

UDK: 930.85(5+6)

COPYRIGHT ©: ANA JELNIKAR

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore: Between Continents, Literatures and Ideas

Ana JELNIKAR*

Anniversaries of important dates in the lives of writers provide scholars with a pretext to assess the significance of the celebrated individual. They also offer an opportunity to evaluate afresh the state of scholarship in the field, seeking new critical directions. Recognized globally as one of the major poets and thinkers of the modern era, the intricacies of his uneven reputation notwithstanding, Rabindranath Tagore, one might think, needs no such excuse. Nonetheless, with the 150th anniversary of his birth coming up, it is inevitable that the flow of Tagoreana which began in 1913 with the poet's winning the Nobel Prize for Literature will once again gather speed, forcing us, almost a century later, to grapple with the man's legacy and the relevance of his thinking for the world of today.

This volume of contributions by a number of Tagore specialists, Indologists and Asian scholars steals a march on the many publications promised for the year 2011. Does Tagore the creative writer still possess the power to excite our literary taste buds, and Tagore the thinker the salience to address some of the most pressing issues of the contemporary world, spanning global warming and climate change, identity politics and social (dis)integration? Moreover, does Tagore the man of action nudge us out of our intellectual comfort zones by insisting on theory being translated into practice?

The first set of papers engages with Tagore's legacy from a variety of perspectives, taking into account his literary works, practical achievements in education and rural reconstruction, as well as his philosophy, particularly as it applies to his creative writing. What is no doubt a "rich and diverse legacy," which has always meant "different things to different groups of people," as Ketaki Kushari Dyson puts it, is

* Ana Jelnikar, Translator, University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, S1-6000 Koper, Slovenia. E-mail: ajelnikar@yahoo.com

considered also in relation to translation, the politics of language and the importance of keeping the tradition alive and vibrant.

Tagore wrote against the backdrop of what is now commonly understood as the first wave of globalization, when, in ways foreshadowing our own time, the world had shrunk significantly through technological advancements, a communication revolution, global commerce, imperialism and migration. In this expanded international context, cultures and individuals were brought together in unprecedented ways, throwing into sharp relief questions of cultural identities, global cooperation, power inequalities, social cohesion, and so on. Tagore stressed the need to understand local problems in a global perspective, and while his 'ideal of a humanitarian world', to quote from the first contributor Malashri Lal, underpinned his efforts also as a creative writer, Tagore's strategy was to start with the local, the particular, the grass-roots and gradually build it up. This involved thinking differently about the 'Other', the content of which shifted depending on where one stood. Tagore went beyond the more evident cross-cultural dichotomies of colonizer and colonized, bringing to the fore unsettling constructions of the 'Other' also within his own society. Lal's paper engages with the stereotyping of a married Bengali woman and an Afghan trader as gleaned from two of Tagore's famous short stories, *The Wife's Letter* and *Kabuliwala*. It provides an analysis of the ways in which Tagore questioned the received notions of gender and racial identity by successfully blurring the lines between the constructions of 'self' and 'other'. Lal sees this as part of Tagore's larger project of experimenting innovatively in the many genres he used 'by entering the minds of people substantially different from himself'. The author's choice of the two stories also highlights Tagore's relevance today: "Beyond the evident literary quality of the stories lies a domain of contemporary contexts in which Afghanistan and woman's rights provide keys to a global discourse."

The fact that Tagore's concerns were not limited to "the cultural domination that grew out of colonial hegemony but equally with the cultural domination that had evolved from his country's own past and was gathering momentum as a divisive force between city and village in early modern India" is also stressed by Uma Das Gupta. She approaches the humanist side to Tagore from the perspective of his educational and rural reconstruction experiments, as the founder of the international Visva-Bharati University in rural southern Bengal. The poet's half-a lifetime-long effort to bring city and village life together in an alternative form of education that combines traditional knowledge with the findings of modern science, is, the author emphasizes, "central to his national and international concerns throughout his life." Urging us to also lend equal weight to Tagore in his roles as an educationist and rural reformer, Uma Das Gupta acknowledges the sad incompatibility of 'his cosmopolitan educational project'

with ‘the imperatives of a competitive capitalism and nationalism’. How Tagore’s humanist educational ideals can be made applicable for, or withstand the pressures of, a power- and profit-driven world remains a pertinent question.

If Uma Das Gupta’s paper understands Tagore’s making of the institution Visva-Bharati also in terms of an on-going dialectical tension existing between his thought and action, the uneasy relationship between Tagore’s substantial body of discursive writings (his lectures and essays in English and Bengali) and his literary works is pushed to considerably more provocative lengths by William Radice, who wants to have Tagore’s creative writings opened up to fresh perspectives and a more rigorous and challenging approach.

Seeing that reading Tagore’s creative works through the filter of his ideas and ideals has become somewhat of a trend in scholarship and a source of continued misunderstandings, Radice asks what might be gained in our appreciation of his literature if we pretended his discursive writings did not exist, and focused solely on the works themselves and what they are saying. Testing this experimental hypothesis against Tagore’s plays *Bisarjan* (*Sacrifice*, 1890) and *Acalāyatan* (1912), Radice conveys that seeing the plays in terms of a message of non-violence, or an attack on idolatry and Hindu orthodoxy is ultimately reductive and blinds us from appreciating the many strands of humour, the absurd and the irresolvable present in his writing. Tagore is not blameless in this, for he himself, in response to criticism, would often explain his own work in terms of idealistic messages. It is precisely the institution of ‘the messenger’, to which Tagore occasionally succumbed, that needs dismantling, if we are to appreciate the basic fact that literature works in ways far more complex and ambiguous than any one message can capture.

In a compelling personal account, from the perspective of someone who grew up “reading Tagore’s books, listening to his music, watching his dance-dramas, and writing poetry under the inspiration of his words,” Ketaki Kushari Dyson takes the question of Tagore’s legacy head-on. Pointing out that while to a Bengali and an Indian the pride in what she dubs his ‘phenomenal legacy’ (if only in terms of the sheer scope and breadth of his creative output) is certainly justifiable, looking after that heritage is also a ‘serious responsibility’. Asking how best to do this and what ways there are to relate to it, Dyson offers a number of general and concrete pointers that should stimulate a more dynamic and productive approach to Tagore’s formidable legacy in the years to come. Against claims of intellectual proprietorship, she stresses that ‘the right to work on [Tagore] does not belong to insiders alone’ – a point in consonance with Tagore’s own strongly-held universalist beliefs that cultural products belong to the world at large and are there for anyone to claim as rightfully theirs (cf. Hogan 2003: 16–17). In keeping further with Tagore’s spirit, she urges for a more

dynamic approach in the way, for example, Tagore's educational institutions are being run. As for the performing arts, a certain freedom of interpretation is essential if his works are to be kept relevant and part of 'a living tradition'. Finally, she takes up the worrying issue of language politics in which the so-called 'regional languages' are being marginalised at the expense of English in elitist circles and the dominance of Hindi in popular culture, with consequences for one of the more obvious – if perhaps inadequately acknowledged and understood – legacies of Rabindranath, that of the modern Bengali literary language.

If, as Dyson rightly argues, the definition of what constitutes Tagore's heritage and legacy needs to be broadened beyond the obvious, this definition obviously includes the vast legacy of Tagore in cultures and literatures other than his own. After 1913, as he became, in Amit Chaudhuri's words, 'the first global superstar or celebrity in literature' and the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, his life took on an entirely new dimension (Chaudhuri 2001: xviii). What followed was an unprecedented response to any poet in the history of letters. Many interrelated factors came into play as various countries, groups and individuals responded to the Indian poet, each in their own way, even as they drew on the common stock of perceptions that guided people's imagination as regards 'the East' and 'Asia' in the early decades of the twentieth century. Between receiving the Prize and his last foreign tour to Persia and Iraq in 1932 at the age of 71, Tagore undertook no fewer than twelve world tours, effectively spending more than a tenth of his lengthy life, close to nine years, abroad. Multiple times in Europe, North America, the Middle East, the Far East, and once to South-East Asia and South America, Tagore visited every inhabited continent except for Australia and, perhaps more unexpectedly, Africa (discounting a short stay in Alexandria and Cairo on his return trip in 1926). Some trips kept him away from Calcutta and Santiniketan for over a year.

This hugely significant component of Tagore's life has over the years given rise to a substantial body of literature that deals with Tagore's reception in the various countries abroad.¹ Certain aspects have received more attention than others and it seems apt with the approaching anniversary to take stock of this scholarship, identify gaps and entertain new methodological orientations. The second set of papers therefore takes up Tagore's reception and impact with respect to China and East Central Europe, with the focus on Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. Tagore's visits to these three countries have so far received comparatively little scholarly attention.²

¹ For Tagore's reputation in the West, cf. Aronson 1978; Kämpchen 1999 (Germany); Bangha 2008 (Central Europe, particularly Hungary). For more on East-and-West encounter, cf. Ivbulis 1999.

² Imre Bangha's recent publication is a path-breaker in this respect.

Jana Rošker examines Tagore's impact on China in the light of the country's nascent cultural and political orientations of the 1920s, gauging the significance of the encounter also in view of the wider historical and cultural relations between the two neighbours. Her approach has an important comparative dimension which, while identifying the common preoccupations of India and Asia with issues of tradition, modernity and Westernization, points to their divergent cultural and intellectual responses. This disjuncture, it seems, must be taken into account if we are to understand the mixed response Tagore received on his visit to China in 1923. "Colonialism successfully determined the terms of discourse in India but failed to conclusively shape the discourse in China," writes Rošker. This explains why Tagore's high hopes of re-establishing the cultural and spiritual links between the two cultures embedded in his idealist discourse of Asian unity could not but fail to convince most Chinese intellectuals, who were in search of more concrete answers to human suffering and its alleviation, and therefore objected to what they perceived as hopeless escapism. Nonetheless, Tagore's visit to China did incite "much interest both in China and in India for the revival of Sino-Indian cultural collaboration and many private, as well as official agendas were realised in this direction."

Imre Bangha's opening paragraph to his paper on the Hungarian response to Tagore in the wider East Central European arena not only points to the gaps existing in the scholarship dealing with Tagore's reception in Europe, but also to the need to broaden the scope of post-colonial discourse to include the culturally rich 'peripheries' of Western Europe. It is worth citing in full:

The cultural encounter between 'East' and 'West' has been the subject of an enormous amount of scholarly work in recent decades. Most studies, however, investigate British, French and German 'Orientalisms' while the cultures of East Central Europe, roughly the Eastern part of the European Union, with languages hopelessly decorated with diacritics and inaccessible for most of the academic cosmopolis, have received relatively little attention in post-colonial discourse. However, this colourful region, often perceived to be part of the Orient during past centuries, has much to offer to a student of cultural encounters or of reception history.

That there is something of a pre-history to Postcolonial Studies to be taken into account by Western academe is borne out also by the fact that it was, like it or not, "the communist literary policy," as Bangha notes, "that discovered Indian realism and started translations [from modern Indian languages, and non-Tagore ones, sometimes directly from the original] long before the West discovered Postcolonial writings." Taking up in detail two understudied phases of Tagore's reception in the region from a trans-national perspective, Bangha shows how ideologically motivated readings of the Bengali poet are closely related to wider European trends and global events. This

constitutes another important shift in orientation, whereby studies from a ‘national’ perspective – what has become something of an orthodoxy in scholarship – give way to a less artificially bounded approach that looks for similarities and dissimilarities across a broader regional context.

What was broadly true of the Hungarian response can also be said to be true of Tagore’s reception in Croatia, as Klara Gónc Moaçanin’s article demonstrates. Tagore’s popularity in East Central Europe came in three waves, with the second wave reaching its apex in 1926, when Tagore toured this part of the world, coming from the sanatorium at Lake Balaton, where he had been recovering from severe exhaustion, to lecture in Zagreb. That his popularity had initially less to do with any appreciation of the intrinsic quality of his works and thought and more with external factors made fluctuations in his reception inevitable. The third bout of enthusiasm for Tagore came in the wake of the Non-Aligned Movement. Predictably hijacked by various groups at different times throughout his checkered reception, Tagore, the author suggests, has always had a following of individuals who out of their deep appreciation of his writing take it upon themselves to stimulate interest in his works among the Croatian-speaking community. Moaçanin, however, is skeptical that “the fourth wave of enthusiastic readers of Tagore is to appear any time soon,” seeing the little response she gets from “the Internet generations of our present-day globalised world” in the university classroom, notwithstanding “a kind of renaissance for Tagore in limited educated circles interested in literature and art.” Can Tagore speak across such vastly different sensibilities?

Moving from the regional, via the national to the individual, the last contribution examines Tagore’s relevance for the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel against the broader canvas of the Slovenian response to the poet and the specific concerns of his home-region that came under fascist Italian rule in the 1920s. Kosovel’s response to Tagore, Ana Jelnikar argues, can best be made sense of in terms of situational identification – the poet’s identifying with another poet contemporaneously across cultures because of their shared predicaments and expectations. Building on this notion, Jelnikar relates it to the various points of identification Kosovel surmised between himself and the Indian poet, the various concerns he shared with him, and the messages he imbibed, and finally suggests that Kosovel’s poetry should be seen as “part of a more complex, global configuration of anti-imperial politics and ethics.”

Taking the contributions together, it not only appears that the 150th anniversary of Tagore’s birth holds the potential of taking Tagore scholarship further, as it indeed should, but also that Tagore’s legacy is alive and well.

References

- Aronson, Alex (1978) *Rabindranath Tagore through Western Eyes*. Calcutta: Rddhi.
- Bangha, Imre (2008) *Hungry Tiger: Encounters between Hungarian and Bengali Literary Cultures*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Chaudhuri, Amit (2001) 'Introduction.' In: *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. Amit Chaudhuri, ed. London: Picador. Pp. xvii–xxxiv.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm (2003) 'Introduction.' In: *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit, eds. Cranbury: Associated University Presses. Pp. 9–23.
- Ivbulis, Viktors (1999) *Tagore: East and West Cultural Unity*. Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati University.
- Kämpchen, Martin (1999) *Rabindranath Tagore in Germany: Four Responses to a Cultural Icon*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.