



Tagore-the Nobel Laureate: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) was an Indian Bengali writer who was a towering figure of 20th century world literature. Apart from being a prolific writer, he was also an influential artist and a musician. Tagore’s best known work in poetry, Gitanjali, led to him receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 making him the first Asian Nobel Laureate. Among the numerous contributions of Tagore is introducing the short story genre to Bengali literature; moving Indian poetry towards Modernism; and founding the prestigious Visva Bharati University. Moreover, Tagore composed the national anthem of India as well as Bangladesh while contributed to the national anthem of Sri Lanka. Due to this, he remains the only person in the world to have penned the national anthem of more than one nation.

Key words: Nobel, Laureate, educational, environment, etc.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Not only Indian but was Asia’s first Nobel Laureate, was born into a prominent Calcutta family known for its socio-religious and cultural innovations during the 19th Bengal Renaissance. The profound social and cultural involvement of his family would later play a strong role in the formulation of Rabindranath’s educational priorities. His grandfather Dwarkanath was involved in supporting medical facilities, educational institutions and the arts, and he fought for religious and social reform and the establishment of a free press. His father was also a leader in social and religious reform, which encouraged a multicultural exchange in the family mansion Jorasanko. Within the joint family, Rabindranath’s thirteen brothers and sisters were mathematicians, journalists, novelists, musicians, and artists. His cousins, who shared the family mansion, were leaders in theatre, science and a new art movement. The tremendous excitement and cultural richness of his extended family permitted young Rabindranath to absorb and learn subconsciously at his own pace, giving him a dynamic open model of education, which he later tried to recreate in his school at Santiniketan. Not surprisingly, he found his outside formal schooling to be inferior and boring and, after a brief exposure to several schools, he refused to attend school. The only degrees he ever received were honorary ones bestowed late in life. His experiences at Jorasanko provided him with a lifelong conviction concerning the importance of freedom in education. He also realized in a profound manner the importance of the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity, and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one’s cultural and natural environment.

His first notable book of lyrics, Sandhya Sangit (1882; “Evening Songs”), won the admiration of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Tagore later wrote in his Reminiscences, “the sadness and pain which sought expression in the Evening Songs had their roots in the depth of my being.” The book was closely followed by Prabhat Sangit (1883; “Morning Songs”), in which he celebrated his joy at the discovery of the world around him. The new mood was the outcome of a mystical experience he had had while looking at the sunrise one day: “As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment



through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light,” he recalled in *Reminiscences*. He recounted this experience in greater detail in *The Religion of Man*: “I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art. To this Being I was responsible; for the creation in me is His as well as mine.” He called this Being his *Jivan devata* (“The Lord of His Life”), a new conception of God as man’s intimate friend, lover, and beloved that was to play an important role in his subsequent work.

His newly awakened sense of all-pervading joy in the universe expressed itself in *Chhabi O Gan* (1884; “Pictures and Songs”) and *Kari O Kamal* (1886; “Sharps and Flats”), in which he boldly celebrated the human body in such poems as “Tanu” (“Body”), “Bahu” (“Arms”), “Chumban” (“The Kiss”), “Stan” (“Breasts”), “Deher Milan” (“Physical Union”), and “Vivasana” (“Undraped Beauty”). He described *Kari O Kamal* as “the Song of Humanity standing on the road in front of the gateway of the Palace of Life” and believed it to be an important landmark in the evolution of his poetic outlook. It was, however, his new contemplative, mystical, religious, and metaphysical tone dominating *Manasi* (1890; “The Mind’s Creation”), *Sonar Tari* (1894; “The Golden Boat”), *Chitra* (1896), *Naivedya* (1901; “Offerings”), *Kheya* (1906; “Ferrying Across”), and *Gitanjali* (1910; Song Offerings) that gave his lyrical poetry depth, maturity, and serenity and that eventually brought him world renown with the publication of the English translations of *Gitanjali* in 1912.

The publication of *Gitanjali* was the most significant event in Tagore’s writing career, for, following the volume’s appearance, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913—the first such recognition of an Eastern writer. And yet this slender volume of poems, which was “hailed by the literary public of England as the greatest literary event of the day” and which created “the literary sensation of the day” in America, according to the editors of the *Literary History of the United States*, reached English readers almost by chance. As Tagore explained in a letter to his niece Indira, he undertook the task of translating some of his poems into English during a March, 1912, illness that delayed his departure for England; he began his translations because he “simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in the days gone by.” And once on board the ship in May 1912, he continued his translations to while away the time of travel.

Role and Impact of Rabindernath Tagore Education Philosophy on Indian Education

In Tagore’s philosophy of education, the aesthetic development of the senses was as important as the intellectual—if not more so—and music, literature, art, dance and drama were given great prominence in the daily life of the school. This was particularly so after the first decade of the school. Drawing on his home life at Jorasanko, Rabindranath tried to create an atmosphere in which the arts would become instinctive. One of the first areas to be emphasized was music. Rabindranath writes that in his adolescence, a cascade of musical emotion ‘gushed forth day after day at Jorasanko. We felt we would try to test everything,’ he writes, and no achievement seemed impossible...We wrote, we sang, we acted, we poured ourselves out on every side.’ rather



involved them with whatever he was writing or composing. The students were allowed access to the room where he read his new writings to teachers and critics, and they were encouraged to read out their own writings in special literary evenings. In teaching also he believed in presenting difficult levels of literature, which the students might not fully grasp, but which would stimulate them. The writing and publishing of periodicals had always been an important aspect of Jo rasanko life, and students at Santiniketan were encouraged to create their own publications and put out several illustrated magazines.

Rabindranath Tagore's Works

Tagore, the Poet

Tagore wrote his first verse when he was only eight years old. Like a poet born to compose, verses subsequently poured naturally from his pen. With the publications of “Sandhya Sangit” (Evening Songs) in 1882 and “Prabhat Sangit” (Morning Songs) in 1883 Rabindranath secured his place among the most distinguished poets of his era. His interest in the observation of ordinary people’s lives in ordinary situations found expression in poems published under the title “Chhabi O Gan” (Pictures and Songs).

Every Journey Is a Pilgrimage

Tagore enjoyed traveling and made many friends abroad. He traveled all over Europe and Asia, including England, France, Italy, Russia, China, and Japan. He celebrated his sixtieth birthday in Germany. In Stockholm, the Swedish Academy paid him rich tribute. At the personal invitation of the king Reza Shah Pahlavi, Tagore visited Persia, in April and May of 1932, and paid homage in the city of Shiraz to two great masters of Persian poetry, Hafiz (1320-1389) and Saadi (1184-1283).

Tagore’s last pilgrimage ended on August 7, 1941. He was 80 years old. His poem “A Farewell” speaks poignantly to the themes of death and departure:

Tagore's Works in the Asian Division

The Asian Division’s South Asian collection holds many works by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali, as well as a number of contemporary scholarly publications on his life and legacy. Here are a few titles for further reading:

“Rabindranathera Galpaguccha” (1970, first published in 1900)

“Ghare Baire” (The Home and the World, 1950, first published in 1916)

“Gora” (Fair-Skinned, 1951, first published in 1910)

Sudhakar Chattopadhyay’s “Rabindranatha o bharatiya sahitya”

The role and impact of Tagore’s education philosophy as reflected in contemporary educational institution of India are as follows:

- i. **Intellectual Development:** Tagore also greatly emphasized the intellectual development of the child. By intellectual development he means development of imagination, creative free thinking, constraint curiosity and alertness of the mind, Child should be free to adopt his own way learning which will lead to all round development.
- ii. **Natural growth in Natural Circumstance:** Tagore envisaged that nature is the best teacher to the pupil. Nature will provide the student with necessary situation to earn knowledge. No pressure should be exerted upon the student to learn anything. It is nature which will be the



guiding force to inculcate the spirit of learning in the mind of a student to pursue the education he likes. It will shape his behaviour and character.

- iii. **Freedom to Learner:** Tagore had championed the cause of freedom. The same he wanted to implement in the field of education. With that object he had opened Santiniketan, Sri Niketan and Brahmachari Ashram. Accordingly, he gave free choice to students to develop their interest in any field they like. To him, education should be after the heart of a man. He explained freedom in three-categorized ways i.e. freedom of heart, freedom of intellect and freedom of will. Education imparted in a natural way will lead to the fulfillment of these three freedoms. One may pursue the vocational education or education of an intellect, or education in any branch of the arts or one may become a sansei by observing celibacy.
- iv. **Self Realization:** Spiritualism is the essence of humanism. Manifestation of personality depends upon the self-realization and spiritual knowledge of individual.
- v. **Love for Humanity:** Tagore held that education can teach people to realize oneness of the globe. Education for international understanding and universal brotherhoods another important aim of his educational philosophy.

The rise and fall of a poet

These prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years [...]" (Yeats, 1913). This is William Butler Yeats in 1912, writing his famous Introduction to the English version of Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali, published the following year. We have here peeped into the second sentence of the Introduction. Yeats is so excited that he cannot postpone sharing it with his readers. He actually goes so far as to claim that "Tagore's lyrics [...] display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture [...]". In 1935, however, Yeats begins a letter to his friend with the words "Damn Tagore". What happened in those twenty-odd years to turn a qualified admirer into a detached denouncer? Actually, since Yeats' reaction was characteristic of the West, rather than an isolated instance, we had better ask what happened with the Western readers of Tagore? Tagore was a writer of prodigious production. By the time he came out of his teens he had accumulated an opus that in itself would have been quite sufficient not to make the long eighty years of his life seem only modestly productive. He wrote in Bengali, his mother tongue, and enjoyed an extraordinary reputation among his countrymen, though not undivided. Indeed, not few were those objecting to the audacity of his style, all kinds of technical innovations and the unconventional treatment of only seemingly traditional motifs. In the West he was completely unknown

The rise and fall of a poet's public

Multiple are the reasons behind this shooting parabola. We shall here try to trace them, moving from the apparent to the less obvious. First of all, what has been stressed innumerable times has to be repeated once again: among those who have been able to read Tagore in the original it is a matter of common agreement that translations of his poetry, to any language, are only a very feeble echo of its original richness and sound. Bengali has been called the Italian of India and one of the most melodious Indo-European languages, occasionally even the most melodious. Moreover, contrary to Tagore's own and the bulk of subsequent translating practice, what we find as uneven poetic prose is, in Bengali, verse respecting rhythm, metre and rhyme that can be



easily put to 3 music (much of his poems are in fact songs and rely more on their formal features than on the content). Translating his own lines Tagore must have felt the way he did when translating songs of Bengali bauls, wandering poet-singers, describing the job as presenting butterflies with their wings torn out. There are at least two reasons to Tagore's avoiding more formal translations of his own poems. Firstly, he never felt sufficiently confident of his English and had serious doubts even about his translations in prose. Secondly, he considered any attempt at saving the beauty of the original a wild goose chase in the first place, the discrepancy between the original and any target language being, to his mind, unsurmountable. He even openly discouraged his aspiring translators from learning Bengali and resorting to the originals themselves and asked them to rather start

"Tagore's syndrome": echo and pizza effects

Admitting the alleged untranslatability of Bengali verse, admitting Tagore's own oversights in gaining his Western reputation and the relative flatness of much of his later writing, admitting the flaws in some of his Western interpreters, I would still argue that the main culprit for the poet's disappearance from the Western world is the latter's superficial curiosity and only slack readiness to open itself to the Other. Tagore's case has remained the gaudiest instance of one culture going from one extreme to the other in its appreciation of something belonging to a different culture. What began as excitation of the moment was doomed to soon exhaust itself once fresh fuel stopped coming and the interest not being genuine enough to enable any kind of deeper and sustained study. The episode ignominiously ended with Tagore even being accused of getting credit for the work of Yeats, who had supposedly "rewritten" Gitanjali. Tagore's Western illness became first and foremost part of the anamnesis of the West itself. It was not his fall so much as the fall of his public. This is the extreme version of the behavioural pattern we are repeatedly coming across, with Tagore only as a – or rather the – case in point. It typically manifests itself in a somewhat different way, with the West appropriating the Other by adapting it to its own point of view and sensibilities. Although I argued this was not predominantly so in Tagore's case, it typically best acknowledges the Other when the latter is best representing qualities acquired from the West. I would call that the echo effect. In exemplifying it, let us stick to India. More than with Tagore, this indulging in its own reflection, its own echo, becomes visible in the four living Indian authors connected by the Booker Prize, what is generally considered the second best prize in literature at the global level. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* not only won its author the 1981 Booker, but also the 1993 Booker of Bookers, the only one awarded so far. In 1997 Arundhati Roy got hers for the debut novel *The God of Small Things*, with Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* following suit in 2006. Only two years later, it was awarded to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. It is certainly not my intention here to question any of these. My present concern is rather to propose these cases as much likelier instances than Tagore's of the West paying homage to its own taste and/or caprice of the moment. *Midnight's Children*, and Rushdie in general, is hailed as a grand representative of magical realism, a mode of writing the West has come to love so much, being well-suited to its postmodern preference for undermining any stable concept of reality and creating pastiche. However, once the West outgrows its own fashion, it is my suspicion that Rushdie's dashing reputation will be among the



first to suffer. The God of Small Things is very near to making linguistic exuberance its protagonist, which, coupled with a tragic, cross-religious love story in an exotic setting, sounds like a pretty safe formula for gaining the sympathies of a Western panel. I find Kiran Desai's example peculiarly interesting as it can be seen against that of her mother, Anita Desai, who, sustainedly, writes much more careful, penetrating, but, alas, traditional, prose, and has therefore only managed to be short-listed for the Booker, three times, which is in all probability the farthest she will ever get. Finally, *The White Tiger* contains at least two winning factors: the always welcome semi-childlike perspective, and raw, unmitigated depiction of an exotic urban world. Once again, I am not arguing here that all or any of these writers won their awards because of the reasons I summarily sketched, but these are worth considering as elements of an extraliterary pattern that keeps repeating itself in the Western appreciation of non-Western literatures.

Conclusion

Tagore may be viewed as a spiritualist in education. Generally, naturalism discards transcendental experiences. Tagore was a naturalist but his naturalism was not a narrow one. It was a sort of means to spiritualism in which he wanted to develop among the boys. Tagore was a great champion of education for international understanding. He loved his nation and wanted to improve its conditions but in this connection his nationalism was not a narrow one. His patriotism and nationalism led to internationalism. He regarded the world as one and enables us to feel that we have to develop respect for world citizenship also. Tagore's impact on education in India has not been well recognized and through discussion it was found that educational work of Tagore deserves more scrutiny. It needs to be recognized and evaluated by educationists around the world. His impact on education has been felt more but it has not been articulated by researchers, or educationists. Arduous as it is, and for various reasons, constant care has to be taken to read literature simply for what it is. Though there are a number of factors that can and should be taken into account as contributing to our better appreciation, no extraliterary concern may claim to become the criterion of literary excellence. In this respect, contact with a different literary tradition or practice represents particularly slippery ground, there being so many distractions to tempt one into evaluating what should be simply appreciated. The road from impression to judgment is crowded with sirens and colourful blossoms the traveller may enjoy, but not follow. Taking India as a representative of the non-West, exemplified primarily by Rabindranath Tagore, the present text has done nothing toward evaluating its or his literary quality. It has rather intended to clear some of the shrubbery and thus contribute to preparing the ground for a genuine start in unprejudiced literary examination. Tagore's solitary case turned into a syndrome, and everything should be done to eradicate it.

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