

UDK: 930.85(5+6)

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Reception of Tagore's Work in Croatia¹

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Abstract

Tagore became popular in Croatia soon after he received the Nobel Prize. During the subsequent decades his fame spread in different waves. Mostly it did not depend on the artistic value of his works but was subject to external circumstances. Tagore's popularity reached its apogee in 1926, when he visited Zagreb. The interest in his creativity has persisted till the present day, as can be concluded from a number of published articles dedicated to his work.

Keywords: Tagore, Croatia, reception

Only a year after Rabīndranāth Tagore received the Nobel prize, the Croatian philosopher Pavao Vuk-Pavlović (1894–1976) translated his *Gītāñjali* into the Croatian language. It was one of the first translations after Tagore's own into English, and as far as I know, Andre Gide's into French, published in December 1913 in *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Vuk-Pavlović's translation was published serially in Zagreb's daily journal *The Morning Leaf* over a week in January 1914, to be published as a book in the same year with an introductory note by the translator.

Pavao Vuk-Pavlović also translated Tagore's play *Chitra*, staged in Croatian National Theatre in 1915. There were only three performances, and in 1927 one radio broadcasting. The translation was published in 1940. It is not clear whether the translator worked from Tagore's English translation or a German one published in 1914, or he may have combined the two. The famous Croatian composer Krešimir Baranović (1894–1975) wrote the music for the performance and the main characters were played by well-known actors. The public and critics were satisfied, but not so the famous Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981). In his journal *Davni dani*

¹ This article is greatly indebted to the article of Sveto Petrović, see bibl.

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(Bygone days) on 21 September 1915, at 3 p.m., while sitting in the Botanical gardens, he wrote:

I bother myself. Rabin-Dranath-Tagore. Alfons Verli. He directs *Chitra*. He makes out of it an Uraufführung in Agram. With all the rapture for Upanishads and Rigveda, Tagore, who with this suggestive picture of the East, India, Asia, the Ganges, Budha, reads as though full of spices, tunefully, crossing over to a quasi-lyric monotony, which slowly becomes bothersome like tropical rain, and then starts to irk more and more. What kind of reading is this? For snobs? Or is it that I do not understand it at all? (Krlježa 1915)

Whether Krlježa had read Vuk-Pavlović's translation or attended some theatre rehearsal, we do not know. But obviously, Tagore was not one of his chosen authors. Still, one may ask whether this staging of *Chitra* was not the first in Europe.

Pavao Vuk-Pavlović also translated two of Tagore's plays: *Malini* and *The King of the Dark Chamber (Raja)* – these translations remained unpublished.²

These first translations inaugurated Tagore's reputation in the former Yugoslavia, a reputation which came in three waves. The first wave came after the news of the Nobel Prize and it weakened during the 1st World War. One of Tagore's rivals – and Tagore was quite unaware of the goings-on in Stockholm – was Peter Rosegger, a German patriotic author and a symbol of Drang nach Osten, today completely forgotten, and unpopular in Croatia at that time. When the news came that Tagore won the prize, he was attacked in the German press and for that reason in Croatia all the sympathies went to Tagore. It was Christian intellectuals in particular who welcomed the Indian poet with enthusiasm, discovering some affinity with what they thought was Tagore's mysticism. Only very few of Tagore's admirers tried to understand his *Gītāñjali* as a literary work, and even so they tended to see in his poems predominantly words and feelings of a mystic in a way kindred to the symbolists of the time.

The second wave was sparked off after the end of the 1st World War and was sustained until 1921, with the interest for the poet resurging again in 1926, when Tagore came to Zagreb for a short visit. The liberal intellectuals were the ones now most interested in the poet, seeing in him a spiritual guide for a new civilisation which should replace the European one. Tagore's most famous work for this particular wave was his book *Nationalism*, translated into Croatian in 1921 by Antun Barac. Popular was also his novel *The Home and the World*, thought as a literary extrapolation of *Nationalism*. *Gītāñjali* was no longer in the foreground; instead *The Gardener* under the title *Gradinar* translated by the Serbian Jew David S. Pijade gained in popularity,

² I owe this information to his late wife Dr. Lelja Dobronić, who presented me with both manuscripts.

translated also into Croatian by Iso Velikanović in 1923. Tagore's *The Home and the World* was translated by an anonymous translator in Zagreb in 1922 and published serially, to eventually come out as a book in Miroslav Golik's translation in 1944. From Tagore's *Sādhanā* three essays were translated in 1923.

Tagore was not accepted by what one might call a wide-ranging public. In 1924, Ivo Blažević, a Catholic writer, tried to reject in his article Tagore's pseudo-mysticism.

One can easily conclude that the interest for the author was not connected with Tagore's literary value and most of the writers ignored him with the exception of the Slovenian writers Oton Župančič and Alojz Gradnik and the Croatian poets Tin Ujević (1891–1955) and Dragutin Tadijanović (1905–2007).

During his European tour, Tagore came to Zagreb from Hungary, where he had undergone medical treatment (Balatonfüred). During his two days in Zagreb he stayed in the Hotel Palace and gave his lectures in the Croatian Musical Conservatory hall. He was supposed to give his lecture only once, on 13th November, but due to exceptionally high interest he was asked to repeat his lecture the next day. He spoke in English but recited his poetry in Bengali. Pavao Vuk-Pavlović, his first translator in Croatia, was present at the lecture. Tagore signed Pavao Vuk-Pavlović's personal copy of his own Croatian translation of *Gītāñjali* (1914). In his article *Tagore in Yugoslavia* Sveto Petrović relates the events in Zagreb thus:

... On the morning of November 13th he arrived in Zagreb by train from Budapest. During a stroll in the city he was attracted by a shop exhibiting the products of folk handicrafts; he found the motifs of the embroideries extremely similar to the Hindustani ones, and bought a number of pieces. In the evening he lectured to the packed hall of the Zagreb Conservatory; it is difficult to ascertain the subject of the lecture – none of the numerous press reports mentioned it – but it seems it was broadly equivalent to the lecture on modern civilization he was to give two days later in Belgrade. Anyhow, the audience was enthusiastic; in particular, it warmly greeted the recital of his poems (from *The Gardener*), so he had to repeat it. The whole show lasted for a little more than an hour. As the interest was great and many people were left outdoors, Tagore repeated the lecture next morning. A part of the evening lecture was translated, but the translation was dropped as it irritated the poet. (Petrović 1970: 13)

After Zagreb, Tagore went to Belgrade and by 17th November he was already in Sofia. Tagore's stay in Zagreb was applauded in the press; there was no criticism, yet something was amiss. Sveto Petrović again:

Commercial papers made it the news of the day rivalling each other in thoroughness of information about Tagore's dress, his appearance, his countenance, about the people who came with him and his own wonderful ecstasies that started regularly at three each morning. In the periodicals numerous more intelligent and equally sympathetic accounts of his visit were published.

Discordant voices were hardly heard. Still, reading carefully between the lines of these accounts one may find out that a feeling of uneasiness was present; that only courtesy prevented some unpleasant words from being said. (Petrović 1970: 14)

The poet Dragutin Tadijanović remembered listening to Tagore in 1926, so that years later, for a small gathering devoted to the memory of Tagore's anniversary in 1981, he wrote a poem:

He had hair and beard as white as a fleece of a lamb,
And my hair was black as the wing of a raven,
While I have been watching him and listening,
As if in the mountain a small brook has been tumbling down
from stone to stone,
Until it would rest in a wide field
And in the silence joined the stream of a glittering river.
My hair today is white like the fleece of a lamb
And in my heart even now his silvery voice resounds.³ (Tadijanović 1981)

Tagore's visit to Europe at that time was not a fortunate one. Following his encounter with Mussolini, which was used for fascist propaganda, he went to Horthy's Hungary and after his trip to the former Yugoslavia continued on his tour to Boris's Bulgaria. There can be no doubt that initially Tagore had not the slightest inkling of fascism, and that many of the unfortunate events surrounding his visit and negative feelings about him were due to the fact that Tagore could not understand what was politically really going on in Europe. Another detrimental factor to the poet's reputation was that the organization of his travels was left to the impresarios for whom commercial assets were of key interest. In Zagreb cards with his signature were sold and the entrance fees for his lectures were unusually high. Tagore's impresarios tried to make the event more exotic and attractive to the fashionable society, involving also the head of the Theosophical Society in Zagreb. Tagore must often have felt the artificiality of the

³ "Imao je kosu i bradu bijelu kao vunu janjeta/ A moja je kosa bila crna kao krilo gavrana/ Kada sam ga gledao i slušao/ Kao da je u planini šumorio/ Bistri potok rušeći se s kamena na kamen/ Dok se ne bi smirio u širokom polju/ I u tišini se pridružio toku blistave rijeke/ Moja je kosa danas bijela kao vuna janjeta/ A zvonki njegov glas i danas odjekuje u mom srcu." He wrote the poem while participating at the round-table honouring Tagore's 120th birth anniversary, held in Croatian Writers Union in 1981. Published in the newspaper Vjesnik, 20.5.1981. (translated by Klara Gönc Moačanin)

atmosphere surrounding him, though he seems to have written nothing about his stay in Zagreb.

It is easy to notice that Tagore's popularity did not depend on his literary or his contemplative quality, which also explains why it simply vanished after his short stay. This phenomenon was not unique to Croatia but happened elsewhere in Europe. One can also add an objective reason for this dwindling of Tagore's literary fame in the West related to the problem of the language of the translations and the quality of translations, but this would require a separate treatment.

During 1930s and 40s Tagore was not in vogue in Croatia, but in 1954, with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement and with the establishment of political connections between the former Yugoslavia and India, there came the third wave of Tagore's popularity. *The Gardener* is popular again and in 1961, on the occasion of Tagore's birth centenary a new translation of *Gītāñjali* by the poet Vesna Krmpotić comes out (republished in a new edition in 1980). Even so, Tagore's *The Wreck* and again *The Home and the World* attracted more interest from the Croatian reader than his poetry.

In a big public library in Zagreb (*Gradska knjižnica*), Tagore was among some fifty most frequently read modern writers during 1959 and 1960, and *The Wreck* was one of the most widely read books.

As already mentioned, in 1981 there was a small round-table discussion dedicated to Rabīndranāth Tagore. The famous Croatian composer Bruno Bjelinski (1909–1992) played his compositions inspired by some *Gītāñjali* poems. Furthermore, a small exhibition of Tagore's paintings was held and I made some introductory remarks about his visual language. Satyajit Ray's film on Tagore was also performed.

In 1983, Vesna Krmpotić also published translations of some of Tagore's later poems. A new translation of *The Gardener* by the established Croatian translator Marko Grčić appeared in 1994. Some articles were published: in 1982 Ružica Čičak-Chand wrote about Tagore and his influence on the work of the poet Tin Ujević; Mislav Ježić published an article about Tagore's philosophical views in 1989; in 1991, Zdravka Matišić wrote about the supposed meeting of the Croatian writer Ivana Brlić Mažunarić with Tagore in Zagreb in 1926.

During these last decades, I have tried to rouse more interest for Tagore in Croatia. In 1981 I published an article on his life: *In the memory of the poet Rabīndranāth Tagore*. As I have never been able to fully understand why he was so criticised for his prose works, I wrote an article entitled *An apology which it is not: Rabīndranāth Tagore as a novel-writer and Sanskrit prose tradition*. In 1991 I put together an hour's long radio broadcast dedicated to his memory on the Croatian radio programme 3,

entitled simply *The poet Rabīndranāth Tagore* (the text for the show was later published in *Književna smotra*). I have translated also two of his novels, *Farewell, My Friend* and *Chaturanga*, his play *The Post Office*, and a selection of his short stories, *The Postmaster; The Living and the Dead, Wealth Surrendered, The Editor*, as well as some of his poems, due to different circumstance, these translations have not yet been published.

Recently, Robert Mandić from Spalato (Split), who owns a small editing house, from sheer love of Tagore, published his own Croatian translations of *Gītāñjali, Lover's Gift, Crossing, Fruit Gathering, The Religion of Man, Personality* and *Sadhana*.

It seems to me that the fourth wave of enthusiastic readers of Tagore is not going to appear any time soon. Every three years I teach a course entitled *Introduction to Neo Indo-Aryan and Dravidian Literature*, giving an overview of Bengali literature in which I try to emphasize the outstanding character, role and meaning of Rabīndranāth Tagore as a universal thinker, trying to get students to read *Gītāñjali*, but sadly there is almost no response from the Internet generations of our present-day globalised world. Most of my students seem to have no interest or understanding, or for that matter feelings, for the way Tagore expressed his experience of life and the world.

While talking about Hindī literature in the *chāyāvād* period I try to emphasize the role of Tagore's influence on the Hindī authors of that literary stream. I am even happy if in turn I hear from the students that Tagore was important for these poets. Though there is a kind of renaissance for Tagore in limited educated circles interested in literature and art, both in the West and in India, my feeling is that his sensibility as represented in his works is accessible only to those who, to some extent, share his way of experiencing life.

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