

RABINDRANATH TAGORE: CRITICAL ESSAYS. Edited by Mohammad A. Quayum*

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Rabindranath Tagore has never been out of the public imagination, and he speaks to us as a contemporary. Certainly, it has been so in the Indian subcontinent though his reputation in the West has gone through the periods of rise and fall. Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats among others, for instance, were very enthusiastic about Tagore's poetry in the beginning and in fact had adored the poet but later were rather shrill in their criticism of his poetry. The poet's one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary, however, has come as an opportunity to revisit Tagore and the enormous corpus of his work. And indeed we find a resurgence of interest in him. Fresh studies of his life and writings as well as new translations and editions of his works encompassing the vast range of his creative and intellectual achievements are on view. *The Poet and His World*, edited by Mohammad Quayum, is a timely volume that puts together insightful readings of the many facets of the poet who has been aptly described as "the myriad-minded man" (Dutta and Robinson 1).

Besides the introduction, which gives a thematic overview of the book, there are thirteen essays by well known Tagore scholars. Martin Kämpchen writes about Hermann Keyserling, maverick philosopher and a "private scholar" who becomes an unlikely friend of the poet (Tagore felt uneasy with the "overbearing nature" of Keyserling who in turn was not impressed with Tagore's poetry, but with his personality) (41). Significantly, both shared a spiritual vision, which was perhaps also a need of their troubled times, and it

provided a healing touch especially to the Germans scarred by war and the humiliating terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty. Such a spiritual concordance struck a chord with European intellectuals as Western civilization sank to a low point between the two world wars. The professed aim of the two savants was to bring about a synthesis of East and West. Keyserling's School of Wisdom and Tagore's Santiniketan stood as embodiments of their ideas.

Sukanta Chaudhuri in his essay demystifies Tagore's image as a reclusive poet-sage and the larger-than-life persona built up around him. This inevitably led to projecting his international image and fetishizing his Nobel Prize, which detracts from an objective assessment of his merit.

Tagore was deeply committed to humanity and his "Religion of Man" is a testimony to his faith. Mohammad Quayum affirms that this commitment was indeed central to his imagination. He takes issue with the diatribe against the poet by some sanctimonious Muslim critics who saw Tagore as an apologist for Hindu fundamentalism, and argues that he was a staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity. He was critical of religious orthodoxy, and his association with the Brahma Sabha and the Brahmo Samaj revealed his catholic outlook.

William Radice sees Tagore's work as an educationalist and as a poet. Indeed, education, as Kathleen M. O'Connell believes, was a central mission of the poet. Santiniketan, his "life's best treasure," was set up to impart a mode of education which facilitated the development of human life to endow it with creativity, fullness and dignity (109). It provided imaginative and robust ways of responding to several environmental and socio-political challenges of modern times. Tagore had a pragmatic approach to education and linked it purposefully to life. It was at Sriniketan that he launched the rural reconstruction work.

Uma Das Gupta takes a wider perspective on Tagore, who set up Visva-Bharati to bring the East and West closer and foster global fellowship through the study of Asian and Western cultures. Tagore envisioned a pan-Asian revival based on ancient wisdom and spirituality to combat the materialism of the West. He firmly believed that modernization is achievable without surrendering inwardness and compassion. He was especially drawn to the wisdom of China. It is a pity that Tagore's advocacy of Buddhism as a historic bond between India and China has often been ignored.

"Nation" and "nationalism" are pervasive themes in Tagore's work, and Mohammad Quayum devotes his essay, "Empire and Nation," to interrogating Tagore's ideas on the intersecting discourses of empire and nation. Quayum

finds that even in his less examined literature, his letters and travel writings, Tagore problematises nation and nationalism. Nationalism, as the postcolonial critics would maintain, is not a natural entity but a social contract, which often begets intolerance and "othering." This othering inevitably engenders violence. For Gandhi, the nation was an axiomatic concept within the nationalist discourse to be deployed as a legitimate basis for national solidarity into the Non-Cooperation movement. But Tagore attacked Gandhi's movement which, in spite of its non-violent objectives, had generated much epistemic violence against the British. He also questioned the moral grounds of standing up against the British while the Indian society itself was deeply divided and was mired in its iniquitous caste system. All the same, he had an anti-colonial stance which he never abandoned. We may recall how he returned his knighthood after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It is not without reason that Gandhi lauded the poet as "an ardent nationalist" (Bhattacharya 216).

For Tagore, the nation is distinctively modern and exclusively Western, with a definite purpose which is reified in the form of the state. Therefore, in his critique, the nation is always the nation-state. It is also a critique of the western social organization based on coercive uniformity. But Narasingha P. Sil does not agree with Tagore's contention that nations were not known in pre-British India, since Kautilya talked about *rashtra* as far back as the third century. The kingdoms of the Mauryas and Guptas had gigantic state apparatuses and committed excesses not very different from those of the modern nation-states. On the other hand, movements like the Renaissance and the Reformation flourished under the state patronage in Europe. Tagore was appreciative of the intellectual accomplishments of the British. He was only opposed to their crass materialism, a view which he shared with Gandhi. Instead of the ideology of nation, Tagore advanced the idea of *swadeshi samaj*, based on cooperation and mutual concern. Narasingha asserts that "His vision of a communitarian utopia, *swadeshi samaj*, cannot be easily dismissed as a variety of metaphysical nonsense" (183). In fact, it was the simplistic notion of national identity resulting from the nationalist inversion of Orientalism that was an anathema to him.

Abhjit Sen in his essay discusses another side of Tagore as a performer who combined in himself the roles of author, actor and producer, and created what has been called a "new theatre" (188-189). Ananda Lal provides a blueprint for reviving Tagore Performance, warning against stereotyping the Tagorean "styles" and "methods" or standardising his music, the Rabindrasangeet, which is capable of infinite variety of performances (200). Tagore himself was always experimenting in his quest for the new.

As the conscience of his times, Tagore stood up for the underprivileged and the marginalised, creating in his fiction powerful protagonists, and giving voice to those on the margins of family or societal life. Lalita Pandit Hogan comments on Binodini of *Chokher Bali* who she sees as a Dionysian figure “who destroys social forms so that their fragility and bad faith can be exposed. This Dionysian rupture is aimed at giving expression to the abjection of widowhood, while purifying it of symbolic pollution associated with death” (208).

In another essay, Quayum gives a detailed textual and contextual reading of *The Home and the World*, perhaps the most well known of Tagore’s novels set against the Swadeshi movement. With the exception of a few critics such as Lukács who condemned it outright as “a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind,” (Lukács 1983) it has been praised enormously by readers . Located at a critical point in the history of India’s freedom movement, it is a tragic narrative of how nationalism and ethnocentrism coalesce to ultimately subvert the values that hold the nation together. Tagore created a remarkable character Bimala, a “new” Indian woman at the turn of the century. Tagore’s “new woman” is not a disembodied figure; she embodies a strong political cultural identity (249). The “new woman” is also the subject of Tagore’s short story “The Laboratory,” which is very well-analysed by Bharati Ray, who comments on how intimately Tagore showed an understanding of women’s psyches.

Tagore’s genius cannot be fully fathomed or recognized by merely looking at his “texts.” Art for him was a nourishing principle of life and not a cultural product. And so great was his contribution to various fields of activity and thought that it would be difficult to encapsulate these in a single volume. *The Poet and His World*, however, succeeds admirably in touching upon the manifold concerns of the poet and the man, who was a humanist to the core, and whose reflections on the human condition are so relevant in today’s world. He belongs to India as much as he belongs to the rest of the world. His understanding of universality is not of an abstract Kantian sort, for he worked on particular cultural traditions to provide the bases for understanding and ethically relating to others. It is not akin to a postmodern toleration of alterity, but an effort to dissolve invidious elements of otherness altogether and to enrich one’s own tradition through hermeneutic absorption and assimilation. Being a citizen of the world at large is a lonely enterprise; a kind of an exile away from the comfort of hearth and home. Tagore knew it and called for *ekla chalo* (walk alone) when it came to that.

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