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Man of magical poetry Rabindranath Tagore in East and West

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's writing is deeply rooted in both Indian and Western learning traditions. Apart from fiction in the form of poetry, songs, stories, and dramas, it also includes portrayals of common people's lives, literary criticism, philosophy, and social issues. Rabindranath Tagore originally wrote in Bengali, but later reached a broad audience in the West after recasting his poetry in English. In contrast to the frenzied life in the West, his poetry was felt to convey the peace of the soul in harmony with nature.

Keywords: Indian, Western, Poetry, Songs, Stories, Dramas, Bengali, English, Philosophy

Introduction

The profoundly original writer, whose elegant prose and magical poetry Bengali readers know well, is not the sermonizing spiritual guru admired – and then rejected – in London. Tagore was not only an immensely versatile poet; he was also a great short story writer, novelist, playwright, essayist, and composer of songs, as well as a talented painter whose pictures, with their mixture of representation and abstraction, are only now beginning to receive the acclaim that they have long deserved. His essays, moreover, ranged over literature, politics, culture, social change, religious beliefs, philosophical analysis, international relations, and much else. The coincidence of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence with the publication of a selection of Tagore's letters by Cambridge University Press ^[1], brought Tagore's ideas and reflections to the fore, which makes it important to examine what kind of leadership in thought and understanding he provided in the Indian subcontinent in the first half of this century.

Analysis

Given the vast range of his creative achievements, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the image of Tagore in the West is its narrowness; he is recurrently viewed as “the great mystic from the East,” an image with a putative message for the West, which some would welcome, others dislike, and still others find deeply boring. To a great extent this Tagore was the West's own creation, part of its tradition of message-seeking from the East, particularly from India, which – as Hegel put it – had “existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans ^[2].”

Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, Herder, and Schopenhauer were only a few of the thinkers who followed the same pattern. They theorized, at first, that India was the source of superior wisdom. Schopenhauer at one stage even argued that the New Testament “must somehow be of Indian origin: this is attested by its completely Indian ethics, which transforms morals into asceticism, its pessimism, and its avatar,” in “the person of Christ.” But then they rejected their own theories with great vehemence, sometimes blaming India for not living up to their unfounded expectations.

We can imagine that Rabindranath's physical appearance – handsome, bearded, dressed in non-Western clothes – may, to some extent, have encouraged his being seen as a carrier of exotic wisdom. Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese Nobel Laureate in Literature, treasured memories from his middle-school days of “this sage-like poet”:

“His white hair flowed softly down both sides of his forehead; the tufts of hair under the temples also were long like two beards, and linking up with the hair on his cheeks, continued

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into his beard, so that he gave an impression, to the boy I was then, of some ancient Oriental wizard^[3].”

That appearance would have been well-suited to the selling of Tagore in the West as a quintessentially mystical poet, and it could have made it somewhat easier to pigeonhole him. Commenting on Rabindranath's appearance, Frances Cornford told William Rosenstein, “*I can now imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I never could before.*” Beatrice Webb, who did not like Tagore and resented what she took to be his “*quite obvious dislike of all that the Webbs stand for*” (there is, in fact, little evidence that Tagore had given much thought to this subject), said that he was “*beautiful to look at*” and that “*his speech has the perfect intonation and slow chant-like moderation of the dramatic saint.*”

Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, among others, first led the chorus of adoration in the Western appreciation of Tagore, and then soon moved to neglect and even shrill criticism. The contrast between Yeats's praise of his work in 1912, “*These lyrics ... display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long,*” “*the work of a supreme culture*” and his denunciation in 1935, “*Damn Tagore*”, arose partly from the inability of Tagore's many-sided writings to fit into the narrow box in which Yeats wanted to place – and keep – him. Certainly, Tagore did write a huge amount, and published ceaselessly, even in English (sometimes in indifferent English translation), but Yeats was also bothered, it is clear, by the difficulty of fitting Tagore's later writings into the image Yeats had presented to the West. Tagore, he had said, was the product of “*a whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us,*” and yet “*we have met our own image, ... or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream*”^[4].

Yeats did not totally reject his early admiration as Ezra Pound and several others did, and he included some of Tagore's early poems in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which he edited in 1936. Yeats also had some favorable things to say about Tagore's prose writings. His censure of Tagore's later poems was reinforced by his dislike of Tagore's own English translations of his work,

“Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English,”

Yeats explained, unlike the English version of *Gitanjali* which Yeats had himself helped to prepare. Poetry is, of course, notoriously difficult to translate, and anyone who knows Tagore's poems in their original Bengali cannot feel satisfied with any of the translations, made with or without Yeats's help. Even the translations of his prose works suffer, to some extent, from distortion. E.M. Forster noted, in a review of a translation of one of Tagore's great Bengali novels, *The Home and the World*, in 1919:

“The theme is so beautiful,” but the charms have “vanished in translation,” or perhaps “in an experiment that has not quite come off”^[5].

Review

Tagore himself played a somewhat bemused part in the boom and bust of his English reputation. He accepted the extravagant praise with much surprise as well as pleasure, and then received denunciations with even greater surprise, and barely concealed pain. Tagore was sensitive to criticism, and was hurt by even the most far-fetched accusations, such

as the charge that he was getting credit for the work of Yeats, who had “rewritten” *Gitanjali*. This charge was made by a correspondent for *The Times*, Sir Valentine Chirol, whom E.M. Forster once described as “*an old Anglo-Indian reactionary hack.*” From time to time Tagore also protested the crudity of some of his overexcited advocates. He wrote to C.F. Andrews in 1920:

“These people ... are like drunkards who are afraid of their lucid intervals.”

In 1901 Tagore founded an experimental school in rural West Bengal at Shantiniketan (“Abode of Peace”), where he sought to blend the best in the Indian and Western traditions. He settled permanently at the school, which became Visva-Bharati University in 1921. Years of sadness arising from the deaths of his wife and two children between 1902 and 1907 are reflected in his later poetry, which was introduced to the West in *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* (1912). This book, containing Tagore's English prose translations of religious poems from several of his Bengali verse collections, including *Gitanjali* (1910) was hailed by W.B. Yeats and André Gide and won him the Nobel Prize in 1913. Tagore was awarded a knighthood in 1915, but he repudiated it in 1919 as a protest against the Amritsar, Jallianwalla-Bagh Massacre.

From 1912 Tagore spent long periods out of India, lecturing and reading from his work in Europe the Americas, and East Asia and becoming an eloquent spokesperson for the cause of Indian independence. Tagore's novels in Bengali are less well known than his poems and short stories; they include *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare-Baire* (1916), translated into English as *Gora* and *The Home and the World*, respectively. In the late 1920s, when he was in his 60s, Tagore took up painting and produced works that won him a place among India's foremost contemporary artists.

Conclusion

Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal. With his translations of some of his poems he became rapidly known in the West. In fact his fame attained a luminous height, taking him across continents on lecture tours and tours of friendship. For the world he became the voice of India's spiritual heritage; and for India, especially for Bengal, he became a great living institution. Through his works Tagore strongly influenced the development of Bengali as a literary language, enriching its poetry with new forms and meters. His influence of, however, extended to Indian literature as a whole, for he established the short story and the political lyric as genres, added new dimensions to the socio-psychological novel and contributed to the development of critical realism. His poem, “The Soul of the People” (1911) became India's national anthem.

Reference

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2. I have tried to analyze these “exotic” approaches to India (along with other Western approaches) in “India and the West,” *The New Republic*, June 7, 1993,

- and in “Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination,” *Daedalus*, Spring, 1997.
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