

Mohammad A. Quayum. *Beyond Boundaries: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2014. 176 pp. ISBN 984-07-5203-0.

I have known Mohammad A. Quayum first as a student, then as one of my young colleagues at the Department of English and later as a researcher and writer. He is one of those of whom we in the Department have reasons to feel proud. He has already translated into English a selection of short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, and edited a collection of critical essays in English on that great writer. Quayum has also done a work worthy of attention, which is an English translation of the works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a writer demanding projection to the non-Bengali speaking world.

Quayum's present book, *Beyond Boundaries: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore*, shows his deep and abiding interest in Rabindranath. He has read that writer with interest and curiosity, and tried to understand him, placing him in the context of intellectual developments – both local and international.

The essays in the book comprise three sections, although they have not been put in that manner. First, there is an introduction to the essays and a biographical account of Rabindranath. These are followed by three essays on Rabindranath's political ideas, with particular reference to his views on nationalism. Then there is a third section, dealing with a number of his writings, including his novel, *The Home and the World*, some of his short stories, and works embodying his representation of Muslims.

The essays in the volume are well-researched, fully documented and written in a style which is both persuasive and pleasant. Altogether the book brings into a new focus the remarkable insights Rabindranath had into human characters and relationships.

The biographical account is carefully arranged. It illuminates Rabindranath's world, indicates his likes and dislikes, without ignoring his inconsistencies, and shows the greatness of a writer, who was at once romantic and practical, and went beyond boundaries. This initial essay brings into sharp relief Rabindranath's contribution to the awakening of his people and provides the readers with the rationale for reading him as a culture hero and, indeed, the most notable symbol of the Indian spirit. It ends with the note that he would have been grievously disappointed had he realised that within six years of his departure the land he had loved would be partitioned into two belligerent halves.

Quayum's treatment of Rabindranath's fictional writings has added to the value of his book. In writing about Rabindranath's short stories, he traces their genesis and relates them to Rabindranath's experiences in rural Bengal and indicates the realism and the understanding with which he looked at his

characters, particularly women and children. Rabindranath was really a path-breaker in the field; he had to develop his own narrative method and style, and in doing that set up models for future practitioners and also became, as Quayum rightly suggests, one of the best short story writers of the world.

Rabindranath had a unique sense of humour, which makes his writing lively and contributes to their lasting appeal. Quayum's treatment of humour in four of Rabindranath's short stories is insightful. Particularly notable is his observation that Rabindranath has not hesitated to project, tongue-in-cheek, his father as well as his own self as a budding writer in two of the stories.

Quayum's defence of Rabindranath against the charges of an anti-Muslim bias is able and conclusive. He shows that although Rabindranath does not have many Muslim characters in his fictional writings owing to his limited contact with the Muslims, Rabindranath was beyond any communal prejudice and had worked, all his life, in his literary works and beyond, for unity between the two communities which he thought was essential for the well-being of the people of his country.

In an interesting essay he puts two unequal writers, Rabindranath and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, together. Clearly, they were very different from each other. Rabindranath and Rokeya were contemporaries; and Rokeya must have known and read Rabindranath as a writer, but we are not aware of Rabindranath's acquaintance with Rokeya's work. Yet, as Quayum has shown, Rokeya was very near Rabindranath in her attitude toward the question, and indeed the necessity, of bringing Hindus and Muslims together. I do not know of any other critic venturing on this hitherto unexplored ground.

Quayum's essay on Rabindranath's widely read and much-discussed, and perhaps the most controversial novel, *The Home and the World*, is a competent piece of literary criticism. He has dwelt on the nearly allegorical political scheme of the novel, indicating that insofar as the three major characters embody political ideas, their presentation constitutes a weakness in the novel. It is not difficult to see that Nikhil stands for Rabindranath, the liberal patriot, who believes in collective progress to be achieved through creative work of individuals, while Sandip, his polar opposite, is the embodiment of violent political action. Sandip is bold in words but cowardly in critical situations. He is a villain, the most diabolical among the characters that Rabindranath has created in his writings. But he is a political character of Rabindranath's own invention, the like of whom did not exist in the Swadeshi movement in which Rabindranath himself had participated, albeit for a very brief period of three months. Because of the dramatic design of the novel, Sandip had to be darkened to work as a foil to the nobility of Nikhil. Rabindranath's poetic language gives Sandip a vitality which Nikhil, the restrained liberal, lacks. Two points are, however, pertinent to note here, which Quayum's essay does not take into account. Firstly, Nikhil is not anti-Swadeshi. The Swadeshi movement

had two aspects, one of boycott of everything foreign, and the other of constructive work, aiming at the promotion of self-reliance and preparation of freedom, which was among the objectives of Gandhi's political ideology. Nikhil is for the constructive part of the liberation struggle, with Sandip representing total and violent boycott. Secondly, although Rabindranath refused to see life as a tragedy, *The Home and the World* ends tragically, with Nikhil getting fatally wounded while trying to pacify a violent communal riot provoked by Sandip's atrocious activities. The riot had a class-bias; it was the outcome of a feeling of insecurity among the less advanced Muslims face to face with a political move by the well-to-do Hindu middle class, which, the Muslims felt, would add to the power of the already powerful and oppressive Hindus *per se*. Nikhil's tragic failure to control, let alone eliminate, the evil let loose by Sandip in his own home as well as in the community over which he is expected to have leadership as a benevolent landlord is an admission by the artist in Rabindranath of the inadequacy of the individualist liberal ideology in which he had reposed his intellectual confidence. Morally, everyone in the novel surrenders to Nikhil, but Nikhil himself is unlikely to survive.

Perhaps it could be noted here that Rabindranath was not a non-believer in nationalism. Along with Gandhi, he has been the most outstanding promoter of Indian national identity. Although Gandhi worked in the political field, he too would have liked to rely on individualist action which he called *Satyagraha* (fighting for truth), and it is not without significance that like Rabindranath's novelistic alter ego, he also had to lay down his life at the hands of extremists.

Quayum has written on Rabindranath's lectures on nationalism with interest and care. In the three lectures Rabindranath delivered – one in Japan and two in America – his voice was that of a Romantic liberal. In the lectures he has given a subjective account of an objective political situation, enriching his presentation with a poetic language which is enchanting without being rhetorical. The similes, metaphors and analogies he uses suggest that what he denounces as political nationalism is really Imperialism. And it was Imperialism, propelled by Capitalism, which was responsible for the devastating War the world was going through during the time the lectures were written. Rabindranath's refusal to identify the malaise as Capitalism is neither untypical nor inexplicable. He was a liberal, fully aware of the evils of Capitalism, but would not like the system to be identified and dismantled for fear of a social revolution, leading to the abolition of private property. Years later, in 1930, he visited Russia and was deeply impressed by the cultural and social changes he witnessed in that country, but did not mention even once Lenin who had led the Russian Revolution. The other reason behind his disinclination to put the Imperialist-Capitalist system in the dock was perhaps related to his attitude toward British imperialism in India. He is fully alive to the harms British rule has caused to India, but despite that knowledge he did not want complete

separation from the British nation. This is because he was of the opinion that the coming of the British to India was “providential,” particularly in respect of the help he thought they had provided in the fields of progress and national unity. Indeed, he has said in the second part of his Nationalism lectures, “We [the Indians] neither have the right nor the power to exclude this people from the building of the destiny of India.”

There is yet another limitation in Rabindranath’s lectures on nationalism which, I feel, Quayum could have pointed out. Rabindranath, one notices, speaks passionately against the aggressive nationalism of the West but fails to appreciate the very positive aspect of anti-imperialist and defensive nationalist movements active in many of the subjugated countries, including his own. Quayum himself condemns the “radical” nationalism of the Pakistanis in perpetrating in East Bengal one of the worst genocides in modern history but fails to notice the fact the Bengalis who fought against the Pakistani hordes were also nationalists, and were even more radical than the killers, with the very important difference that theirs was a defensive nationalism and not offensive.

Quayum seems to be rather angry when he calls Georg Lukacs and D.H. Lawrence a “pack” and says that Lukacs had “pounced upon” Rabindranath. To be sure, both of them had their own standpoints and manner of speaking. Lukacs was a committed Marxist who looked at literature from his ideological point of view and spoke against *The Home and the World* in the manner he did because of his apprehension that the work would have a negative impact on the liberation struggle of India, and Lawrence had in him the makings of a racist who was intolerant of the East and lost his cool because of the contemporary display of what he called the “worship-of-Tagore” attitude.

Rabindranath is a perennial source of joy for readers who read him in the original, and even for those who have to rely on translation. Quayum’s book would certainly be helpful for Rabindranath’s readers in understanding that great writer and in placing him in the liberal tradition of ideology to which he belongs.

I would be looking forward to having further publications by Quayum, and, I feel, so would others.

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