out of a 1914 bout of depression. The novel ends in Hindu-Muslim violence and Nikhil's likely mortal wounding. *Gora* raises controversial questions regarding the Indian identity. As with *Ghare Baire*, matters of self-identity (*jāti*), personal freedom, and religion are developed in the context of a family story and love triangle. In it an Irish boy orphaned in the Sepoy Mutiny is raised by Hindus as the titular *gora* "whitey". Ignorant of his foreign origins, he chastises Hindu religious backsliders out of love for the indigenous Indians and solidarity with them against his hegemon-compatriots. He falls for a Brahmo girl, compelling his worried foster father to reveal his lost past and cease his nativist zeal. As a "true dialectic" advancing "arguments for and against strict traditionalism", it tackles the colonial conundrum by "portray[ing] the value of all positions within a particular frame not only syncretism, not only liberal orthodoxy, but the extremest reactionary traditionalism he defends by an appeal to what humans share." Among these Tagore highlights "identity conceived of as dharma."

In *Jogajog* (Relationships), the heroine Kumudinibound by the ideals of *Śiva-Sati*, exemplified by *Dākshāyani* is torn between her pity for the sinking fortunes of her progressive and compassionate elder brother and his foil: her roue of a husband. Tagore flaunts his feminist leanings; pathos depicts the plight and ultimate demise of women trapped by pregnancy, duty, and family honour; he simultaneously trucks with

Bengal's putrescent landed gentry. The story revolves around the underlying rivalry between two families the Chatterjees, aristocrats now on the decline (*Biprodas*) and the Ghosals (*Madhusudan*), representing new money and new arrogance. *Kumudini*, *Biprodas*' sister, is caught between the two as she is married off to *Madhusudan*. She had risen in an observant and sheltered traditional home, as had all her female relations. Others were uplifting: *Shesher Kobita* translated twice as *Last Poem* and *Farewell Song* is his most lyrical novel, with poems and rhythmic passages written by a poet protagonist. It contains elements of satire and postmodernism and has stock characters who gleefully attack the reputation of an old, outmoded, oppressively renowned poet who, incidentally, goes by a familiar name: "Rabindranath Tagore". Though his novels remain among the least-appreciated of his works, they have been given renewed attention via film adaptations by Ray and others: *Chokher Bali* and *Ghare Baire* are exemplary. In the first, Tagore inscribes Bengali society via its heroine: a rebellious widow who would live for herself alone. He pillories the custom of perpetual mourning on the part of widows, who were not allowed to remarry, who were consigned to seclusion and loneliness. Tagore wrote of it: "I have always regretted the ending".

## Stories

Tagore's three-volume *Galpaguchchha* comprises eighty-four stories that reflect upon the author's surroundings, on modern and fashionable ideas, and on mind puzzles. Tagore associated his earliest stories, such as those of the "Sadhana" period, with an exuberance of vitality and spontaneity; these traits were cultivated by zamindar Tagore's life in *Patisar*, *Shajadpur*, *Shelaidaha*, and other villages. Seeing the common and the poor, he examined their lives with a depth and feeling singular in Indian literature up to that point. In "The Fruitseller from Kabul", Tagore speaks in first person as a town dweller and novelist imputing exotic perquisites to an Afghan seller. He channels the lubricative lust of those mired in the blasé, nidorous, and sudorific morass of subcontinental city life: for distant vistas. "There were autumn mornings, the time of year when kings of old went forth to conquest; and I, never stirring from my little corner in Calcutta, would let my mind wander over the whole world. At the very name of another country, my heart would go out to it I would fall to weaving a network of dreams: the mountains, the glens, the forest." The *Golpoguchchho* (Bunch of Stories) was written in Tagore's *Sabuj Patra* period, which lasted from 1914 to 1917 and was named for another of his magazines. These yarns are celebrated fare in Bengali fiction and are commonly used as plot fodder by Bengali film and theatre. The Ray film

Charulata echoed the controversial Tagore novella *Nastanirh* (The Broken Nest). In *Atithi*, which was made into another film, the little Brahmin boy Tarapada shares a boat ride with a village zamindar. The boy relates his flight from home and his subsequent wanderings. Taking pity, the elder adopts him; he fixes the boy to marry his own daughter. The night before his wedding, Tarapada runs off again. *Strir Patra* (The Wife's Letter) is an early treatise in female emancipation. Mrinal is wife to a Bengali middle class man: prissy, preening, and patriarchal. Travelling alone she writes a letter, which comprehends the story. She details the pettiness of a life spent entreating his viraginous virility; she ultimately gives up married life, proclaiming, *Amio bachbo. Ei bachlum: "And I shall live. Here, I live."* Haimanti assails Hindu arranged marriage and spotlights their often dismal domesticity, the hypocrisies plaguing the Indian middle classes, and how Haimanti, a young woman, due to her insufferable sensitivity and free spirit, foredid herself. In the last passage Tagore blasts the reification of Sita's self-immolation attempt; she had meant to appease her consort Rama's doubts of her chastity. *Musalmani Didi* eyes recrudescing Hindu-Muslim tensions and, in many ways, embodies the essence of Tagore's humanism. The somewhat auto-referential *Darpaharan* describes a fey young man who harbours literary ambitions. Though he loves his wife, he wishes to stifle her literary career, deeming it unfeminine. In youth Tagore likely agreed with him. *Darpaharan* depicts the final humbling of the man as he ultimately acknowledges his wife's talents. As do many other Tagore stories, *Jibito o Mrito* equips Bengalis with a ubiquitous epigram: *Kadombini moriya proman korilo she more nai "Kadombini died, thereby proving that she hadn't."*

## Poetry

Tagore's poetic style, which proceeds from a lineage established by 15th- and 16th-century Vaishnava poets, ranges from classical formalism to the comic, visionary, and ecstatic. He was influenced by the atavistic mysticism of Vyasa and other rishi-authors of the Upanishads, the Bhakti-Sufi mystic Kabir, and Ramprasad Sen. Tagore's most innovative and mature poetry embodies his exposure to Bengali rural folk music, which included mystic Baul ballads such as those of the bard Lalou. These, rediscovered and repopularised by Tagore, resemble 19th-century *Kartābhajā* hymns that emphasise inward divinity and rebellion against bourgeois *bhadralok* religious and social orthodoxy. During his *Shelaidaha* years, his poems took on a lyrical voice of the *moner manush*, the *Bāuls'* "man within the heart" and Tagore's "life force of his deep recesses", or meditating upon the *jeevan devata* the demiurge or the "living God within". This

figure connected with divinity through appeal to nature and the emotional interplay of human drama. Such tools saw use in his *Bhānusiṃha* poems chronicling the Radha-Krishna romance, which were repeatedly revised over the course of seventy years. Tagore reacted to the halfhearted uptake of modernist and realist techniques in Bengali literature by writing matching experimental works in the 1930s. These include *Africa* and *Camalia*, among the better known of his latter poems. He occasionally wrote poems using *Shadhu Bhasha*, a Sanskritised dialect of Bengali; he later adopted a more popular dialect known as *Cholti Bhasha*. Other works include *Manasi*, *Sonar Tori* (Golden Boat), *Balaka* (Wild Geese, a name redolent of migrating souls), and *Purobi*. *Sonar Tori's* most famous poem, dealing with the fleeting endurance of life and achievement, goes by the same name; hauntingly it ends: *Shunno nodir tire rohinu porī / Jaha chhilo loe gēlo shonar tori* "all I had achieved was carried off on the golden boat only I was left behind." *Gitanjali* is Tagore's best-known collection internationally, earning him his Nobel.

## Conclusion

The Bengali poet, writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) remains a unique, though still under-recognised genius. Tagore's cultural production was vast, covering poetry, prose and plays; an astonishing volume of music which is played and sung throughout Bengal to this day (and includes the national anthems of two countries, India and Bangladesh); internationally acclaimed and exhibited paintings; social, political and philosophical essays; agrarian reform; pioneering environmentalism; the creation of a school and a university. His philosophy of education may yet come to be seen as one of his most significant contributions.

## References

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