Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Imagination: Nation, Gender, and Global Justice

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Abstract:
This paper focuses on Tagore's increasing activism and his bid to persuade his readers in his later works of the importance of thinking globally and abandoning exclusionary perspectives. It shows how he strove in his writing to alter mentalities underlying the politics of domination and division in the world he lived in. The paper also attempts to draw out the implications of his critical approach to imagination and emotion and the way he used emotion-and affect-enhancing literature to oppose divisive and instrumental attitudes and to bring people together by transcending nation or gender divisions.

While Rabindranath Tagore is well-recognized in South Asian Studies circles and in the mainstream as an aesthete or even a mystic, he is alleged to have increasingly distanced himself from the pressing political issues of his day. Notably, he is thought to have become uninvolved with the struggle against the colonizer. Disagreeing with this position, I argue that Tagore moved by way of an active engagement in the Indian freedom struggle into thinking more globally about how to change exclusionary attitudes. He sought to alter mentalities underlying the politics of domination and division in his world—i.e., of the subordination of some people, races, lands and resources by other groups. As I show below, it is the critical approach Tagore took to imagination and emotion that offers lessons about global activism relevant even today.

My claim is that, later in his intellectual life, Tagore increasingly came to hold the position that, unless the divisive viewpoints and emotions underlying the hierarchies of nation, empire, and capital could be changed, one power structure invariably would replace another in the course of world historical tussles. And it is in this regard that Tagore's own experiments with emotion- and affect-enhancing literature and arts became germane. In

the context of the heightening historical turmoil of the early 20th century, Tagore urgently examined how aesthetic practice created emotional appeal *for* divisive and instrumental attitudes. And he sought for ways to re-educate emotions, imaginations, and minds in order to foster attitudes bringing people together.

In this activist approach to imaginative appeal, Tagore's thought comes very close to critical philosophers of our day. Note that, in her most recent book, the well-known feminist postcolonial thinker Gayatri Charavorty Spivak addresses the importance of aesthetic education along similar lines. She emphasizes that in our day (of emotion-arousing media) we are greatly in need of "training the imagination to make it ready for implementing global justice and democracy." [1] Whereas Spivak focuses on critically implementing the western humanist framework of democratic justice, from the grounds of semi-modern India Tagore differs from such an agenda. He wants to incorporate regional literary and metaphysical legacies into his secular vision of training the imagination to implement harmonious justice on a global scale. Tagore's regional approach to aesthetic training goes through two major phases, growing increasingly complex and altering in response to world historical changes .This altering trend in Tagore's thought reinforces the argument I have made elsewhere that "culture and language are . . . fields of social activity made and changed by human agents" (Niyogi De b 19). At the same time, a consciousness textualized in language is permeated with conflicting value judgments, some of which are bound to be complicit with power and capital. Within the limited scope of the present discussion, I focus on the critical aspects of Tagore's thought.

We encounter the first phase of Tagore's thoughts on artistic imagination and global harmony at the turn of the 20th century. Radically critical of western colonization, Tagore turns at this stage to the visions and values born of Hindu agrarian civilization to find the key to human togetherness. To begin with, he avers that true literature transmits humankind's deepest ideal (*gabhirtama adarsha*)—the notion of being *yukta* or connected with a collectivity and with the world. This literary vision of connectedness, notes Tagore, is encapsulated in the Sanskrit term for literature, *sahitya,* which is rooted in the word *sahit,* meaning "unite and harmonize" ("Vishwasahitya" 770). Here, Tagore is drawing on an assumption of syncretism then current in his multilingual India that languages are open semantic systems permitting the revitalization of original texts in new verbal orders and semantic spaces (Devy 187). Note that this concept of the open semantic system is constitutively at odds with the power hierarchy between an original text and its copy that one finds in monolingual and monocultural systems—a hierarchy that has produced the modern idea of intellectual property. Underlying the syncretistic assumption that languages are open and malleable systems of meaning, on the other hand, is the Hindu metaphysical belief that the "repeated birth [of the soul or significance] is the very substance of all animate creations"(Devy 187).

While the Hindu metaphysic of the migrating soul is endorsed by his philosophical writings, Tagore's way of linking it to harmony-creating *sahitya* demonstrates what Subaltern historian Ranajit Guha has characterized as Tagore's "unfettered" (85) habit of implementing

religious concepts in a secular framework. Tagore is appropriating the civilizational logic of creative revitalization, bred within a long history of multilingual exchange, and he is positing the concept as an ethical norm. The normative ideal of *sahit*-conducing imagination, in turn, is pitted in Tagore's early writings against a different ideal. This is the *virodhmulak* or antagonism-rooted ideal he finds primarily in European imaginations that propagate imperialist attitudes. For instance, in 1901, Tagore imputes that European children's literature pits "godlike" Europeans in contrast to the "bestial" races of the East ("Virodhmulak Adarsha" 882-883)—i.e., that this literature is catalyzing in European children emotional appeal for Social Darwinist attitudes. Elsewhere, Tagore faults some rising nationalist authors of his Bengal for adapting the same imperial reasoning to their own *virodh*-driven attitude of elitism ("Chhele Bhulano Chhara" 579).

In his well-known essay "Vishwasahitya"/ "World Literature" written in 1906, moreover, Tagore clearly interlinks the attitude of *virodh*/antagonism to possessive mentalities. He criticizes imagination which looks upon others and nature as instruments to be used for an end, in his words, as *bina betaner chakar* (wageless servants) (762). Combined, statements such as these imply that an alternative logic of human *sahit*—prevalent in imagination and in practice--is to be found in *bharatiya* (Indian) civilization which not only is multilingual and syncretistic but attuned to nature and non-utilitarian.

This implication stands out in an essay (1901) contrasting Shakespeare's *Tempest* to the Sanskrit dramatist Kalidas's *Abhijnanam Shakuntalam.* In this piece, Tagore maintains that the imaginative layout of *The Tempest* rests on the "basic idea" of strife over *adhipatya* (sovereignity). It generates aesthetic appeal for the reactionary strife of the displaced sovereign—the one who *swarajyer adhikar haite bichyuta haiya mantrabale prakritirajyer upar kathar adhipatya bistar karitechhen* (deprived of control over his own kingdom, spreads his power of magic on the kingdom of nature to impose a severe domination)("Prachin Sahitya" 622-623). On this reading, the Shakespearean play justifies a masculinist, territorial, and ecologically destructive attitude through its literary appeal, with magic coming to stand for a technology of instrumentation which aids a scientific ruler's expansionist agenda. Against this *virodh*-based imaginative layout, Tagore posits the Indian playwright Kalidas's *Shakuntalam* as a *suparinata drishtanta* (fully developed instance) of literary imagination, that is, as a work that perfectly envisions and conduces human *sahit.* [2]

Three core ideas comprising Tagore's early notion of harmonious imagination, based on Hindu civilizational traditions, emerge in his treatment of *Shakuntalam* as a template for imaginative training*:* (a) The core of human concord is to be found in a work such as this rooted in a non-utilitarian, agrarian framework: the attunement of the mind with the world, the human with the non-human. (b) Kalidas's use in this work of the un-modern Sanskrit aesthetic of *rasa* (relish)--an aesthetic which portrays personal desires only through "hints" (*abhas*) and therewith distills a delicate balance of *de*personalized emotions—is peculiarly well-suited for clarifying a vision of interpersonal concord. (c) The woman Shakuntala exemplifies this ideal of concord through embodying the *rasa* of a feminine love attuned to nature.

Very soon, these three ideas merge in Tagore's enthusiastic nationalist poetry as he throws himself full force into the nationalist Swadeshi Movement in 1905. This movement surged against the first attempt made by the colonial state to partition Bengal, known as the Bangabhanga. It is as if the pleasant, forebearing, and self-yielding Shakuntala of Tagore's earlier essay reappears in his swadeshi songs as the all-protective and all-giving mother Bengal. Seen as the incarnation of bountiful nature, she is imagined as the Hindu mother goddess (combining elements of Durga, Lakshmi, and Kali). Noteworthy in this respect, is a song depicting a Hinduized image of a supremely beautiful, multi-armed mother goddess rising from the heart of Bengal, and coming to be revealed to the transfixed eye of the devotee: *Aji bangladesher hridoy hote kakhon aponi/ Tumi aei aporup rupe bahir hole janani . . . Ogo Ma tomay dekhe dekhe ankhi naa phire/ Tomar duar aji khule gyache sonar mandire* (From the heart of Bangladesh when, on your own/Do you emerge in this unsurpassed beauty, Mother . . . O my Mother, looking and looking upon you, my eye turns not away/ Your doors have opened today into the temple of gold). Without a doubt, the affect of an extra-sensory and self-surrendering *darshan*—replete with the *rasa* of ecstatic worship—is invoked by this song.

Dipesh Chakrabarty explains that imagination such as this invokes nationalism as a *rasa* – an imaginative relishing of emotions which enables the "cessation of the ordinary historical world"(173). As such, *rasa* invokes a culture of imagination which, according to Chakrabarty, is different from the "subject-centered" analytical imagination driving historical decisions in the modern world. Imaginative *rasa* penetrates beyond logic that classifies, possesses, and divides lands, peoples, and bodies. Following Chakrabarty's insight, we can conclude that these swadeshi songs by Tagore, depicting the motherland, indeed, aim to train the imagination of the Bengali patriot. The patriot is trained to "bypass . . . the distinction" between subjects and objects (175). It is assumed that in this process he will transcend the *virodhmulak* logic of the impending Partition, which at the time was fracturing the people of Bengal and causing chaos all around.

Only two years later, however, we get from Tagore a far more critical assessment of nationalist imagination--uncontainable in Chakrabarty's emphasis on cultural difference. Thus, Chakrabarty's approach limits Tagore to an early stage of his (Hindu nationalist) thought, disregarding the more critical and globally-poised phase of his intellectual development. An essay written in 1907 on literature and aesthetic beauty—"Sahitya O Saundarya"—captures the global turn in Tagore's thought. Launching a broad critique of divisive imaginations, Tagore maintains in this essay that authors who produce images of *saundarya* (beauty) and *suchita* (bodily purity) in a bid to identify the *utkarsha* (essence) of a person or a people reinforce *samprodayik* (sectarian) attitudes (775-780). The implication is that subjects located in the historical world and harboring sectarian attitudes are the ones who author the *rasa* of nationalism, and that they deploy essentialist images of beauty and purity as instruments to reinforce the divisive *rasa*.

What worldly conditions drove Tagore to rethink his view about artistic imagination at this moment?

Uma Dasgupta answers the question most completely for us. She notes that, on the one hand, Tagore suddenly withdrew from the Swadeshi Movement "at its height "(4). He resigned from every swadeshi committee on the same day (Dasgupta 4). This was his way of protesting against the outbreak of communal violence within the movement, since at this moment, Muslims were being attacked in the name of mother Bengal. The attacks being leveled on Muslims in the very names of swadeshi and mother Bengal. Soon thereafter, Tagore turned to the active work of educating both Muslim and Hindu tenants in his family's agricultural estates (Dasgupta 5). On the other hand, Tagore was bearing witness to the escalation of separatist nationalism in Europe leading up to the First World War. In view of these world historical trends, he began to disavow traditionalist nationalism. Instead, "he argued that the Great War had ushered in a 'new age' whereby the need of the day was for cooperation between peoples, not isolation"(Dasgupta 7) and civilizational separatism.

Tagore himself puts his evolving cooperative viewpoint best when he says in his "Russiar Chithi"/Letters from Russia (1930) that the "local problems of a people are a part and parcel of humankind's" (*swajatir samasya samastha manusher samasyar anatargata*). His post-swadeshi work grows increasingly concerned with the interconnected problems of "*prabhu-dasher samparka*"/master-slave relations (1928) in various locations of world history. In a remarkable critical essay titled "Narir Manusatya" (The Humanness of Woman) written in 1928, Tagore reflects on how social justice movements challenge these asymmetrical relations by imagining every person to be a "*byektibishesh*" or distinctive individual. Clearly, he was being inspired in this new line of democratic thought by the Euro-American Women's Movements as well as the Women's Suffrage Movement in India. The Bolshevik Movement and Soviet Russia also gave Tagore food for reflection, even as he critiqued the totalitarian institutions of the Russian state.

In what ways does Tagore alter his viewpoint on training the imagination so as to use it to implement harmony hand in hand with democratic justice? In my view, his ideas about imaginative training flow along two parallel paths in his post-swadeshi writings. I look in turn at each path and present some quick examples.

Some of his later works bring images and authors face to face. Categories of person who are typically used in nationalist and imperial discourses as one-dimensional images symbolizing essence or deviance, bodily purity or pollution come to life in these late writings by Tagore. As realistic characters, they act within specific historical circumstances, and they talk back at their essentialist and biased authors (who also appear as characters in the stories). On occasion, the characters talk responsibly about their own involvement in the processes which reduce human lives to one-dimensional symbols, and which use symbols as instruments to reinforce master-slave relations inter-nationally or inter-communally.

Take, for example, the first great political novel Tagore wrote after the swadeshi movement, *Gora* (1910). The novel ends with a Hindu Brahminical nationalist's self-discovery: the man finds out that he is actually Irish by birth, [having been] adopted by

a Brahmin couple during the Sepoy Uprising. This discovery brings about a moment of epiphany. The man Gora realizes that, until now, he had authored for himself an imaginary *bharatbarsha* (India) tinted with emotional *bhava* (569). He has been clinging to a mere image of the motherland, and thus failing to recognize that he is reinforcing divisions in the name of national unification. Now Gora is able to admit that he used to perpetuate caste prejudice by secluding his brahmin body from other *Bharatiya* bodies. Moreover, when we encounter Gora the Irishman criticizing his own homogenous and divisive imagination, we are, of course, also hearing the *gora* or white man talking back at (self-critiquing) imperial European authors.

As stated in the essay titled "Virodmulak Adarsha", Tagore maintained that European writers cultivate the roots of racial/nationalist antagonisms worldwide by the way they uphold appealing pictures of racial superiority—i.e., of "godlike" white men--in their works.

The novel *Gora* is followed by a series of creative works which revolve around articulate women characters. We find a series of articulate women characters in Tagore's creative works. These women are shown to be talking back to prevalent images of femininity from their various historical locations. They question the use of women's images as symbols of purity, modesty, and self-sacrifice. And they challenge conventional (Hindu) nationalist representations of women as pleasant goddess-mothers, poised to reproduce a pure nation/race.

In his second great anti-swadeshi novel, *Ghare Baire/The Home and the World* (1914), Tagore's woman protagonist Bimala (literally, the Pure One) recalls in monologue how she became established as the Queen Bee of the Swadeshi Movement (21). She was positioned as an embodiment of the *Bande Mataram* or Hail-to-the-Motherland mantra through the impassioned *kalpana* (imagination) of the principal nationalist activist, Sandeep (literally, the Ignited One). Bimala describes how Sandeep had looked upon her with eyes ignited like the bright stars (*nakhatra*)(11), and had hailed her as the Hindu goddess of the bountiful land, Annapurna (13). Later in the narrative, Bimala herself turns out to be critical of her own self-identification with this passionate imagination of the mother-as-land. In retrospect, she impugns her support for the crimes (*pap*) committed by orthodox nationalists—both Bengali swadeshis and Europeans--against others in the name of purifying imagined motherlands (15-16). Moreover, she delineates the way she had trapped herself into Hinduizing the purity of the motherland. In the heat of patriotic passion, she had joined voice with Sandeep in calling Bengal by the names of the goddesses Durga and Lakshmi (15). The novel suggests that this mother-goddess imagery is deployed to mask the "reign of fear" (*bhayer shasan*) (78) imposed upon impoverished tenant farmers, including Muslims, by elite Hindu nationalists (98-99).

By the late 1920's, Tagore is even more clear in speaking, as he put it, *narider pakhya niye* (from the side of women) ("Narir Manusatya" 24). He inveighs against the controlling attitudes and images he finds in the *kalpana* (imagination) of both male

European imperialists and Indian nationalists (21). The historical events grounding this clearer transition to feminist critique in Tagore's aesthetic thought, in my view, are the growth of a distinct feminist voice in India hand in hand with the controversies in India as well as in Britain over Indian women's suffrage (leading to women's enfranchisement in Bengal in 1926) (Forbes 92-103).

Following this, in 1932, we hear the female protagonist of a Tagore poem challenging the nationalist author Saratchandra Chatterjee. The new woman portrayed in *Sadharan Meye* ironically pleads with the male novelist to refrain from making her into another Shakuntala in the vein of Kalidas's iconic heroine. She refuses to follow Shakuntala down the path of self-sacrifice (*tyag*) and sorrowful forbearance ("Sadharan Meye" 669). Clearly, the challenge here also is self-directed. Tagore is talking back at his own portrayal, earlier on, of a self-surrendering Shakuntala who upholds the harmonious values of Hindu agrarian civilization. The new woman of 1932 instead wants to be recognized for her autonomous needs and wants. Soon thereafter, we are to hear an even more radical woman's voice in a Tagore work. The latter exposes the master-slave relations underlying the Hindu caste system's (racialized) perceptions of bodily purity and pollution. This radical new woman demands that she be both imagined and related to in a holistic way—as a fully valued *manab*/human both in the spirit and in the body.

Dismantling the symbolism of a pristine Bengali peasant life attuned to nature—found in so many of his own earlier works—in the play/dance-drama *Chandalika* (1933, 1936) Tagore makes a peasant girl from the untouchable caste give voice to the discrimination and dehumanization riddling the village. While at first it appears that a Buddhist monk by the name of Ananda has in fact broken down the taboo of bodily purity and pollution by naming this girl as an equal human being and accepting water from her hand, soon the question rises if the naming of equality will remain at the level of essentialist imagination only. Reinstated by the monk's imagination as an equal, Tagore's low-born woman begins to talk back at her humanist creator and to want him as her partner both in the spirit and in the body. She maintains that the elite man must return to reciprocate her full desire for partnership, lest otherwise she loses touch with her new found self-value: *nijer ami mulya bhuli* (174). This *mulya* or value lies in her developing sense of autonomous worth, which has been authored in her by the humanist man's equalizing attitude. The implication of the low-born woman's demand is that the principle of human equality must appear on the cultural horizon not simply as an essentialist and depersonalized image. It must be actualized in the form of social practice. Only through such pragmatic, hard-hitting portrayals of radical social change could the audience is imagination be emotionally retrained so as to think against ingrained (caste/race-based) biases regarding bodily purity and pollution.

Does all this mean that we are actually seeing the post-swadeshi Tagore move away from his earlier interest in training the imagination in the depersonalized aesthetic of the *rasa*—the regional spiritual aesthetics of depersonalization that bypass the historical world and its subjective biases? Is Tagore taking the position that for the imagination to be trained

for use in enabling global justice it ought to be schooled to implement and critique only western humanistic values (of equality and autonomous worth)? No. What Tagore seeks in later works is a combined approach. He wants to posit as secular historical norms; first, the habits of syncretism born of a region with a long legacy of multilingual and multiracial flows; and second, an allied metaphysical vocabulary of spiritual oneness. Illustrating this combined approach, some of Tagore's late works take a second path. Therein, the regional concepts of syncretism and spiritual union are invoked as ethical norms in whose light divisive and self-serving attitudes can be exposed and cast aside.

As our first example of this second path, let us return to the closing of the novel *Gora.* We hear Gora declare that only by discovering his alien birth—and being released from his prior Hindu Brahminical nationalism—has he been able to land on the true ground of *bharatbarsha*. His body and mind no longer inscribe any "*virodh* between the Hindu, the Muslim, or the Christian *samaj*" (i.e., social economy) (570). The point to note is that; whereas Gora's imagination of the *bharatiya* has to be displaced from nationalism before it is able to embrace the regional ethic of human oneness, the ethical norm itself is practiced by his mother in everyday life. Gora's mother is portrayed to be living cooperatively and embodying a syncretistic attitude on a daily basis upon the shifting grounds of a multilingual, multi-communal, and multiracial region. In this endeavor, she had worked hand in hand with an indigenous Christian nursemaid who suckled Gora.

Allied to these practices of cooperative living and syncretistic exchange in Tagore's partially modernized India were the popular aesthetic and spiritual traditions connected to the *bhakti* legacy (particularly strong in Tagore's eastern India). Images of the self-surrendering *bhakta* or devotee also appear in a number of Tagore's late works, especially those written in the genre of allegory. Invariably, Tagore's *bhakta* emerges not simply as the traditional world renouncer and rather as an actor in secular history. He/she is a responsible agent who mobilizes against the crimes committed by humans upon humanity—specifically, upon the spirit of cooperation and harmony (*sahit)* which Tagore saw as fundamental to human community. Let me end by quoting parts from one such allegorical work, a deeply gloomy anti-war poem Tagore wrote in the midst of the First World War (1916). In my view, this poem encapsulates Tagore's combined approach. It melds ideas about human oneness and cooperation drawn both from the spiritual monism of the *bhakti* tradition and from the historical monism of the humanistic Enlightenment (which emphasizes equality, justice, responsible activism).

In this anti-war poem titled *Jhader Kheya,* on the one hand, we meet an anguished collective of people striving in unison to transcend destructive historical conditions. In the vein of *bhakti* imagery, the notion of spiritual oneness is depicted as a journey of many across the sea of worldly tribulations—in pursuit of deliverance (*moksha*) and under the commandment of the divine helmsman (the *paramatman*).

Hear you not from afar the roars of death,
O you who are wretched, O you who are callous?

Those tumultuous cries,
The gushing of blood from million breasts—
[Dur hote ki shunis mrityur garjan, Ore deen
Ore udaseen—
Oi krandaner kalarol,
Lakshya bakshya hote mukto rakter kallol. . . .
The commandment has come, at this time the ties of the harbor must end,
. . .
From all corners, people leave home and rush forth with oars in hand
. . .
Even then must we row on against the grimmest obstacles,
With the world's heart-rending moans ringing in our ears,
Bearing upon our heads wild stormy days,
Clinging in our hearts to hope without end.
[*Esecche adesh, bandare badhankaal ebarer mato holo sesh.*
. . .
T r t ri tai ghar cch ri ch ridik hote d nr h te cchute se d nri
. . .
Tobu beye tari sab thele hote habe p r, kane niye nikhiler hahakar,
Shire laye duranta durdin, bakshe laye asha antaheen.] (*Balaka* 88-91)

On the other hand, we see the influence of the Enlightenment in what turns out to be a portrayal of responsible agents mobilizing against the causes of war. The *bhakta* or devotee is shown also as a historical subject striving in secular time to be accountable for crimes against the intrinsic human spirit of concord. For every person going on the journey is invested with subjective interiority: with self-doubt and self-critique.

O my companion, whom do you slander?
Hang your head [in shame].
These crimes are mine, and they are yours—
The cowardliness of the coward,
The arrogant wrongs of the mighty,
The cruel greed of the greedy,
The daily-agitated spirits of the deprived,
The conceit of race,
These many insults of the godly in human.
Ore bhai, kar ninda karo tumi?
Matha karo nato.
E amar e tomar p p . . .
Bhirur bhiruta punjya, prabaler uddhata anyaya,
Lobheer nisthur lobh,
Banchiter nitya chityakhobh,
Jati abhiman,
Manaber adhistatri debotar bahu ashamaan. (My translation) (92-93)

In this vision of Tagore's, all subjects of history are being called upon to try to correct the criminality of the self-interested and divisive attitudes underlying historical strife. The collective struggle to take on responsibility--to fulfill the godly spirit of concord embedded in the human--is portrayed as an unending historical endeavor. It is a "training" of minds and bodies in which activists from every corner of the globe must take part.

In totality, the poem encapsulates Tagore's key ideas about global concord. As stated elsewhere, Tagore held that practices of harmony and justice are not limited to one civilization. We must travel across various "seas of knowledge" ("swadeshi samaj" 699) to understand different ways of practicing justice and to learn from them. As such, "peoples' history" or *manusher itihas* will not end (*Ghare Baire/ Home and the World* 102) for it constitutes a cumulative, visionary struggle to build a harmonious whole.

The implication I draw overall from Tagore's evolving critique of historical perspectives is that progressive endeavors to realize the human inclinations for being at one with others and the world must be recognized on a global scale. They must be exchanged and relearned, combined and challenged by individual everywhere. This non-reductive and, in a way, pragmatic vision of global harmony and justice, in my view, is what lay behind the life-long endeavors of Rabindranath Tagore, the philosophical writer and performing artist.

Endnote

[1] http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674051836

[2] PS 662. For an extended discussion of the 1901 piece, see my essay "Decolonizing Universality."

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