

**Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011. 306 pp. ISBN 978-81-250-4319-5.**

Rabindranath Tagore's reputation is unique in that, despite being a writer in one of India's regional languages, he was not only the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1913) – in fact, the first Asian to win the Prize under any category – but also one of the four founders of Modern India, the other three of the great quartet being Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar. For his versatile creativity he is compared to the German genius Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Quite legitimately, a spate of commemorative celebrations under various auspices to mark his 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary on May 8, 2011 spawned frenetic response to his outstanding achievements and has since yielded a plethora of publications. Mohammad A. Quayum's painstaking pursuit of encasing Tagore's complex and many-sided literary talent stands out in a string of widely circulated recent books, such as Amit Chaudhuri's *On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today* (2011), Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation* (2011) and Michael Collins' *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World* (2011). Chaudhuri's book places Tagore in the larger context of global literature; Bhattacharya maps out the Tagorean terrain through the lens of a historian, taking apart the Bengali polymath's copious writings and depicting the contours of their relationship with a unified idea that undergirds the diverse range of Rabindranath's writing, while Collins places Tagore in the context of imperial history and builds a convincing case for the evolution of Tagore's ideas on empire and the nation. More engagingly, and perhaps thoroughly too, the thirteen essays in Quayum's edited volume extract the salience of Tagore's genius. In doing so, the essays demonstrate compelling expertise in the explication of his vision and concern.

In his essay, "Rabindranath Tagore and Hermann Keyserling: A Difficult Friendship," Martin Kämpchen appraises the essential nature of friendship between the free-wheeling German philosopher and the hugely prolific Indian poet. Count Hermann Keyserling (1880-1946) and Kabiguru Rabindranath (1861-1941) were not direct contemporaries. There were sharp differences in their nature and temperament. However, both disliked formalised academic life, especially doctrinaire system of academic philosophy and as such there were notable parallels amidst striking contrasts. Kämpchen notes how a synthesis of the "West" and the "East" shaped their intellectual preoccupation. This synthetic flavour informed their passion for founding a non-formal school. The pedagogical project of Keyserling's School of Wisdom in Darmstadt coming up at the end of 1920 had a remarkable similarity with that of the school for

children at Santiniketan founded in 1901 by Rabindranath, which grew into an international university known as Visva-Bharati in 1921 and is now one of the premier centrally administered institutions of higher education in India.

Keyserling considered Rabindranath an avid advocate of inter-civilisational alliance, “the first ecumenical man of Indian nationality.” He was fascinated by the latter’s universalistic philosophy which, though sometimes vague and iridescent, was nonetheless assimilative, protean and enormously versatile in the Count’s magnanimous estimation of the Indian poet whom he had met on three different occasions – in Calcutta (1912), in London (1913) and in Darmstadt, Germany (1921), and was in correspondence with until 1938, three years before Tagore’s death. However, their friendship, as the title of Martin Kämpchen’s essay declares, was difficult in that Rabindranath’s response to Keyserling’s effusive appreciation was laconic and at best lukewarm. Evidently, the latter was in personal spell of the poet radiating mystic charm and divine compulsion.

While Tagore’s indivisible sanity and sumptuous creativity won him international admiration, his absorption into the total fabric of Bengali life across social divisions accounts for his amazing iconic status among his compatriots. Sukanta Chaudhuri looks for the factors that have fuelled Tagore’s undimmed legacy and invested it with contemporary relevance. With Rabindrasangeet spearheading the poet’s cultural popularity, Tagore has thoroughly permeated the Bengali ethos with the ingredients of theism and secularism in his multi-faceted humanism. He fortified the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal Renaissance by urging all the elements in the indigenous culture and assimilating the positive potentials of the impact of Western civilisation. Besides the cultural life of Bengal, Rabindranath has left an indelible mark on the economic and administrative map of the region and is implanted in the popular sensibility by transcending his own class location and extending his empathy with all classes and social groups. As Chaudhuri pithily makes his point, “This deep-seated high-cultural component in a community’s total definition of itself does not, to my knowledge, exist anywhere else in India, and perhaps seldom in the world” (64).

In his three essays in this anthology, M.A. Quayum engages with Tagore’s literary representations of Muslims, the discourses of empire and nation in his travel writings, and his political imagination in *The Home and the World* respectively. He defends Rabindranath’s secular, humane and open-minded stance in his literary discourses against the recent parochial and malicious propaganda of a group of jingoistic and ultra-Muslim cyber critics, such as Shakil Sarwar, Taj Hashmi, Tayeb Husain and Mohammad Abdullah. In a cogent argument supported by credible and clinching textual evidence from Tagore’s novels, short stories, essays and letters, Quayum denounces the communal rhetoric of these dogmatic critics. He cites a slew of positive portrayals of inter-

communal amity and sanity in Tagore's works, for instance, Rahmat's innocent love for Mini in "Kabuliwala," and Habir Khan's altruistic, avuncular and charitable concern for Kamala in "The Story of a Mussalmani." Equally, orthodox customs, moribund social practices and monomaniacal religiosity are critiqued and condemned in the novel *Gora* as well as in short stories like "Purification," "The Exercise Book," "Trespass" and "The Parrot's Training." Notably in addition, it was Tagore's mission as a zamindar (landlord) living in Shelaidah in Kustia district to "save the Sheikhs from the Sahas" and heal the cleavages of class and status. The Mandal system was Tagore's innovative idea for rural reconstruction and independent economic and social space for the poor peasantry of East Bengal which is now Bangladesh.

The trauma of India's vivisection and its continuing reverberations have been greatly exacerbated by the partition memories in the subcontinent. The anti-Tagore canard whipped up by bigoted elements was defied by Bengalis of East Pakistan in 1961. The popular news daily, *Azad*, joined the sectarian move to denounce the Tagore legacy on the promptings of the government, while *Ittefaq* and *Sangbad* defended the poet against this propaganda and vilification. The Bengali culture of East Pakistan was preserved and revived by such upsurge in favour of Tagore. During the war between India and Pakistan in early September 1965 Tagore's songs were banned on government-controlled radio and TV. A cultural organisation, *Chhayanot*, emerged in response to the ban in East Pakistan. Although during the recent years Tagore has lost some of the ground he gained<sup>1</sup> during the suppressive tirade supported by the anti-Bengali policy of the then Pakistani government, his literary standing remains indisputable and now emerges unscathed in Quayum's interpretation of the poet's secular and syncretic vision.

Tagore was an ardent advocate of humanitarian universalism. The ideational conflict between narrow nationalistic focus and the basic human values which lay at the core of human civilisation preoccupied him both in his literary works and travel writings. Quayum notes how the Tagorean ideal articulated forthrightly in a string of letters, interviews and speeches are rooted in the Upanishadic principles of *Santam* (the true peace), the *Sivam* (the true goodness) and *Advaitam* (the love, the oneness with all and with God). The spiritual basis of his political creed informs Tagore's plea for mutuality and equality between the races conducive to the growth of a non-hegemonic and harmonious global society. He saw European nationalism snowballing into expansive imperialism. The empire-hungry nations jettisoned their own vaunted values in their rapacious and aggrandising quest for wealth and power. Sure enough, the West was far from being at its best with its unbridled nationalism and imperial arrogance, its self-seclusion and parochialism. It was detrimental to

<sup>1</sup> Ghulam Murshid, "Poet of the Padma." *Frontline* 28.27 (Dec. 31, 2011-January 13, 2012).

basic human values and bred misery and injustice in the world. As Quayum rightly says, Tagore's critique of nationalism and imperialism is consistent in the entire corpus of his writing and its validity has been vindicated by the ideological positions of prominent postcolonial critics and demonstrably ratified by the recent events in Iraq.

Rabindranath's political ideas are passionately pressed into the service of his political imagination. His ideology serves as ballast to his literary offerings that are evidently moving, eloquent and relevant to their ethos and provenance. The commitment to his moral vision at times undermined the necessary degree of creative detachment in his literary discourses, as is evidenced by the palpable clash of ideas around which the story of *The Home and the World* revolves. Although, answering the question regarding the purpose of writing the novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), Tagore declared the work as "creative," not "educative," the signature of the author's times or the historical context can easily be seen on the storyline. The introspective idealist Nikhilesh holds superior humanist values as against the unscrupulous pragmatist Sandip, who is devoted to a most narrowly conceived idea of the nationalist agenda. In addition, Nikhilesh concedes autonomy to his wife Bimala while Sandip makes her his instrument. The novel may be read as a critique of the Hindu nationalist conception of femininity. While Quayum notes that the espousal of "anti-nationalitarian sentiment, conceived against a backdrop of a larger ideology of love, creation and global human fellowship" (246) constitutes the conceptual texture of the novel, another perceptive reader of the novel notes that the novel "leaves us with an interesting puzzle." As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya in a recent interpretation of Tagore puts it: "Did Tagore portray in Nikhilesh his own perception of his failure to convince the public that Tagore's view of politics was the correct one?"<sup>2</sup> Quayum, on the other hand, views this novel as an allegory and underlines its message: "Love and fellowship, like commodities, do not have to stop at a geographical border, and in spite of the ostensible spatial demarcation between the home and the world, the two remain fundamentally united as integral aspects of one organic whole."

Tagore's ideal of international co-operation, good neighbourliness and inter-cultural bonding is exemplified by Visva-Bharati University which he founded and shaped with exceptional dedication in order to foster and institutionalise universalism. Uma Dasgupta in her essay on Visva-Bharati which is, true to its logo, a "one-nest world," shows how Rabindranath's uncommon educational venture is conflated with his commitment to vibrant and dynamic internationalism. Focusing on the ancient ties between India and China, she recounts Tagore's attempt at fortifying the cultural affinity between the two

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<sup>2</sup> Sabyashachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*. New Delhi: Viking, 2011, 129.

Asian neighbours. The first regular Chinese class was started at Visva-Bharati in 1924 by Dr. Lin Ngo-Chiang. A few years later, Tan Yun-Shan's arrival at Visva-Bharati in 1928 helped forge further inter-cultural links between the two great Eastern civilisations. Hall of Chinese Studies or Cheena Bhavan of Visva-Bharati University came up in 1937. Tagore's inaugural address for the Cheena Bhavan, Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to China in 1939 and that of Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek to India in 1942 lifted the Indo-Chinese relations from oblivion and imbued it with a fresh mutuality and understanding. The propelling vision was of course Tagore's.

Notwithstanding the theme of internationalism being positively foregrounded in this volume by several contributors, it has been problematised by Narsingha P. Sil in his essay, "Rabindranath Tagore's Nationalist Thought: A Retrospect." Sil gives high marks to Tagore for the grandeur and sublimity of his salutary and inspiring vision, but finds it utopian and unfeasible in "the mechanized, organized, regulated, regimented, and *quid pro quo* transactional world of nation-states that resembles... the City of Man" (182). Sil also finds fault with Tagore's reading of Indian and English history and sees his "views on human life... squarely situated in his vision of an idealized world" (180), without "a blueprint for his preferred polity" (181). The critique of Tagore's nationalism here sounds cogent but the distinction between patriotism and nationalism proposed by Sil is less than compelling in that both sprung from patriotic loyalism and as such were projects of anti-colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Tagore would warn urgently that both patriotism and nationalism were apt to mutate into an exclusionary political creed subverting substantive universal values. He was also of the view that if the emergent patriotism inculcating India's incipient freedom struggle was propelled with a narrow geographical focus, it would be perverted by ethnocentricities and its defining essence would slide into a limited cartographic imagination. In his reading of India's history Sil also disregards the fact that at no point of time, before British conquests, had India's spatial integrity in the form of a specific territory been underpinned by a stable map. This is why John Strachey, a senior colonial official in the 1880s, could not figure out India's sensuous geography in a speech to Cambridge University undergraduates:

[T]here is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India... no nation, no 'people of India' of which we hear so much... [T]hat the men of the Punjab, Bengal, the North-west Provinces, and Madras, should ever feel that they belong to one great Indian nation, is impossible....<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*. New Delhi: Penguin, updated paperback edition, 1999, 153-54.

<sup>4</sup> John Strachey, *India*. London, 1886; ctd. in Khilnani 154 and in Tanika Sarkar 39.

The situation dramatically changed as dispersed geographies were melded by anti-colonial upsurge.

While Tagore directed loyalty towards the affective world of Indians – both regional and pan-Indian, he deprecated xenophobia and sectarianism that lay at the heart of nationalist politics. In other words, he offered, as Tanika Sarkar notes, “a radically new way of being an Indian patriot,”<sup>5</sup> which does not wish away the material world represented by maps. As the great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote in 1961, Tagore’s prescient and sharp thoughts in *Nationalism* (1917) has a certain validity today – at least as a premise for human exploration – given the reality of a shrinking world.

Other contributions of note in this anthology are the essays by William Radice, Kathleen M O’Connell and Lalita Pandit Hogan as well as the essays by Abhijit Sen, Ananda Lal and Bharati Ray. They deal with the subjects ranging from Tagore’s vision on education and women to the need for exploiting the potential of creative experimentation with his performance texts in theatre, music and dance and exploring the possibilities for their innovative production. The textual analysis of *Gora*, as promised in the Introduction (3) is missing from the volume. There are only passing references to it with a slip in giving the year of its publication which is 1909, not 1902 as we see in this book.

Finally, as Ashok Mitra noted recently, “Any scope for hope for Tagore and his songs to be more than totem rests with the Bangladeshis, who have clung to Tagore’s language.”<sup>6</sup> The editor’s acknowledgment of that cultural bond as well as his personal admiration for Tagore’s extraordinary literary talent and the staggering range of his perceptive writings which has enriched humanity – in sharp contrast with the sheer “Rabindrik” schmaltz – make this substantial anthology a labour of love.

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<sup>5</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “Rabindranath’s *Gora* and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLIV.30 (July 25, 2009): 37-46.

<sup>6</sup> Ashok Mitra, “Language Barriers.” *Frontline* 28.27, Dec.31, 2011-January 13, 2012.