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Tagore's Modernist Predilections: Incursions into an Unchartered Territory

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Abstract

Literary criticism on Rabindranath Tagore in his relation to English literature has been largely misleading, for it has largely limited itself to elaborating on possible similarities and comparisons between nineteenth century English poets like Shelley, Keats, Thompson and Tennyson on the one hand, and Rabindranath Tagore on the other. An undue and unjustified emphasis has been laid on his early works; and as a result, the traits of romanticism and mysticism in Tagore's poetry have been highlighted and augmented out of all proportion. The fact that Rabindranath Tagore is essentially a modern poet who lived and wrote during the twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century has been needlessly and heedlessly overlooked. It is imperative that the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore produced during the post-*Gitanjali* period be compared and contrasted with those of the Modern English poets. It is only then that scholars and researchers in the field of Tagorean literature will attain a comprehensive understanding of the art of Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: Tagore, Romanticism, mysticism, modernist, post-war, modern civilisation.

English poetry from the West has gifted readers Romantic poets like P.B. Shelley and John Keats, mystic poets like Francis Thompson and modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, who were influenced by realism. However, Rabindranath Tagore holds a unique position in the entire world of poetry by virtue of the fact that he has uniquely combined in his verse the romantic fervour of Shelley and Keats, the mysticism of Francis Thompson, and the realism of Eliot and Auden. It would perhaps, be relevant to recall, in this context, the observation made by Sisir Kumar Ghose, the well known critic, and scholar: "Tagore's poetry is so vast, various, and voluminous, that it escapes any easy schematisation or categorising, even if attempts to find a pattern have not been given up." (Ghose 1986: 32)

From his early childhood, Rabindranath Tagore had a rather uncommon exposure to music, poetry and drama from all over the world. Vedic chants and recitations from

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Shakespeare were both commonly heard in the Tagore household at Jorasanko. Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian and English, were the languages that the children were taught at home, along with the Physical Sciences. Brojeshwar, the servant who took care of the young children - and, who had, at one time, taught in a village school - often recited from the ancient Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The young poet was also exposed to the songs of Dasu Rai and Kishori Chatterji. Vaishnava literature and the mystic cult of the Bauls also left an indelible mark on the poet's psyche. Sanskrit literature, especially the works of the great poet Kalidasa, left a deep impression on Tagore, and many of his works reflect a debt to these earlier masterpieces. The Upanishadas were a formative influence on the developing consciousness of the young poet. The poet's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore initiated him to the mantras of the Upanishadas in 1873, before the ritual of the sacred 'thread ceremony' was performed. The "Gayatri Mantra" in particular left a deep impression on Tagore's mind. Tagore subsequently accompanied his father on a tour of the Himalayas; and in the close proximity of the Maharshihe learnt to respect the teachings of the great religious texts, to appreciate the teachings of religions apart from his own. These early experiences left an enduring mark on the poet's psyche, and found expression in many of his subsequent literary works. As A. K. Basu Majumdar has so aptly pointed out: "The hymns of the *Rigveda* and the songs of the *Samaveda*, after thousands of years, have been presented again to us through the songs of Tagore. The deepest thoughts of the Upanishads, and their message to humanity, the ideas of love, amity and pity of Gautam Buddha and Asoka, have all been revived in Tagore's writings." (Basu Majumdar 1993: 14) Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning and Whitman were among the Western poets with whose poetry Tagore was familiar with from a relatively young age. Tagore had, in fact, asserted, quite vehemently, that a good English Education was of immense worth to an Indian poet, artist, or intellectual. In an essay published in the leading periodical of the day, *Bharati*, Tagore opined:

> In fact, due to the influence of English education, suddenly a current of great change has burst into the calm and placid waters of Bengali society; some banks of this society are falling, and others, are being formed. The earth around some of the most deep rooted beliefs are being washed away, and hundreds of new beliefs are taking new roots. When so much outside and inside us is falling topsy-turvy, should we even then remain tied to the strings of ancient poetry, disregarding all sense of time and space. It would be extremely unnatural to expect that such a tremendous change would have no effect on our poetry. (Sharma 2012: 131)

Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats mainly influenced him as poets of nature. Browning's vigorous optimism finds reflection in Tagore's "Phalguni" and other plays, and some of his poems. Tagore also admired Whitman's humanism, which he had himself developed. He was also deeply impressed by the poems of John Donne. Many were the Western philosophers with whom Tagore was in direct contact, and they influenced and shaped his thoughts to a certain extent. Bertrand Russell, Bergson, Gilbert Murray, Albert Einstein and Stopford Brooke were among those with whom he

came into close personal contact, and who influenced him one way or the other. Although Tagore was against any sort of blind, uncritical show of respect towards the West, he was in favour of according the positive aspects of the western civilization the esteem that it deserved:

> Contemporary India has its ancient civilisation as a mine has its coal. When the law of give and take, growth and decay operated in it, it thrived as a great forest. There was the activity of spring and rain in it, and the natural growth of flower, blossom, and plant. Now it does not change and growth has become superfluous. The light and heat of many ages is still latent in it but for us it is dark and cold. As we do not have the flame that can light it, we produce out of it only columns of pitch black smoke. What we collect by digging tunnels of research to this past is also useless—and even this natural wealth we are not collecting ourselves. All our coal comes from the Englishman's shores. (*Rabindra Rachanavali*, Vol. XI, 1961: 483)

However, literary criticism on Rabindranath Tagore in his relation to English literature has been largely misleading, for it has largely limited itself to elaborating on possible similarities and comparisons between nineteenth century English poets like Shelley, Keats, Thompson and Tennyson on the one hand, and Rabindranath Tagore on the other. An undue and unjustified emphasis has been laid on his early works; and as a result, the traits of romanticism and mysticism in Tagore's poetry have been highlighted and augmented out of all proportion. The fact that Rabindranath Tagore is essentially a modern poet who lived and wrote during the twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century has been needlessly and heedlessly overlooked. As George E.G. Catlin has aptly pointed out: "It is an indication of his stature that, whereas some think he "dates" so much, actually he survives as a spokesman of India, dating so little." (Catlin 1964: 11) It is imperative that the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore produced during the post-*Gitanjali* period be compared and contrasted with those of the Modern English poets. It is only then that scholars and researchers in the field of Tagorean literature will attain a comprehensive understanding of the art of Rabindranath Tagore. As the noted author and critic Bhabatosh Chatterjee has pointed out: "... Tagore's grasp of the complexity of the modern temper would help today's readers, writers and critics remodel the familiar portrait [of Tagore as a predominantly Romantic and Mystic poet]..." (Chatterjee 1996: 171)

Hopkins is rightly regarded as the harbinger of new trends in English poetry, but it is the poems of T. S. Eliot which ushered in a distinctly new era in English poetry. Eliot's *Waste Land*, published in 1922 has been hailed by many prominent critics as a distinctive landmark in the history of modern English poetry. The "waste land" referred to in the poem symbolises the spiritual bankruptcy of the modern civilisation. The degeneration of morality, of spiritual values, the aridity of the human soul, the aimlessness and the chaos that are predominant in modern society, are some of the themes and motifs which recur again and again in this poem which is very often referred to as the representative modernist poem. Raymond Tschumi, commenting on the philosophical element in T.S. Eliot's poetry, observes:

> The philosophical element in Eliot's poetry consists mainly in his criticism of contemporary life, and his satire is—perhaps arbitrarily—related to his religious convictions. Eliot is the witness of a world which is crumbling down because it has lost its foundations, of a world which exploits its resources but no longer creates. He is moved to write poetry partly by a desire to show an evidence of both the decadence of Europe and the necessity of a superior truth. (Tschumi 1951: 155)

The anarchy, turmoil, disorder and meaninglessness that are relentless constants in the life of the modern human being are perhaps best summarised in the following lines from the section 'What the Thunder said':

> If there were only water amongst the rock
> Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
> Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
> There is not even silence in the mountains
> But sterile thunder without rain
> There is not even solitude in the mountains
> But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
> From doors of mudcracked houses. (Eliot 1969: 72)

Eliot depicts in his poems the dejection, hollowness, meaninglessness and aridness of life in the post-war civilization. The entire modern world appears to be inhabited by de-spiritualised, de-vitalised, hollow men, who lead a completely empty and purposeless existence. "Choruses from The Rock", one of Eliot's most celebrated poems, also deals with a similar theme:

> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
> Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust. (Eliot 1969: 147)

W. H. Auden, the other celebrated architect of the modernist movement in English poetry, also focuses again and again on the themes of the hopelessness, meaninglessness, emptiness and barrenness of modern human existence. Auden repeatedly speaks of the ugliness of modern human life, of the mindless destruction of nature that is an integral part of industrialisation, of the "progress" of the human civilisation.

> Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own
> Though the roads have almost vanished and the expresses never run:
> Smokeless chimneys, damaged bridges, rotting wharves and choked canals,
> Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on their side across the rails;
> (Auden, "Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own" 39)

Auden, in his poems, has dwelt again and again on the purposelessness, futility, and emptiness of modern human existence: "Here am I, here are you/But what does it mean? What are we going to do?" (Auden 1937: 19)

Tagore's play *Red Oleanders*, first published in 1925, chronicles a similar modernist preoccupation with the sterility of human existence and anxiety about the eventual consequences of such a barren and de-spiritualised way of life. Nandini's remarks about the ill effects of rampant industrialisation, the adverse effects of destroying nature indiscriminately, about the sterility and the hollowness of modern human existence echo the anxieties and the preoccupations of Eliot and Auden: "It puzzles me to see a whole city thrusting its head underground, groping with both hands in the dark. You dig tunnels in the underworld and come out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past." (Tagore 2012: 4) Nandini's words highlight the destructive tendencies that mark the modern age, which is viciously bent on extracting all that it can from mother earth, on exploiting the weak and the marginalised: "The living heart of the earth gives itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom and disturb the dead, you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious. Don't you see everybody here is either angry, or suspicious, or afraid?" (Tagore 2012: 15)) Through the utterances of the King of the Underworld Tagore articulates his apprehensions about the direction in which human civilization seemed to be heading:

> One day Nandini, in a far off land, I saw a mountain as weary as myself. I could not guess that all its stones were aching inwardly. One night I heard a noise, as if some giant's evil dream had moaned and moaned and suddenly snapped as under. Next morning I found the mountain had disappeared in the chasm of a yawning earthquake. That made me understand, how overgrown power crushes itself inwardly by its own weight. (Tagore 2012: 19)

With its relentless obsession with material well being, with power, with a blind groping after a "success" which was sure to, eventually, lead to spiritual sterility and emotional void, modern human civilisation appeared to be doomed to intense anguish, melancholy and wretchedness.

The Waste Land ends with a message of hope, with the anticipation and the possibility of a possible redemption:

> *Damyata:* The boat responded
> Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
> The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
> Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
> To controlling hands
> Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
> Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot 1969: 74)

In Rabindranath Tagore's collection of poems entitled *Balaka* one can detect a similar strain of optimism, in spite of the dreadfulness and terrors of war that several of the poems deal with and highlight. The poem "The Oarsmen" clearly points towards this particular aspect of Tagore's poetry: "And we die with the faith that Peace is true,/ and Good is true, and true is the eternal One!" (Tagore 1955: 54) Both T. S. Eliot and Rabindranath Tagore highlight the sad plight of the modern civilization, the aridity of

the soul of the modern man—but both the poets voice their hopes of a possible redemption, of the possibility of deliverance, of salvation by following Upanishadic ideas of sacrifice, sympathy and control of our all that is negative within ourselves.

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