# Antinomies, Engagement and Beyond: Studies in Tagore

# Antinomies, Engagement and Beyond: Studies in Tagore

Edited by

**Rituparna Chakraborty**
**Shubham Bhattacharjee**

Published by

Ababil Books

Kolkata • Delhi • Mumbai • Chennai

in collaboration with

Swami Vivekananda University

Published by
Ababil Books

Publishers & Distributors
Indian Leather Housing Complex
Ahmed Villa
15A/1, Gulam Jilani Khan Road
Kolkata-700 039
West Bengal, India
Phone: 96742 76100
E-mail: ababilbooks@gmail.com
Visit us: www.ababilbooks.com

in collaboration with

**Swami Vivekananda University**



ISBN: 978-93-91449- -



Published: September, 2024

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Printed by: D. G. Offset, 96/N, Maharani Indira Devi Road, Kolkata-700 060

## Acknowledgement

For the successful completion of this edited volume, we are most indebted to the vision of our Hon'ble Chancellor, Dr. Nandan Gupta, the inspiration of our Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor Professor (Dr.) Subrata Kumar Dey, the support of our Chief Operating Officer, Shri Saurabh Adhikari, the guidance of our Chief Executive Director (Academics), Professor (Dr.) Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, and the co-operation of our Registrar, Professor (Dr.) Pinak Pani Nath.

We would also like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the concerned faculty members of Swami Vivekananda University, the contributors and collaborators, who have played an active part in the realization of this book.

## Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Forward | 9 |
| Introduction | 11 |
| Nation and Woman: Dismantling the Binary of *The Home and the World*<br>*Rituparna Chakraborty* | 13 |
| Sartorial Tagore on the Screen: Observations on Tagore's Clothing in *Kadambari*<br>*Soumyarup Bhattacharjee* | 23 |
| Dialogical Intersections: Hermeneutic Engagements with Tradition and Modernity in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali*<br>*Agnideepto Datta* | 32 |
| On Xenophobia: A Study of the Similarities found in the Ideas of Tagore and Fanon<br>*Anirban Banerjee* | 44 |
| Negotiating Universals, Navigating Praxes: Kabir, Lalon and Tagore at Intersections<br>*Debarshi Arathdar* | 56 |

A Comparative Analysis of Philosophical Reflections in Tagore's "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies": The Ephemeral Wisdom of the Human Being 68
*Shantanu Siuli*

Cultural Hybridity: Exploring Nation, Culture and Society in Tagore's *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*) 82
*Shyamal Mondal, Shubham Bhattacharjee*

Science in Rural Reconstruction: Rabindranath's Sriniketan Experiment 97
*Madhumita Roy*

The Significance of the Religious Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore in the Modern World: A Comparative Analysis 116
*Tirna Sadhu*

Tagore as a Romantic Poet: A Study of Select Poems 136
*Shreyoshi Dhar*

Nation and Transnation in the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore 145
*Natasha Chatterjee*

About the Contributors 153

# Foreword

The cultural, social, and political landscape of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in India was marked by a confluence of powerful intellectual currents that shaped the very foundations of modern Indian identity. At the center of this transformative epoch stood Rabindranath Tagore, a polymath whose ideas transcended the boundaries of nation, language, and ideology. Tagore, along with his contemporaries, engaged deeply with the questions of nationhood, globalism, and the intersections of culture and society. The resulting discourse remains relevant in today's world, as we grapple with issues of identity, migration, nationalism, and transnationalism in an increasingly globalized society.

*Nation, Internation, and Transnation: Culture, Society, and Politics in Tagore and His Contemporaries* delves into these intricate and multilayered discussions, offering readers a window into the intellectual ferment of Tagore's time. Through a nuanced examination of his works and the socio-political contexts of his contemporaries, this volume seeks to bridge the historical and contemporary, highlighting the enduring relevance of their thoughts in today's globalized landscape.

In exploring the dynamics of nation-building, cosmopolitanism, and transnational exchanges, the authors of this anthology invite readers to engage with Tagore and his contemporaries not only as historical figures but as voices resonating across time. Their visions were not confined to the borders of their immediate realities but were expansive enough to include reflections on universal human experiences and aspirations.

This book offers a deep and scholarly engagement with the way culture, politics, and society intersect in the works of Tagore and his peers. For readers keen on understanding the nuanced relationships between the local and the global, the national and the international, this collection presents a rich tapestry of ideas that continue to influence how we conceptualize identity, belonging, and the politics of space and place.

As we open this collection, we are invited to revisit an era of rich intellectual exchange and re-imagine its significance for the present and future, providing a fresh perspective on how cultural and political identities are negotiated in a rapidly transforming world.

# Introduction

Nationalism as a political and doctrinal thesis is largely derived from the Western tradition that began to impact on the educated populace of India since the nineteenth century. Raymond Williams in his Culture and Society stresses the importance of the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first few decades of the nineteenth century in Europe. Europe began to be disrupted with new formations of political cartography, the French Revolution, aggressive power politics in the border states of Europe, American War of Independence, Industrial Revolution etc. Initiated through the new trajectories of political thought in the post-Enlightenment Europe, questions relating to nation, border and citizenship began to emerge. After the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian empire, new negotiations in political philosophy relating to nation states began to emerge.

This new ideological filiation could be also felt in the rise of the nationalist thought in India. Ramchandra Guha in his edition of Tagore's *Nationalism* (2017) has identified four pillars of Indian nationalism and modernity. These four pillars identified as Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Tagore have shown four different

approaches to the ideal of Indian nation. They have provided four different ideational structuration. However much Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar differ from each other in their critical positions, they substantiate a unified view of nationalism as such. But Tagore stands far away from the three other pillars in so far as he declines to subscribe to the view of nationalism derived from the West. He comments: "India has never had a real sense of nationalism". Even the Ballantyne-Vidyasagar debate on development of education largely reflects the rejection of modular cultural forms. Vidyasagar's work on social development, his establishment of Metropolitan as an autonomous centre of higher learning were slowly trying to inflect on the development of Indian national ideologies. Even Rammohan Roy's reform movement may be considered as having contributed to the emergence of rationalism and enlightenment: this of course led indirectly to the development of Indian nationalism. Sivanath Shastri's *Ramtanu Lahiri O TatkalinBangasamaj* very clearly registers the gradual intellectual development of the Bengali society in three definitive stages that distinctively contributed to the future development of Indian nationalism

Tagore's advocacy of "global fellowship", higher ideals of humanity and his distrust of aggressive forms of nationalism must have foreshadowed the future theoretical dissemination of internationalism and transnationalism. In other words, the world has gradually moved towards the re-fashioning of the global order on the basis of the work of Tagore and his contemporaries. This possibly foreshadowed the late 20th century formulation of transcultural/transnational world order.

# Nation and Woman: Dismantling the Binary of *The Home and the World*

Rituparna Chakraborty

In the modern domesticity, the Hindu Nationalists invested a "truly educated", "truly modest" and "truly Indian woman" (BhodroMohila) with the imaginary auspiciousness of "Laksmi", the Hindu Goddess of domestic welfare and prosperity. By extending this religious sentiment, the exponents of Hindu Nationalism cast in the woman the idea of Nation, "Bharatlakshmi". Woman's education was drawn up in consistence with the Nationalist and patriarchal doctrines. A clear mark of difference was drawn between a truly ideal Indian woman, Lakshmi, representing the virtues of docility and submissiveness and selfless service and the ultra-free woman, a "memsahib". Kundamala Devi, a writer, writing for a women's magazine, "Bamabodhini Patrika", wrote in 1870: "Oh dear ones! If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to Memsahib like behaviour. This is not becoming in a Bengali household." (Chakraborty 14).

There has been a good deal of debates over the feasibility and justification of the project, formulated by the modern Hindu nationalist Bourgeoise, of drawing a line of demarcation between the outside world and the "inner domain". A formidable challenge had to be countered by the Nationalists. In order to be equal to the task of competing with the colonizers in the material world of economic organization, statecraft, science etc. , the colonized people had to hon the skill in wielding higher techniques of organizing material life and adjusting them with their own cultures. This was how the nationalist project of rationalizing the conventional culture needed to be accomplished. However, in doing this task, the essence of indigenous culture must not be compromised. Imitation of the west in every department of life had to be avoided. In "Nationalism in India", Tagore also strongly opposed the westernization of Indian culture: "We in India must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own, we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life…It does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field." (Tagore 71)

The nationalist felt it both undesirable and unwarranted to borrow or imitate the materialism of the West, for after all, as for as spiritual resources were concerned, the East was ahead of the West, for after all, as for as spiritual resources were concerned, the East was ahead of the West, and those resources had to be strengthen and preserved as long as this spiritual-moral essence of India's culture was left untaintedwith the gross

worldliness of the Western practices. The problem of accommodating themselves to the mundane world could be handled. "The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of the social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into Ghar and Bahir." (Chatterjee 120). In his lecture turned essay "Woman", in the book *Personality*, Tagore observes: "The domestic world has been the gift of God to woman. She can extend her radiance of love beyond its boundaries of all sides…" (Tagore 162) What Tagore intended to emphasize is that, women alone, on the strength of their innate brilliance of captivity, nurture and fortitude, can enlighten the "inner domain" (Home) with Bliss and happiness. However, in a basic contravention to the patriarchal project of the Nationalists to consign women into the confines of domesticity, he says in the aforesaid essay: "I do not mean to imply that domestic life is the only life for a woman. I mean that the human world is …woman's world, be it domestic or be it full of other activities of life, which are human activities, are not merely abstract efforts to organize." (Tagore 161)

How and why the Hindu Nationalists created the inner domain (The Home) vis-à-vis the external domain (The World) has been discussed, and now attention may be paid to the formation of the "unhomely", a site Homi Bhabha has devised from a Feminist perception. In keeping with his analysis in this respect, it may be said that the domain of the "unhomely" neither gives a sense of homelessness, nor can it be easily posited in the

familiar division of social life into private and public spheres (Ghar o Bahir). It is a moment where displacement of the conventional "Home" and "World" takes place, the border between "Home" and "World" gets jumbled up, and very mysteriously, "the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (Bhabha 13) A highly dramatic situation depicted in Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire)* may be cited to demonstrate how this unhomely abruptly comes out and dismantles the set order of Home and World. Homie Bhabha describes this in this manner: "...in 1905, Bengal is ablaze with Swadeshi... when 'home-made Bimala, the product of the confined space'...is aroused by 'a running undertone of melody, low down in the bass…the true manly voice, the note of power.' Bimala is possessed and drawn forever from the zenana, the secluded women's quarter, as she crosses that fated verandah into the world of public affairs—over to another shore and the ferry has cease to ply." (Bhabha 14)Bimala's obsessive response to the "truly manly" note emanating from the "World" and her dislocation from the "Home" forever, signifies the fragility of the patriarchal Nationalist calcifying design of dividing the man and the woman into the public and the private and inscribes a new trope—the world-in-the-home. Paradoxically, the "truly manly voice" metonymically represents Sandip, a fictional character, whose cherished Nationalism structured the inner domain, the oeuvre of cultural / spiritual essence. It is the agency of Nationalism (Sandip), whose intervention in the world precipitated Bimala's departure

from home for the world. Thus, metaphorically Nationalism itself effaces its own ideological construct. Such self-contradictions vented themselves in the discourse of Nationalism, in terms of the equation of man-woman relationship, as well as the material/spiritual binary paradigm.

Hindu Elite Nationalists projected women as "Bharatlakshmi" symbolizing household as well as National progress and prosperity. In keeping with the project, the Nation, an imagined community, had always been allegorically represented by a "mother" image or a "goddess". In the context of Indian Nationalism, allegorization of women in such images is available in modern indigenous text. "Kali" or "Devi" as Mother India had been portrayed as the very soul of India by such writers and exponents of resurgent Nationalism as Bankim Chandra. The idolization of the Nation as Mother in his novel *Anandamath*is worth mentioning in this respect. Tagore categorically pointed out that the construction of a Nationalist "self" within the paradigm of religious orthodoxy was a dangerous project. When the woman is employed as the very embodiment of the Nation, the woman of flesh and blood is left on the blind spot, and only remains marginally as a metaphor for a mythical past. Tagore's *Home and the World* demonstrates an aggressive Nationalist Sandip, who manipulatively portrays the central female protagonist Bimala as an incarnation of Shakti, the goddess, who would inspire his sons with vigour and valour. In Tagore's novel *Gora*, Gora identifies women with the "home"(inner domain) and says: "the scriptures tell us that woman is deserving

of worship because she gives light to the home... the altar at which women may be truly worshipped is her place as Mother, the seat of the pure, right-minded lady of the House." (Tagore 9) His friend Binay, on the other hand, comments self-depreciatingly: "We look on India only as a country of men; we entirely ignore the women." (Tagore 83) It was only after having been in love with Sucharita, a woman of sterling qualities that Gora realized the pitfalls of Nationalism in terms of "Woman question".

There are two issues of profound socio-political significance, needed to be brought under the limelight. The first one is why, in their agenda, the vanguards of Nationalism and Nationalist movement, so carefully set aside the "woman question", while it demanded due attention. The answer has to be explored in the political designs of the Hindu Elite Nationalists. This Nationalism wanted to establish itself as a force capable of retaliating imperialism. Ironically, instead of building and consolidating itself on the underpinning of the true essence of our tradition, our culture and hopes and aspirations of the people, the true voice of the country, the most miserably exploited, the Hinduism-oriented Elitist Nationalism practically photocopied the logic of imperialism, consisting of religious linguistic and cultural homogeneity; in fine, this nationalism aped the European monocultural nation. In "Nationalism in India", Tagore pointed out the dangers lying in such a blind imitation of European nationalism: "The gigantic organizations for hurting others and warding off their blows, for making money by dragging others back, will not help us… they

will seriously impede our freedom in the larger life of a higher civilization. (Tagore 67).

Such imitation was not only dangerous but incongruous as well in the heterogenous, pluralistic and poly-phonic socio-cultural milieu of India. Therefore, it is evident that the Hindu Elite Nationalists take a wrong route, and it could not help it because this Nationalism was largely atavistic in nature, mapped on the premise of an imaginatively constructed "glory past", made of dreams, ringed with memories and rooted in an illusion of "wreck sublime" forgotten in the "depths of time". This homogenous and totalizing Nationalism founded on religious majoritarianism needed to create differences –the "other"—in order to make itself superior. Before disclosing who the "others" were, this discussion requires to be riveted to fall back upon an idealized Indian woman, set in the image of Mother/Goddess assigned to the solemn task of preserving Nation's spiritual heritage. But is it all that the story of idolizing women contains? Certainly not. In the first place, the stratagem pursued by the Bourgeois Nationalists for the construction of woman, representing the Nation's cultural/spiritual legacy supposed to have been churned out of the imagined past, unravel the fact that they blended quite a few of the strands of the traditional patriarchy with their new stratagem, and virtually left the basic tropes of patriarchy, like scriptural dictates, caste, racial and class inhibitions unreformed, though they always masked themselves in the disguise of beacons of modernity and liberty. In the second place, a highly reprehensible politics was implemented in the idealization

of women. Women, educated to the extent as designed by patriarchy and devoted to "Hindutva", and docile and submissive were branded normal in bizarre contrast with intellectually advanced woman, self-willed, liberalized in their outlook on sexuality, secular and independent in spirit. It is they, who were lampooned as "memsahib", that is not "normal".

It is interesting to note that in the Nationalist idea of "new woman" or "normal woman", spirituality was tactfully equated with the so-called virtues of femininity. Radharani Lahiri wrote in 1873:"Of all the subjects that women might learn, house work is the most important..., she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in house work." (Chatterjee 129). It was that the "new women" "were altogether shut... but what was to be taken care of by them was theindifference carved out by the hegemonic patriarchy... to homogenize all women lying beyond the boundary of their paradigm, namely the so-called lower caste women and the Anglo-Indian women into shameless, sexually uncontrolled and profane women. As for the "over-educated" women, attempting the pen to express their repressed anger and anguish against male hegemony, we can borrow the feminist phrase "mad woman in the attic". The discourse made so far with regard to what kind of an inner sanctum,the so-called modern patriarchy landed "new woman", it may be pertinently said that as in the earlier ethos, so in the pantheon of the modern elite nationalism, the perpetuation of woman's entrapment in the "Sisyphean stratum" retained.

Most of the upper caste women conformed to this new kind of appropriation of their true selfhood/identity and liberty because in their constructed role of the custodians of the Nation's inner domain, they were placed in the class hierarchy on a rung more privileged than other women not just because they wanted to assert their cultural superiority through the conflation of woman and the Nation, but also because they must have been caught in a fear of the possibility of women's emergence as a formidable force to challenge the legitimacy of the patriarchal authority over them. Somnath Zutshi in an essay, "Women, Nation and the Outsider in contemporary Hindi Cinema", writes "...behind this urge for control lay a fear or the powerful forces that lay buried within woman as well as Nation-sexuality in the one case and the demand for social justice in the other... forces that could easily become overwhelming." (Zutshi 85). In connection to women's great possibilities, Tagore opined"The time has come... when her field of work has far transcended the domestic sphere of life. The world with its insulted individuals has sent its appeal to her. These individuals must find their true value... and renew their faith in God's love through her love." (Tagore 167)

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# Sartorial Tagore on the Screen: Observations on Tagore's Clothing in *Kadambari*

Soumyarup Bhattacharjee

Over the years, Rabindranath Tagore's fiction as well as his life have functioned as the source for many cinematic adaptations. From Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha and Bimal Roy to relatively contemporary directors such as Rituparno Ghosh, Suman Mukherjee, Suman Ghosh, and Buddhadev Dasgupta, Tagore has been a mainstay when it comes to mining literary sources for creative inspiration in Indian cinema in general and Bengali cinema in particular. Novels such as *Nastanirh*, *Noukadubi*, and *Chokher Bali*, short stories like "Stree'r Patra," "Monihara," and "Kabuliwala," and poems like "Dui Bigha Jomi" have spawned successful as well as critically acclaimed film renditions. While scholarship on Tagore in connection with the cinematic medium has received considerable attention in recent years, such scholarship more commonly focused on the adaptation of his writing for films while Tagore's own portrayal on screen has been largely peripheral. It is to address this lacuna in

contemporary critical discussion on Tagore in connection with cinema, this essay focuses on Suman Ghosh's *Kadambari* (2015) and explores its portrayal of Tagore from a sartorial perspective with a view to examining how the film reimagines the historical figure of Tagore and his relationship with the titular heroine Kadambari on screen.

In a letter dated 19th October 1894, written while the poet was in Bolpur, Tagore states: "We know people only in dotted outline, that is to say, with gaps in our knowledge which we have to fill in ourselves, as best we can" (Tagore, Glimpses). One is not surprised to find such profundity regarding human nature and his existence even in the poet's correspondence, as his letters are often peppered with such philosophical musings. Nonetheless, this particular comment mentioned above offers an exciting and perhaps unique entry point into our present discussion regarding Tagore's portrayal on screen. Representing a historical character on screen with any degree of historical accuracy presupposes a certain extent of familiarity with the person concerned, even with the awareness that the question of accuracy or fidelity is inherently a deeply contested one.

This brings us to a perplexing question: how does one know Tagore? The most straightforward answer is perhaps through his writing. Indeed, for the reader and the critic, the path to knowing the artist is his art, and it is only through a careful analysis of Tagore's oeuvre that one forms an idea about the author, his politics, and his perceptions. However, this method, although indispensable, is a limited one. The idea one forms of

the artist through his art alone is bound to be incomplete and porous; it is, at best, an approximation of his mind. The mind of the author, even though it is a repository of his intellectuality, does not encompass his entire corporeality. Naturally, the investigator moves to the biographical and the anecdotal to fill these gaps: photographs, journals, audio and video recordings, first-hand accounts by those who met him, etc. Therefore, it might be argued that portraying a historical character on screen is not simply an act of representation; instead, it is an act of reconstruction—the piecing together of fragments to build a larger whole. However, this reconstruction is not and can never be complete as it is demarcated only by what Tagore had aptly described as a "dotted outline"—the porous boundary through which some essence always escapes. The remaining gaps must be filled in, as Tagore had realised, by "ourselves, as best we can" (Tagore, Glimpses). Hence, this reconstruction is necessarily a process of re-construction—mediated by interpretation and imagination.

On the one hand, unlike the historian or the biographer, the film-maker is not bound by the prerogative to provide an authentic representation of the past—be it an event, a situation, or a person. In other words, cinema, like other forms of artistic media, usually takes recourse to a certain degree of "license" while presenting a real-life personality on screen by blending the fictive with the factual. On the other hand, the coming together of the fictive and the factual does not function in an ideologically neutral field; rather it is

mediated by the politics of a range of stakeholders such as the film-maker or the production house.

At this point, let us turn the problem on its head. If cinematic representations of a historical character is mediated by ideology, then analysis of a particular character against the socio-cultural milieu that produced it can offer an insight into the discursive influences shaping that particular representation. It is with this impetus this essay turns its focus on *Kadambari* and its portrayal of Tagore. Even though Rabindranath (Parambrata Chatterjee) is not the protagonist in the film as it instead chooses to focus on the life and experiences of the eponymous Kadambari Devi (Konkona Sen Sharma), Rabindranath's sister-in-law and the wife of his bother Jyotirindranath Tagore, within the Tagore house at Jorasanko, Rabindranath does appear as an important character in the film. While technically a biography, the film, to a large extent, revolves around the complex and multifaceted relationship between Kadambari and Rabindranath.

It might be argued that Tagore's portrayal in the film is fraught with contradictions; this is to say, the film simultaneously follows and deviates from the common available image of Tagore and his historical personage. The film faithfully renders Tagore's sartorial style, along with those of the other members of the Thakurbari, which shows considerable research on the part of the director Suman Ghosh, costume designer Suchismita Dasgupta, and the production team. Clothing and physical appearance is an important cultural and historical marker— to borrow from Raymond Williams, a sign for

the existence of certain structures of feeling at a specific historical moment—and hence significant for the portrayal of any historical character belonging to any historical period, but it's particularly significant in the case of the Tagore family as members such as Debendranath Tagore, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Jnanadanandini Devi, Abanindranath Tagore, and Rabindranath himself had played an important role not only in pioneering literary and cultural modernity in Bengal but also advocated a certain kind of sartorial modernity that exhibited a fusion of Western, Muslim, Brahmo, and traditional "Babu" culture influences. Thus, for the Tagores in general and Rabindranath in particular, clothing was both a personal and political statement. In fact, Tagore's particularity and careful attention to detail when it came to clothing can be witnessed in the detailed descriptions of clothing in many of his writings such as *Char Adhyay* (Green, Rabindranath). Cynthia Green writes:

> ...the Tagore family was well-known as a style-conscious household. Rabindranath's father modified the clothing for the girls in the house. His sisters-in-law created the Nivi saree drape, combining various regional specifics and traits from Western dress, which is still worn today. His elder brother Jyotirindranath experimented with the concept of a national Indian man's suit that combined the dhoti and trousers. Growing up surrounded by such philosophical approaches to clothing, it is not surprising that attire was very important for the poet. But Rabindranath approached dress as a facet of individuality. He was

> explicit about how individual characters in his stories dressed. As he aged, he designed his own garments. (Green, Rabindranath)

Perhaps Tagore is most vividly remembered today in his long flowing robe or "jubbah," since most of his photographs were taken during the latter years of the poet's life when he had already begun preferring the particular attire the most. This was, however, part of his image, evocative of an oriental sage, that he had been cultivating for years.

In the film, Tagore's attire is predominately constituted of kurtas, gowns, and, in the scenes immediately preceding his departure to the West and the one following his return, waistcoat and tuxedo. The Bengali kurta remains by far the most commonly used piece of clothing by Tagore throughout the film. The film's preferred mode of depicting Tagore in kurtas, a piece of attire carrying the legacy of Indo-Islamic fusion and its further synthesis with the Persianate tradition in Bengal, is inspired by, on the one hand, the Tagore household's fascination for clothing that showed the coming together of multiple cultural traditions, and on the other hand, Tagore's careful projection of himself as an Eastern mystic-like figure. Therefore, the film's portrayal of Tagore's clothing serves as an important reminder to the inherently multifaceted and multicultural influences on Bengali modernity as envisioned by the Tagores that eventually left an indelible imprint on Bengali culture and customs in the twentieth century.

However, there are internal nuances within this portrayal of Tagore that merit our attention. While most

of the action in the novel is confined to the indoor and more private spaces, in relatively formal settings or in scenes where characters other than just Tagore and Kadambari are present, Tagore is usually seen wearing long sleeved kurtas with relatively elaborate designs. In contrast, within the space of his own room or in settings where just the two of them are present, such as the scene where Tagore recites to her the poem "Aj'i e probhaate" or the scene where Tagore approaches Kadambari playing the piano, he is seen wearing short sleeved kurtas and white unassuming dhotis, signifying a shared degree of comfort and frankness among the poet and his sister-in-law. This is not a stray feature in the film but a recurring pattern that imbues clothing with a symbolic dimension. The use of attire to differentiate between formal and informal settings and varying levels of intimacy thus emerges as an indirect and symbolic method of offering commentary on the debated relationship between the two characters in real life. There has been much scholarly and popular speculation about the degree and nature of intimacy between Tagore and Kadambari and the possibility of incest even though there is no conclusive or historically verifiable answer is available. The film, in this sense, does address the popular curiosity regarding the romantic aspect shared between the two characters but with commendable artistic restraint.

In an interview, Suman Ghosh has discussed the sources that have influenced the representations of Tagore and his relationship with Kadambari Devi in the film:

> You see, my main references were Tagore's own writings, a famous novel by Sunil Ganguly called "Prothom Alo" and a book by Mullika Sengupta called "Kobir Bouthan". But apart from these I read all the biographies of Tagore that are there—Prasanto Kumar Pal, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay and Krishna Kripalini. There is a wonderful book by eminent psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakkar called "Young Tagore" which delves into the psyche of Tagore during his early years which are particularly relevant for the film... And as I have always said-since I am not making a documentary I felt free to keep the 'myths' surrounding the incident and Tagore family that are prevalent. (McGill, Interview)

Ghosh conveys Tagore's youthful and earnest friendship with his sister-in-law and her role as amuse, especially in his early writing, through tender and frank exchanges between the two characters, especially in indoor scenes in Rabindranath or Kadambari's room or in the rooftop which serve as intimate spaces where they can freely share opinions, express sadness, jealousy, admiration or inspiration and enjoy moments of meaningful companionship. The film's portrayal of Tagore as a sensitive, mild-mannered, soft-spoken young man is perhaps another means of highlighting the emotional intimacy between the characters, and distinguish between the public figure of Tagore and his private inner life. The lack of artifice reflected in Tagore's attire in his interactions with Kadambari while by themselves is also maintained in their dialogues during these conversations. Instead of high-flown speeches, these interactions often

become lyrical and poetic or include Tagore's Rabindra Sangeet to imply what is left unsaid.

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# Dialogical Intersections: Hermeneutic Engagements with Tradition and Modernity in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali*

Agnideepto Datta

**Abstract**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* offers a nuanced exploration of human relationships, societal norms, and individual desires within early 20th-century Bengal. This study employs Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to analyse the novel's engagement with tradition and modernity. Gadamer's concepts of the fusion of horizons and historical consciousness provide a framework for understanding how characters navigate and reinterpret tradition. The dynamic interplay of communication, tradition, and personal aspirations is particularly evident in the character of Binodini, whose resistance and conformity highlight the complexities of individual agency within societal constraints. The dialogues between characters reflect the evolving understanding and redefinition of their roles, illustrating Gadamer's assertion that understanding is an ongoing,

interpretive act rooted in historical context. Tagore's portrayal of the Bengal Renaissance underscores the tension between traditional values and emerging modern thoughts, revealing how personal desires and societal expectations shape identities. This study also addresses feminist critiques, emphasizing the power dynamics and marginalization within the hermeneutic process. Ultimately, *Chokher Bali* extends Gadamer's hermeneutics, offering a critical examination of tradition and modernity in the cultural context of early 20th-century India.

**Keywords**
Tagore, hermeneutics, Gadamer, Bengal Renaissance, historical consciousness

## Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* is a profound narrative that intricately examines human relationships, societal norms, and individual desires within the context of early 20th-century Bengal. This study seeks to explore the conflict between tradition and modernity in *Chokher Bali* using Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as a framework. Gadamer's hermeneutics, emphasizing the dialogical nature of understanding and the historical situatedness of interpretation, provides a valuable lens for analyzing how the characters in Tagore's novel navigate and reinterpret tradition. As Gadamer asserts, "Being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer 474), highlighting the novel's complex interplay of communication and tradition. Moreover, drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that "There are no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche 14), this study

will delve into the subjective experiences of the characters, showing how their personal histories and societal influences shape their actions and beliefs.

## Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his seminal work *Truth and Method*, elaborates on the process of understanding as fundamentally hermeneutic, involving a fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the text. Gadamer posits that understanding is not merely a subjective act but a dialogical process deeply rooted in historical consciousness. He argues that tradition is not a static inheritance but an active process of engagement, where the past and present coalesce in the act of interpretation. According to Gadamer, "Tradition is not simply a pre-given framework within which we operate; it is something that we actively and creatively engage with, shaping and being shaped by it in the process" (Gadamer 276). This view aligns with Martin Heidegger's assertion that "language is the house of Being," suggesting that our engagement with tradition is mediated through language, which itself shapes our understanding of existence and our historical situatedness (Heidegger 193). Both philosophers emphasize the dynamic interplay between the interpreter and the tradition, underscoring that the act of understanding is inherently an interpretive endeavour grounded in the historical continuum.

## Tradition and Modernity in "Chokher Bali"

*Chokher Bali* delves into the complexities of tradition and modernity through the lives of its characters, particularly the widowed Binodini, and her interactions with

Mahendra, Asha, and Bihari. Tagore's portrayal of these characters reflects the societal expectations and personal desires that characterize the transitional period of the Bengal Renaissance. Binodini, as a widow, embodies the struggle against traditional constraints. Her intelligence and charm, coupled with her marginalized status, create a tension between her aspirations and societal expectations. In her initial interactions with Mahendra and his household, Binodini is acutely aware of the limitations imposed on her by tradition. However, she also actively engages with and challenges these constraints.

Literary critic Sudeshna Chakravarti notes that "Binodini's character is a complex interplay of resistance and conformity, challenging the traditional roles assigned to her while simultaneously using them to her advantage" (Chakravarti 135). Binodini's manipulation of her traditional role to assert her agency exemplifies this dynamic, as she navigates and challenges the societal expectations imposed on her, highlighting her struggle to assert her individual desires and agency.

## Dialogical Understanding and Conflict

The dialogues in *Chokher Bali* serve as a medium through which characters negotiate their identities and understand their relationships. Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons is evident in the evolving relationship between Binodini and Mahendra. Initially, Mahendra's attraction to Binodini is rooted in his perception of her as a mysterious and unattainable figure, shaped by his traditional views of womanhood and widowhood.

However, as their relationship develops, Mahendra's understanding of Binodini shifts, influenced by his personal desires and the changing social norms. This shift reflects Gadamer's assertion that "every encounter with tradition involves an interpretive act that reshapes our understanding of both the past and ourselves" (Gadamer 97).

Binodini's relationship with Asha further exemplifies the dialogical nature of understanding. Asha, representing traditional domesticity, initially views Binodini with a mix of admiration and suspicion. Their interactions, however, lead to a gradual re-evaluation of each other's roles and identities. Asha's eventual realization of her own desires and her questioning of traditional norms illustrate Gadamer's idea that understanding is a dynamic process, where "the horizons of the present are constantly shifting and being redefined through engagement with the past" (Gadamer 75).

## Historical Consciousness and the Individual

Gadamer's emphasis on historical consciousness as a fundamental aspect of understanding is particularly relevant to the characters' development in *Chokher Bali*. Binodini's character embodies a critical engagement with her historical context. Her actions and decisions are informed by her awareness of her marginalized status as a widow, yet she also seeks to redefine her identity beyond these constraints. This dual engagement with tradition and modernity is central to Gadamer's hermeneutics, which posits that "the past is never simply behind us; it is always part of the horizon

within which we live and understand" (Gadamer 273).Literary critic Sudeshna Chakravarti argues that "Binodini's character is a complex interplay of resistance and conformity, challenging the traditional roles assigned to her while simultaneously using them to her advantage" (Chakravarti 135).This perspective aligns with Gadamer's view by highlighting how Binodini navigates and interprets her circumstances, using her marginalized position to assert her agency and reconfigure her identity within the constraints of tradition.

Mahendra's character, on the other hand, reflects the struggle of reconciling personal desires with societal expectations. His vacillation between Asha and Binodini can be seen as an internal conflict between adhering to traditional values and embracing modern individualism. The tension in Mahendra's character can be elucidated through the lens of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy, which asserts that "the spirit is not something that exists in isolation; it realizes itself only through engagement with the world" (Hegel 57). This suggests that Mahendra's actions are influenced by his historical situatedness and his attempt to navigate the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity. His struggle to reconcile these aspects underscores the dynamic and interpretive nature of human existence, as emphasized by both Gadamer and Hegel.

## Fusion of Horizons in "Chokher Bali"

The concept of the fusion of horizons is pivotal in understanding the resolution of conflicts in "Chokher Bali." Gadamer argues that true understanding involves

a fusion of the interpreter's horizon with that of the text or the other. In the novel, this fusion is evident in the characters' evolving relationships and their eventual acceptance of each other's complexities.

The culmination of Binodini's journey, marked by her decision to leave Mahendra's household, signifies a moment of self-realization and acceptance. Her departure can be interpreted as a fusion of her own horizon with that of her societal context, acknowledging the limitations imposed by tradition while asserting her individual agency. This act reflects Gadamer's idea that "understanding is not a one-sided act of grasping the other; it is a mutual process of engagement that transforms both the self and the other" (Gadamer 197).Similarly, Mahendra's and Asha's reconciliation towards the end of the novel can be seen as a fusion of horizons. Their acceptance of each other's flaws and desires indicates a deeper understanding that transcends mere adherence to traditional roles. This transformation illustrates Gadamer's view that "the fusion of horizons is an ongoing process, where understanding is always being renewed and redefined" (Gadamer 234).

## Critique of Tradition and Modernity

Tagore's nuanced portrayal of tradition and modernity in *Chokher Bali* invites a critical engagement with Gadamer's hermeneutics. While Gadamer emphasizes the dialogical nature of understanding and the creative engagement with tradition, Tagore's novel also highlights the inherent conflicts and power dynamics within this process. Binodini's character, in particular, underscores the

limitations and challenges faced by individuals who seek to reinterpret tradition in a patriarchal society. As Tagore writes, "I have been foolishly arguing in favour of a little flexibility in our principles" (Tagore 211), reflecting the internal struggle Binodini faces against societal norms. This critique resonates with feminist interpretations of hermeneutics, as discussed by Rita DasGupta Sherma, who argues that "the dialogical process of understanding must also account for the asymmetries of power and the marginalization of certain voices" (Sherma 45). Binodini's attempts to navigate and reinterpret her traditional role exemplify this dynamic, highlighting her agency and resistance within the confines of societal expectations.

Furthermore, Tagore's exploration of personal desires and societal norms in *Chokher Bali* resonates deeply with Gadamer's notion that understanding is inherently situated within historical contexts. The novel vividly portrays the Bengal Renaissance, a period marked by significant cultural and intellectual upheaval in Bengal, where traditional values clashed with the emergence of modern thought and practices. This dynamic cultural milieu serves as a backdrop against which Tagore examines how individuals negotiate their identities and aspirations within changing societal frameworks. Binodini's character exemplifies this tension as she navigates her position as a widow in a patriarchal society undergoing transformation. Her interactions with Mahendra and Asha, and her manipulations within the confines of traditional norms, illustrate her agency and the complexities of personal desires amidst societal

expectations. As Tagore portrays, "Her woman's heart longed for the happy union" (Tagore 146), reflecting Binodini's inner turmoil and aspirations amid the constraints imposed by societal conventions.

Gadamer's assertion that "every act of understanding is rooted in a specific historical context, shaping and being shaped by it" (Gadamer 129) finds resonance in Tagore's narrative, where characters' actions and decisions are informed not only by personal motives but also by the broader historical forces shaping their lives. Through Binodini and other characters, Tagore explores how individuals negotiate tradition and modernity, illustrating the transformative power of historical context in shaping their understanding and self-perception.

## Conclusion

Understanding Tagore's *Chokher Bali* through Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the text emerges as an intricate exploration of the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Gadamer's concepts of the fusion of horizons and historical consciousness provide an invaluable framework for understanding the complexities embedded within Tagore's narrative. The characters in *Chokher Bali* constantly engage with societal norms and personal desires, exemplifying the hermeneutic process of interpretation and reinterpretation. This process is vividly illustrated in the character of Binodini, whose life is a constant negotiation between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Tagore writes, "Binodini was like a chameleon; she assumed different colors at different times, and it was

difficult to understand what she truly wanted" (Tagore 150). This statement encapsulates the fluidity of identity and the continual reinterpretation of self in response to changing contexts.

Furthermore, Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons is evident in the interactions between the characters, particularly in the relationships that develop across generational lines. The novel's portrayal of Mahendra and Binodini's relationship highlights the tensions between adhering to traditional roles and embracing modern desires. This tension is reflective of Gadamer's assertion that understanding is a historically effected event, where the past and present are in constant dialogue. The characters' struggles with their roles and relationships underscore the continuous process of negotiating meaning within their historical and cultural contexts.

In addition to *Chokher Bali*, Tagore's broader oeuvre often grapples with similar themes of tradition and modernity. In "The Home and the World," for example, Tagore explores the dichotomy between the inner world of tradition and the outer world of political activism. Bimala's journey from the confines of her home to the political arena mirrors Binodini's struggles, reflecting the broader societal tensions of early 20th-century India. Tagore articulates this tension through Bimala's introspection: "I was both a queen and a commoner, enclosed within the four walls of my home, yet connected to the world outside by the bond of my love" (Tagore, *The Home and the World* 78). This passage underscores the conflict between personal desires and societal roles, a recurring theme in Tagore's works. While

Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a robust framework for understanding these narratives, *Chokher Bali* also invites a critical examination of the limitations and power dynamics within this process. The novel reveals how societal structures can constrain individuals, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to interpreting tradition and modernity. Tagore's portrayal of the power dynamics within relationships and the societal expectations placed upon individuals calls for a deeper understanding of how these forces shape human experience. As Tagore poignantly observes, "The chains that bind us are not always visible, but they are felt with every breath we take." (Tagore 212)

In this way, *Chokher Bali* not only reflects the hermeneutic principles articulated by Gadamer but also extends them, offering a profound critique of the societal structures that shape human experience. The novel challenges readers to consider the ways in which tradition and modernity intersect and conflict, urging a more critical and reflective engagement with these concepts. Through its rich narrative and complex characters, *Chokher Bali* demonstrates the enduring relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics while also pushing the boundaries of his philosophical framework to address the specific cultural and historical contexts of early 20thcentury India.

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# On Xenophobia: A Study of the Similarities found in the Ideas of Tagore and Fanon

Anirban Banerjee

**Abstract**

Nationalism is a very problematic area that gives an empowerment to the race that is colonised but at the same time it also drives them into the abyss of xenophobia, where they cannot find the good things in any other culture and always defends the dark side of their own culture. This continues even after seventy-five years of independence from the colonisers. Two great thinkers, Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon, from two different timelines, yet similar situations, talk about the same effect of nationalism in their works. For this purpose, this paper shall consider Tagore's essay on "Nationalism", Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* as the primary text. Both the thinkers suggest that nationalism makes us feel proud about ourselves which is like a defence mechanism against the continuous oppression of the coloniser. But this gradually becomes a habit and the colonised people in order to

defend their own culture against colonisation start offending other cultures. This results in xenophobic fanaticism. Therefore, both the thinkers, Tagore and Fanon cautions us not to take nationalism as the final solution against colonialism. This paper shall discuss the similarities of their ideas and other aspects. This paper intends to find the relevance of their ideas in our contemporary society.

**Keywords**
*nationalism, colonialism, xenophobia, postcolonialism.*

Nationalism has been a powerful and often contentious force throughout modern history. It has inspired movements for self-determination and independence but has also fuelled exclusion and conflict. Two influential thinkers who critically examined the darker sides of nationalism are Frantz Fanon and Rabindranath Tagore. Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique, explored how nationalism can devolve into xenophobia, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Tagore, the Indian polymath, warned against the dangers of exclusionist nationalism long before the full impacts of decolonization were realised. Despite their different contexts and backgrounds, both thinkers shared concerns about how nationalism could engender division and hatred. This paper will discuss the similarities between Fanon's idea of nationalism leading to xenophobia and Tagore's concept of exclusionist nationalism, highlighting their critical insights on the potential perils of nationalist fervour.

Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and revolutionary writer, provided profound insights into the psychopathology of colonialism and its implications on both the colonised and colonisers. His works, particularly *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, explore the psychological dimensions of colonisation and the violent processes of decolonization. Fanon's analysis extends to the rise of nationalism and its often-concomitant phenomenon, xenophobia. This essay delves into Fanon's idea of psychopathology and examines how nationalism can lead to xenophobia, drawing from his seminal works and contemporary interpretations.

Frantz Fanon's reflections on nationalism are rooted in his experiences and observations of anti-colonial struggles, particularly in Algeria. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon focuses on the dynamics of post-colonial identity and the pitfalls of nationalist movements. He argues that while nationalism can serve as a unifying force against colonial oppression, it often harbours the seeds of its own corruption and can morph into xenophobia and internal repression. Fanon points out that nationalism, in its struggle to consolidate power and forge a unified identity, can become exclusionary. The newly formed national identity may start to define itself in opposition to others, fostering an "us versus them" mentality. This process often leads to the scapegoating of minorities and immigrants, who are seen as threats to the homogeneous national identity being constructed.

In addition, Fanon warns that the initial revolutionary zeal of nationalist movements can give way to

authoritarianism and xenophobia as new leaders seek to solidify their control. The emphasis on national unity can suppress dissent and lead to the marginalisation of those who do not conform to the dominant national narrative. This dynamic was evident in many post-colonial states where leaders, once revolutionaries, became dictators, using nationalist rhetoric to justify repression and xenophobia.

Fanon's exploration of psychopathology is deeply rooted in his personal and professional experiences. As a psychiatrist, he witnessed the profound psychological damage inflicted on individuals by the colonial system. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses how colonialism dehumanises both the colonised and the colonisers. For the colonised, it creates a sense of inferiority and self-hatred. This internalised racism manifests in various psychological disorders, including identity crises and neuroses. Fanon argues that the colonised individual develops a "white mask," adopting the culture and attitudes of the coloniser to gain acceptance, thus losing their sense of self. Fanon also examines the psychological impact on the colonisers. He posits that the act of dehumanising others to maintain superiority creates a moral and psychological dissonance, leading to a range of psychopathologies. The coloniser's need to constantly assert dominance and justify their position results in paranoia and aggression, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and oppression.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon elaborates on the role of violence in the decolonization process. He argues that the violence inherent in colonialism must be

confronted with violence for genuine liberation. This cathartic violence is necessary for the colonised to reclaim their humanity and identity. Fanon suggests that decolonization is inherently a violent process because it involves the complete overthrow of the colonial system, which is itself rooted in violence. Fanon's notion of violence is not limited to physical confrontation but includes psychological liberation. The decolonized individual must overcome the internalised oppression and rebuild their identity on their terms. This psychological violence is essential for breaking free from the colonial mindset and establishing a new, autonomous sense of self.

Fanon views nationalism as a crucial step in the decolonization process. In the context of decolonization, nationalism serves as a unifying force that mobilises the colonised population against the colonial powers. It fosters a collective identity and a sense of pride, essential for overcoming the inferiority complex instilled by colonialism. Nationalism becomes a means of reclaiming cultural heritage and asserting political autonomy. However, Fanon also warns of the potential pitfalls of nationalism. He cautions that the newly formed national consciousness can quickly devolve into chauvinism and xenophobia. Once the immediate goal of liberation is achieved, the nationalist fervour can turn inward, leading to exclusionary practices and the marginalisation of minority groups. This transition from a unifying force to an exclusionary ideology marks the shift towards xenophobia.

Nationalism, in its extreme form, can foster xenophobia, characterised by a fear and hatred of the

'other.' This xenophobia often arises from the need to solidify a national identity, which is defined in opposition to external or internal others. The process of nation-building involves delineating who belongs to the nation and who does not, often leading to the scapegoating of those deemed outsiders.

Rabindranath Tagore, writing in the early 20th century, also critiqued the rise of nationalism, particularly in the context of British colonial rule in India. Tagore's concerns about nationalism were profoundly shaped by his vision of universal humanism and his belief in the interconnectedness of all people. He feared that nationalism, with its emphasis on exclusivity and competition among nations, would undermine these ideals.

In his essay "Nationalism," Tagore critiques the concept of the nation-state and the blind patriotism it often engenders. He argues that nationalism tends to prioritise the interests of the nation above all else, leading to a disregard for universal moral principles and the welfare of humanity as a whole. This exclusionary aspect of nationalism, Tagore contends, can foster an inward-looking mentality that shuns outsiders and suppresses internal diversity.

It is in this context that the lines from his poem "Where the mind is without fear…" become very significant:

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
> Where knowledge is free

> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
> By narrow domestic walls… (Tagore, NP)

Tagore never wanted a nation closed from all sides to the other cultures. He actually feared the xenophobic tendency of contemporary nationalism. Tagore's critique is particularly poignant when he discusses how nationalism can create artificial barriers between people, fostering suspicion and hostility towards those perceived as different. He saw the potential for nationalism to devolve into chauvinism and xenophobia, where the pursuit of national glory could lead to the exclusion and oppression of minorities and other nations. His critique of nationalism was deeply rooted in his vision of universal humanism, which often put him at odds with the prevailing nationalist sentiments of his time. Tagore's scepticism towards nationalism and his advocacy for a more inclusive and global perspective offer valuable insights into the potential adverse impacts of nationalism on the path to globalisation. Tagore's idea of nationalism diverged significantly from the militant and often exclusionary nationalism that was gaining ground in the early 20th century. He viewed nationalism as a Western import that prioritised the interests of the state over the welfare of individuals and communities. In his lectures on nationalism delivered in Japan and the United States in 1916, Tagore articulated his concerns about the dangers of adopting Western-style nationalism in India. He argued that nationalism, as practised in the West, was a machinery aimed at achieving political and economic power, often at the expense of moral and spiritual values.

Tagore believed that the imposition of nationalism in India would lead to the erosion of its rich cultural and spiritual heritage. He feared that nationalism would foster divisions and conflicts within Indian society, which was inherently diverse and pluralistic. Tagore's vision of nationalism was therefore fundamentally anti-hegemonic; it emphasised the spirit of unity and the continuity of a nation's cultural life, rather than the pursuit of power and dominance.

The debates between Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi further illuminate Tagore's perspective on nationalism. While Gandhi saw nationalism as a necessary force for India's liberation from colonial rule, Tagore was critical of the nationalist movement's potential to incite violence and hatred. Tagore advocated for a form of patriotism that was inclusive and rooted in a broader humanism, contrasting sharply with the narrower, more aggressive nationalism that Gandhi sometimes endorsed.

Tagore's ideas on nationalism have significant implications for globalisation. His vision of a global society was one where cultural and spiritual values took precedence over economic and political interests. He believed that true progress could only be achieved through the harmonious coexistence of different cultures and the mutual respect of diverse traditions. This view stands in stark contrast to the competitive, often confrontational nature of nationalism, which tends to prioritise national interests over global cooperation.

Both Fanon and Tagore underscore the potential for nationalism to foster exclusion and division. They

highlight how the drive for national unity and identity can easily slip into an exclusionary practice that marginalises the minorities and fosters xenophobia. This exclusion can manifest internally, against dissenting voices and minority groups within the nation, and externally, against immigrants and other nations. Moreover, both thinkers emphasise the ethical implications of nationalism. Fanon's concern with the psychological effects of colonialism and the subsequent nationalist movements aligns with Tagore's broader moral vision. They both advocate for a form of nationalism that is inclusive and rooted in universal principles rather than exclusionary practices. Fanon's call for a new humanism in post-colonial societies echoes Tagore's plea for a nationalism that embraces humanity rather than isolates itself.

Nationalism, as a political and cultural ideology, has shaped the contours of modern history, influencing countless movements for independence and self-determination. Among the many voices that have contributed to the discourse on nationalism, Frantz Fanon and Rabindranath Tagore stand out for their profound insights and distinct perspectives. Despite emerging from different cultural and historical contexts, Fanon and Tagore share significant commonalities in their understanding of nationalism, particularly in their critique of colonialism, their vision for a liberated society, and their emphasis on the psychological dimensions of oppression.

Fanon and Tagore both envisioned a liberated society that transcended the narrow confines of nationalism and embraced universal human values. For Fanon, the

struggle against colonialism was not an end in itself but a means to achieve a new humanism. He argued that the post-colonial society should aim to create a new social order based on equality, justice, and mutual respect among all people. Fanon's vision was revolutionary, advocating for a complete break from the colonial past and the establishment of a society that respects the dignity and humanity of every individual.

Tagore, on the other hand, while supporting the cause of Indian independence, was critical of the aggressive nationalism that often accompanied the anti-colonial movements. He warned against the dangers of nationalism that could lead to xenophobia, intolerance, and internal divisions. Instead, Tagore advocated for a vision of nationalism that was inclusive, compassionate, and rooted in the cultural and spiritual values of the people. He believed in the idea of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"—the world is one family—and envisioned a society where different cultures and nations could coexist in harmony.

In conclusion, Frantz Fanon and Rabindranath Tagore, despite their different backgrounds and approaches, share several commonalities in their conception of nationalism. Both critique colonialism not just as a political and economic system, but as a profound assault on human dignity and culture. They envision a liberated society that transcends narrow nationalism and embraces universal human values. Both recognize the psychological dimensions of oppression and emphasise the importance of education in the process of decolonization and nation-building. Their insights remain relevant today as we

continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the challenges of building inclusive and humane societies.

The similarities between Frantz Fanon's idea of nationalism leading to xenophobia and Rabindranath Tagore's concept of exclusionist nationalism lie in their shared concerns about the divisive and exclusionary potential of nationalist fervour. Both thinkers warn that nationalism, while a powerful force for collective identity and resistance against oppression, can also engender xenophobia and internal repression if it prioritises homogeneity and exclusion over inclusivity and universal human values. Their critiques remain profoundly relevant in today's globalised world, where the resurgence of nationalist sentiments continues to pose challenges to social cohesion and international cooperation. Understanding their insights can help in navigating the complexities of modern nationalism and fostering a more inclusive and humane global society.

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# Negotiating Universals, Navigating Praxes: Kabir, Lalon and Tagore at Intersections

Debarshi Arathdar

**Abstract**

The essay analyses the deep-rooted influences and confluences that shape Rabindranath Tagore's poetry via the Bhakti and Baul traditions, both of which emphasize personal spiritual experience and a direct connection with the divine. The Bhakti movement, notable for its challenge to caste and religious orthodoxy, featured poets like Kabir who critiqued ritualistic practices and emphasized inner purity and truth. Tagore resonated with these themes, adopting a similar style that uses simple, evocative language to make profound spiritual insights accessible. Tagore's poetry reflects Kabir's influence through its focus on universal spirituality and inner experience. His poem "Where the Mind is Without Fear" exemplifies this, echoing Kabir's critique of empty rituals and longing for spiritual and societal freedom. The Baul tradition, with figures like Lalon Fakir, also profoundly shaped Tagore's spiritual outlook. The Bauls, known for

their experiential spirituality and critique of social norms, inspired Tagore's emphasis on inner realization and direct communion with the divine. Lalon Fakir's songs, rich in metaphor and symbolism, explored themes of humanism and inner enlightenment, which are evident in Tagore's collection "Gitanjali." Rooted in these traditions, Tagore's works transcend specific religious frameworks, advocating a universal quest for truth and enlightenment, offering timeless insights into the human quest for transcendence and a more equitable world.

**Keywords**
*Baul, Bhakti, Spirituality, Divine, Communion, Transcendence*

Tagore's poetic works resonate with deep spiritual insights and a quest for transcendence, themes that can be traced back to the influences of the Bhakti and Baul traditions. The Bhakti movement, with poets like Kabir, and the Baul tradition, with luminaries such as Lalon Fakir, profoundly shaped Tagore's spiritual and poetic vision. This essay explores the influences of these traditions on Tagore's poetry, focusing on themes of transcendence and spirituality, and presents a detailed examination of how these elements manifest in his work.

## Bhakti Movement and Kabir's Influence

The Bhakti movement, spanning from the 7th to the 17th centuries, emphasized personal devotion and a direct connection with the divine, often challenging the rigidity of caste and religious orthodoxy. Bhakti poets, including Kabir, Mira Bai, and Tulsidas, expressed a spirituality grounded in love, devotion, and the

recognition of God as both immanent and transcendent (Vaudeville, 1993). This movement's inclusive and universal appeal resonated deeply with Tagore, who saw in it a kindred spirit for his own spiritual quest. Kabir (1440-1518), a prominent figure in the Bhakti tradition, is renowned for his simple yet profound poetry that transcends religious boundaries. His verses often critique ritualistic practices and emphasize an inner, personal experience of the divine (Hess & Singh, 1983). Kabir's use of everyday metaphors to convey spiritual truths found a deep resonance in Tagore's poetic style, which similarly sought to make profound insights accessible and relatable.

## Influence on Tagore: Baul Tradition and Lalon Fakir

Tagore's engagement with Kabir's poetry is evident in several aspects of his work. Kabir's influence is visible in Tagore's embrace of a universal spirituality, his use of simple yet evocative language, and his focus on the inner experience of the divine (Radice, 1987). For instance, in Tagore's poem "Where the Mind is Without Fear," the longing for spiritual and societal freedom echoes Kabir's disdain for ritualistic religion and emphasis on inner purity and truth.The Bauls are mystic minstrels from Bengal, known for their unique blend of Hindu Bhakti, Sufi mysticism, and Tantric practices.This tradition, which emerged around the 18th century, emphasizes seeking the divine within the human body and soul, advocating for an experiential and personal spirituality (Capwell, 1974). The Baul philosophy's focus on inner realization

and critique of social norms deeply influenced Tagore's spiritual outlook. Lalon Fakir (1774-1890), a seminal figure in the Baul tradition, composed songs rich in metaphor and symbolism, exploring themes of humanism, the nature of the divine, and the quest for inner enlightenment (Roy, 2012). His works often challenge social and religious conventions, advocating for a direct, personal experience of the divine, which significantly resonated with Tagore's spiritual sensibilities.

Tagore's fascination with the Bauls, particularly Lalon Fakir, significantly shaped his poetic vision. The Bauls' emphasis on inner spiritual experience, their critique of social and religious conventions, and their use of music as a vehicle for spiritual expression deeply influenced Tagore (Sarkar, 2010). This influence is evident in Tagore's collection "Gitanjali" (Song Offerings), where themes of divine love, humanism, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment are prominently explored.

**Transcendence and Spirituality in Tagore's Poetry**

Transcendence in Tagore's poetry refers to the experience of surpassing the physical and material world to connect with a higher spiritual reality. This concept is central to both Bhakti and Baul traditions, which influenced Tagore's understanding of the divine as both immanent and transcendent (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). In "Gitanjali," Tagore frequently depicts transcendence through the imagery of nature, music, and love, portraying a unity with the divine that transcends individual existence. Tagore's spirituality, deeply rooted in the Bhakti and Baul traditions, emphasizes personal

experience and direct communion with the divine. This spirituality transcends specific religious frameworks, advocating for a universal quest for truth and enlightenment (Sen, 2010). Unity with the Divine: Tagore often explores the theme of unity with the divine, reflecting the Bhakti idea of a personal and loving relationship with God. In "Gitanjali," he writes, "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life," capturing the ongoing, dynamic relationship with the divine that echoes Kabir's vision (Tagore, 1912). Inner Experience and Realization: Influenced by the Bauls, Tagore emphasizes the importance of inner spiritual experience. The Bauls' belief that God resides within the human heart resonates in Tagore's works. In "Gitanjali," he states, "The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures," embodying the essence of seeing the divine in all aspects of life (Tagore, 1912). Both Kabir and the Bauls were critical of ritualistic practices and religious orthodoxy. Tagore echoes this sentiment in his poetry, advocating for a spirituality that transcends formal religion. In "Gitanjali," he writes, "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?" reflecting Kabir's disdain for empty rituals and Lalon Fakir's challenge to social and religious conventions (Tagore, 1912).

## Comparative Analysis: Kabir, Lalon Fakir, and Tagore

### Images and Themes

Kabir's and Lalon Fakir's use of simple, everyday language to convey profound spiritual truths had a significant impact on Tagore's poetic style. Tagore's poetry, like that of Kabir and Lalon, is marked by clarity, directness, and the use of vivid imagery drawn from nature and daily life (Das, 1996). This accessibility allows his spiritual message to resonate with a broad audience. The themes of love and devotion are central to the works of Kabir, Lalon Fakir, and Tagore. For Kabir, love is the path to realizing God, as seen in his lines, "The moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it" (Kabir, 1915). Similarly, Lalon Fakir's songs often express a deep longing for the divine. Tagore's poetry, influenced by these traditions, frequently explores divine love and the soul's yearning for union with the eternal (Roy, 2012).

### Social Critique and Humanism

Both Kabir and Lalon Fakir were social reformers who used their poetry to critique societal norms and advocate for humanism. Tagore, inspired by their example, also addresses social issues in his work. His poetry often calls for social harmony, the eradication of caste and religious barriers, and the recognition of human dignity (Chakravarty, 1961). This is evident in his poem "Chitto Jetha Bhayshunyo" (Where the Mind is Without Fear), which envisions a society free from divisions and oppression (Tagore, 1912). Kabir, a 15th-century poet-

saint, is renowned for his bold and provocative critique of social and religious orthodoxies. He emerged as a reformer during a time when Indian society was deeply entrenched in rigid caste hierarchies and religious dogmatism. Kabir's poetry challenged the prevailing norms and advocated for a direct, personal connection with the divine, free from the constraints of organized religion and caste discrimination (Vaudeville, 1993). His verses often highlight the futility of external rituals and underscore the importance of inner purity and devotion. For instance, in one of his couplets, Kabir states:

> "Pothipadhipadhi jag mua, pandit bhayanakoye
> Dhaiakhar prem ka, padhe so pandit hoye"

(The whole world dies reading scriptures, no one becomes wise. The one who understands the word of love, attains true wisdom.)

Through such poignant lines, Kabir not only critiques the superficial religiosity of his time but also promotes a humanistic approach centered on love and compassion, cutting across societal divisions.

## Lalon Fakir: Advocate of Universal Humanism

Lalon Fakir, an 18th-century Bengali Baul saint, similarly used his songs to challenge social norms and advocate for a more inclusive and humane society. The Baul tradition, with its syncretic blend of Hindu and Sufi elements, emphasizes the inner spiritual quest and often stands in opposition to established religious and social conventions. Lalon's poetry addresses issues of caste, religion, and societal inequities, urging people to look

beyond external identities and realize the divine within themselves and others (Roy, 2012). In one of his famous songs, Lalon asks:

"Shob loke koy Lalon ki jaat shongshare"

(Everyone asks, what is Lalon's caste in this world?)

This rhetorical question underscores his rejection of caste distinctions and his advocacy for a society where human dignity transcends social stratification. Lalon's humanism is rooted in the belief that all human beings are inherently divine and deserve equal respect and love.

## Tagore: Continuing the Legacy of Social Reform and Humanism

Inspired by the revolutionary ideas of Kabir and Lalon Fakir, Rabindranath Tagore's work also reflects a deep commitment to social reform and humanism. Tagore's poetry and writings often address the need for social harmony, the eradication of caste and religious barriers, and the recognition of human dignity (Chakravarty, 1961). His vision for a just and equitable society is beautifully encapsulated in his poem "Chitto Jetha Bhayshunyo" (Where the Mind is Without Fear), where he envisions a world free from divisions and oppression:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls..."

(Tagore, 1912)

In this poem, Tagore articulates a dream of a nation where people are free from fear and oppression, where

knowledge and truth prevail, and where societal divisions based on caste, creed, and religion are obliterated. The poem serves as a clarion call for a progressive and enlightened society, reflecting Tagore's deep-seated humanism and his desire for social reform.

## Tagore's Broader Social Vision

Beyond individual poems, Tagore's broader body of work consistently addresses social issues and advocates for reform. In his essays, plays, and songs, Tagore often critiques the rigidity of the caste system, the blind adherence to religious orthodoxy, and the social injustices prevalent in colonial India. He founded the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan with the vision of creating an educational institution that transcends national and cultural boundaries, fostering a spirit of internationalism and human unity (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). Tagore's educational philosophy emphasizes the holistic development of individuals, nurturing creativity, critical thinking, and a sense of social responsibility. In his novel "Ghare-Baire" (The Home and the World), Tagore explores the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the complexities of social and political change in colonial India. The novel critiques both the oppressive aspects of traditional society and the emerging nationalism, advocating for a balanced approach that harmonizes individual freedom with social justice (Tagore, 1916). Through his multifaceted contributions, Tagore sought to inspire a societal transformation grounded in the principles of humanism, compassion, and equality.

## The Legacy of Tagore's Spiritual Vision

Tagore's spiritual vision, shaped by the Bhakti and Baul traditions, has had a lasting impact on both Indian and global literature. His works have inspired countless readers and writers to explore themes of spirituality, love, and humanism. Tagore's ability to synthesize diverse spiritual traditions into a coherent and universal message has made his poetry timeless and relevant across cultures (Radice, 1987). In contemporary times, Tagore's emphasis on inner spiritual experience, unity with the divine, and social harmony continues to resonate. His critique of religious orthodoxy and advocacy for a spirituality that transcends formal religious boundaries are particularly relevant in an era marked by religious and cultural conflicts (Sen, 2010). Tagore's poetry invites readers to seek a deeper, more inclusive understanding of spirituality that embraces all of humanity.

## Conclusion

The influence of Bhakti poets like Kabir and Baul poets like Lalon Fakir on Rabindranath Tagore's poetry is profound and multifaceted. Through their impact, Tagore developed a spiritual vision that emphasizes transcendence, inner experience, and the unity of all life. His poetry, inspired by these traditions, continues to offer a powerful and timeless message of love, devotion, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment. The social reformative and humanistic impulses in the works of Kabir and Lalon Fakir significantly influenced Rabindranath Tagore's literary and philosophical outlook. Kabir's bold critique of religious orthodoxy and social hierarchies, combined

with Lalon Fakir's emphasis on inner spirituality and universal humanism, provided a rich tapestry of ideas that Tagore wove into his own vision for a just and harmonious society. Through his poetry, essays, and educational endeavors, Tagore championed the ideals of social harmony, the eradication of caste and religious barriers, and the recognition of human dignity, carrying forward the legacy of his spiritual predecessors into the modern era. His works continue to inspire and resonate, offering timeless insights into the human quest for transcendence and a more equitable world. Tagore's work not only enriches the literary landscape but also provides valuable insights into the universal human quest for meaning and transcendence.

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# A Comparative Analysis of Philosophical Reflections in Tagore's "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies": The Ephemeral Wisdom of the Human Being

Shantanu Siuli

**Abstract**

This paper aims to make a comparative analysis of the philosophical insights that Rabindranath Tagore's poetry collections titled "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" or this article. The existentialist themes of the transitory aspect of life and the search for the soul are present in two of the long poems and a collection of short poems in "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies". Exploring the essence of Tagore's collections, the study focuses on how his philosophical visions rooted in Indian spirituality and his inner search are represented through the forms and organization of each collection. The paper identifies and compares the motifs featured in both collections, with the focus placed on the motifs of light, nature, and the cyclical nature of existence. This paper also discusses the transient and the eternal interaction in Tagore's poetry with reference to how he handles the tension between

the ephemeral and the eternal. When analyzing imagery and symbolism, one can get to an understanding of the numerous layers of meaning hidden in Tagore's musings about life, death, and divinity. This dissertation aims to discuss the continuity and change in Tagore's philosophical discussion by comparing the short and passionate confessions of "Fireflies" to the long and thoughtful musings in "Fruit-Gathering." In order to provide an enriched understanding of Tagore's poetic world, the study will incorporate the diverse perspectives of literary criticism, philosophy, and cultural analysis. This essay also intends to demonstrate how through the study of passing wisdom in these two collections, Tagore gains a profound knowledge of human nature eradicating philosophical and cultural differences and affirming the work's universality.

**Keywords**

Temporary knowledge, Spiritual beliefs of Indians, Concerning philosophy, and Shifts in images of nature

## Introduction

Regarded as a master of poetry and possessing a profound insight into the philosophy of life, Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most celebrated authors of India. Besides dealing with the matters of existence, nature, and God, his poetry reflects the Indian spirit. Among the numerous collections of his poetry, "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" are perhaps the most interesting to compare because of the way these themes are addressed in different genres of poetry. With an emphasis on their philosophical

insights and the idea of ephemeral wisdom as a whole, this paper compares and contrasts these two collections. A collection of lengthy, reflective poetry on the search for meaning and comprehension within the human mind, "Fruit-Gathering," was first published in 1916. These poems explore topics of love, life, and the divine via a wealth of imagery and symbolism that draws from spiritual traditions and the natural world. Tagore's thoughtful manner in "Fruit-Gathering" enables a thorough examination of the fleeting nature of human experiences and the everlasting truths that exist outside of them (Czekalska 114).

The 1928 book "Fireflies," on the other hand, is a compilation of short, aphoristic poems. Every poetry, like the flickering light of a firefly, captures a thought or a nugget of wisdom. These poems, albeit brief, are packed with substance, providing insightful, emotional observations on the essence of life, beauty, and spirituality. The epigrammatic language of "Fireflies" is a prime example of Tagore's ability to effectively and succinctly communicate complex philosophical themes (Ocampo 14). A common topic linking these two volumes is the idea of ephemeral wisdom or knowledge derived from the brief, transitory experiences of life. Using fleeting phenomena like the budding and withering of flowers or the flickering of fireflies to symbolize deeper philosophical truths, Tagore's poetry frequently captures the ephemeral character of the world. The research looks at the various ways that Tagore expresses this theme in the long musings found in "Fruit-Gathering" and the brief, nearly haiku-style observations found in "Fireflies."

The consistency and richness of Tagore's philosophical perspective are shown by a comparative study of these collections (Dimock 34). "Fireflies" encapsulates wisdom in its most basic form, whereas "Fruit-Gathering" permits a more complex and immersive investigation of concepts. But the pursuit of knowledge about the transient character of human existence and the search for unchanging truths unites the two groups.

In this essay, poetic elements, such as imagery and themes, employed in both collections of poems will be discussed. It will elucidate how Tagore resolves the tension between the ephemeral and the eternal by analyzing the interplay of the ephemeral and the eternal in his works. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Tagore's poetic vision and its continued significance through the integration of the works of various philosophical, theoretical, and cultural perspectives from philosophy, literary criticism, and cultural studies (Nemes 320). This paper will therefore seek to demonstrate that through the analysis of the two poems "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies", Tagore gives considerable insight into the human condition. In this way, Tagore underscores the relevance of his literary insights that are presented as having a significance beyond temporal and spatial coordinates, and cultural/philosophical frameworks.

Thus, this study seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Tagore's analysis of the ephemeral wisdom in "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" offers a profound insight into the human condition. In this way, Tagore establishes the significance of his literary observations in

the context of different philosophical and cultural frameworks and connects with the reader through space and time (Shahane 54).

As the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore is still revered in the literary community. His writings, which are distinguished by a profound interest in both the individual and the global, exhibit a distinctive synthesis of Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. Particularly known for its profound examination of the human spirit and its pursuit of transcendence, Tagore's poetry is highly regarded (Tuck 98). In "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies," Tagore expresses his reflections on nature, life, and the holy through unique poetic forms, providing readers with a wealth of fleeting wisdom.

"Fruit-Gathering," a compilation that came into being during a time of great artistic and reflective activity for Tagore, displays his mature insights about the cyclical aspect of life. The collection's poetry is filled with introspection and calm, frequently using the cycles of nature to highlight more profound realities about life. Inviting readers to embark on a voyage of spiritual discovery and inner serenity, Tagore's language in "Fruit-Gathering" is both lyrical and philosophical (Shahane 55).

However, "Fireflies" is a monument to Tagore's extraordinary skill in succinctly capturing brief moments of insight. Each poem in "Fireflies" offers a moment of knowledge that sheds light on the greater picture of human existence, and they are distinguished by their

conciseness and clarity. Like the fleeting brilliance of a firefly, these epigrammatic lines condense complex philosophical ideas into their core while yet making a lasting impression. Examining Tagore's philosophical insights through the juxtaposition of these two collections offers an intriguing perspective. "Fireflies" balances out "Fruit-Gathering" with its insightful, narrow focus while providing a more thorough examination of the same issues. Collectively, they exhibit Tagore's diverse perspective on the pursuit of everlasting truth and the transience of life (Shahane 62). In examining these pieces, this essay will also take into account the larger background of Tagore's life and era. In India as well as throughout the world, the early 20th century saw a great deal of upheaval and change; Tagore's writing captures these conflicts and changes. Understanding the conceptual complexity of his poetry is made easier by his engagement with current social, political, and cultural issues as well as his profound spiritual questions.

A variety of multidisciplinary viewpoints, like as literary criticism, philosophy, and cultural studies, will be incorporated into the analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of Tagore's poetic vision. By analyzing the literary and thematic components of "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies," the study seeks to shed light on how Tagore negotiates the tension between the transient and the eternal, both the individual and the collective. This comparative analysis will, therefore, seek to emphasize the perennial relevance of Tagore's reflections on ephemeral wisdom. These observations of Tagore are even more valuable today, when people are

still searching for their place in the world, and when life continues to change at an incredible pace. Two poems by Tagore: "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" help the readers embrace change as a natural process in life (Ocampo 17).

## Detailed discussion

Through a close reading of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Fruit-Gathering' and 'Fireflies', it is possible to detect a complex interplay between the ephemeral and the eternal. The main idea of temporary wisdom—the thorough understanding of life achieved through the fleeting moments of enlightenment—unites both books, despite the differences in the genre and the language. To demonstrate Tagore's diverse methods of communicating his philosophical perspective, this article explores the theme components, poetic forms, and symbolic imagery found in each collection. Longer, reflective poems that address spirituality, love, and the human condition make up "Fruit-Gathering". The poems frequently consider how life is cyclical and make comparisons between the soul's spiritual path and the rhythms of the natural world. Harvesting fruit, for example, is a metaphor for collecting experiences and wisdom throughout a lifetime. Tagore stresses the significance of submitting to the divine will and finding serenity in the acknowledgment of life's fleeting nature, hence themes of submission and devotion are also common (Dimock 39-40).

As opposed to this, "Fireflies" offers a selection of succinct, aphoristic poetry that seizes transient epiphanies. Every poetry delivers a flash of knowledge before

vanishing, much like the brilliance of a firefly. Three main themes in "Fireflies" are the transience of human experiences, the interdependence of all life, and the beauty of impermanence. In these poems, Tagore expresses painful and perceptive insights that frequently condense into a few lines a single, profound idea. "Fruit-Gathering" poems are known for their spacious and poetic style. Free verse and a flowing, reflective style are two of Tagore's literary devices that enable a thorough examination of difficult subjects (Czekalska 120). These poems' lengthier style allows for more room for in-depth imagery and elaborate analogies, giving the reader a rich, engaging experience. This arrangement is similar to the slow ripening and gathering of fruit in that it represents the progressive process of intellectual and spiritual development. "Fireflies," on the other hand, conveys its ideas in a much more streamlined manner. The poems are written in a brief, epigrammatic form and are frequently only a few lines long. Because of its brevity, each word must be chosen with care to convey the most meaning possible.

Throughout "Fruit-Gathering," Tagore regularly uses natural images to represent spiritual truths. A major metaphor for the accumulation of life's experiences and the wisdom gained from them is the act of harvesting fruit. Additional recurrent symbols that emphasize the themes of development, renewal, and time passing are flowers, rivers, and the changing of the seasons. Readers are encouraged to ponder on their trips by the peaceful and reflective ambiance these photographs generate (Czekalska 124). The firefly itself is, of course, the main

symbol of "Fireflies". The fleeting flashes of illumination that light up our lives are symbolized by the firefly's short brightness. The collection also has other symbols that highlight the transient and delicate character of wisdom and beauty, such as dew, stars, and raindrops. Though in different ways, "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" both manage the tension between the transient and the eternal. In "Fruit-Gathering," a thorough examination of how fleeting experiences add to a more comprehensive, long-lasting perspective of existence is made possible by the poems' slow, contemplative style. Fruit-gathering becomes a metaphor for the soul's journey to enlightenment, where every moment—though brief—belongs to an ongoing process of development (Nemes 322).

In "Fireflies," the immediate effects of fleeting experiences are highlighted. Every little poetry is a moment in time of knowledge captured, implying that the most transitory of events can have great meaning. The compilation emphasizes the notion that knowledge is not just acquired through time but can also be discovered in the shortest of moments, providing an insightful track of mature understanding. Our comprehension of Tagore's writing is improved by incorporating ideas from literary theory, philosophy, and cultural studies. Philosophically, the ideas of impermanence and interdependence prevalent in Eastern traditions like Buddhism and Vedanta are consistent with Tagore's observations. His poetry also speaks to the transient aspect of life and the pursuit of meaning, themes found in Western existentialist philosophy (Shahane 61).

From a literary standpoint, Tagore's command of the poetic form, imagery, and metaphor are evidence of his proficiency. His versatility and his ability to communicate complicated ideas through a variety of poetic frameworks are demonstrated by the contrast between the broad meditations in "Fruit-Gathering" and the succinct epigrams in "Fireflies". The cultural milieu of early 20th-century India, characterized by substantial transformation and reflection, is mirrored in Tagore's writings. In reaction to the existential concerns of the day, his poetry offers philosophical clarity and a sense of spiritual peace.

An examination of "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" in comparison shows the depth and richness of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical observations on transient wisdom. Through a variety of lyrical genres and styles, Tagore examines the impermanence of life and the eternal truths that exist elsewhere. His poetry validates the work's universal relevance by examining the relationship between the transient and the eternal. This leads to remarkable insights into the human predicament. The present study highlights Tagore's lasting influence as a poet and philosopher, whose contemplations on the transience of existence persistently strike a chord with readers worldwide (Tuck 102). A critical assessment of the subtleties and implications of Rabindranath Tagore's poetic choices is also invited, as does a comparative analysis of his "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" poems, which show the depths of his philosophical views on transient wisdom. Through a comparison of the contemplative profundity of "Fruit-Gathering" and the concise elegance of "Fireflies," we can comprehend

Tagore's method of encapsulating the fleeting essence of human existence and its philosophical importance.

The emphasis on the fleeting character of existence and the search for timeless truths found in Indian spiritual traditions like Vedanta and Upanishadic thinking is evident in Tagore's philosophical views. This intellectual profundity is addressed in "Fruit-Gathering" through intricate stories and introspective meditations, but in "Fireflies," it is condensed into a few powerful sentences (Varshney 87). To ensure that the depth of thought is neither lost in brevity nor swamped by verbosity, the crucial problem is striking a balance between these philosophical inquiries and the poetic form. The sociopolitical and cultural environments of the early twentieth century are depicted in both volumes; this was a period of transition and introspection. Death and modern issues such as the fight for freedom and search for the cultural identity make Tagore's poetry deeper. Whereas "Fruit-Gathering" offers grounds for a comprehensive and serious debate about these issues, "Fireflies" offers more straightforward and touching ideas. The extent to which these strategies help in managing the challenges of the period and the relevance of these strategies for readers of the present are the primary issues of criticism here (Varshney 90).

The sociopolitical and cultural context of early twentieth-century India is also seen in both volumes; this period was one of transition. Tagore's poetry becomes richer through his attempts to depict such modern problems as the struggle for liberty and the search for Indian self-identity. While "Fruit-Gathering" offers an

argument for a more measured and contemplative approach to these themes, "Fireflies" offers more straightforward and powerful reflections on them. The value of such approaches in managing the complexity of the age and relevance to the readers in the present are the major issues for discussion here.

## Conclusion

Analyzing "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" one can see that Rabindranath Tagore successfully uses various poetic techniques to convey the theme of impermanence wisdom. 'Fireflies' captures the themes in a very brief and very bright manner, whereas 'Fruit-Gathering' is a deep and self-reflecting look at the cycle of life and the spiritual meaning behind it. However, both these collections reflect Tagore's profound thinking and ability to simplify complex ideas through poetic expressions.

The comparative analysis shows the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy and allows the readers to address the issues arising from the reading of Tagore's works and appreciate the value of his legacy. Last but not least, this controversy epitomizes the fact thatTagore is a poet and a thinker for all ages and cultures, and his works will continue to resonate in every age and every culture.

The comparison study shows the strengths and weaknesses of every collection. While it is possible to study subjects in "Fruit-Gathering" at a deeper and on multiple levels, it is only possible if the reader spends more time with the text. On the other hand, "Fireflies" are concise when it comes to information and their

impact is fast but they may be perceived as shallow or their message might not be easily understood. When comparing these two volumes, it will be easier to comprehend the content of Tagore's ideas and the skilful use of poetic language. In both "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies", the poets succeed in presenting valuable insights about the human experience and the pursuit of knowledge regarding the temporary yet eternal aspects of life. In conclusion, this work re-establishes Tagore's relevance as a poet and philosopher in the contemporary world. This is why even today people of different cultures and generations are still able to understand and be touched by his capacity to find lessons in the simplest occurrences of life. While analyzing "Fruit-Gathering" and "Fireflies" the poet pleads to accept the pleasures of life as they lead to the better way.

Last of all, as the reader discovers what Tagore has to say about momentary wisdom in his poems, he/she realizes that there is truth in the briefest of moments. It also makes us appreciate such moments as they help in shaping our way, the constant search for eternal values.

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# Cultural Hybridity: Exploring Nation, Culture and Society in Tagore's *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*)

Shyamal Mondal
Shubham Bhattacharjee

**Abstract**

This research paper analyzes the literary work titled *The Home and The World* by Rabindranath Tagore, focusing on Tagore's internal conflict regarding Western culture and the Indian resistance during British colonization. These themes are embodied in the character of Nikhil, who represents Tagore's hybrid identity caught between British and Indian cultures. The study aims to explore Nikhil's hybrid identity in the circumstances of colonial perspectives and the Swadeshi movement. The research adopts a post-colonial proposition and utilizes Homi K. Bhabha's hybrid identity theory, employing a descriptive qualitative method to examine dialogues and narrations from the novel. Data were gathered through library research, highlighting Nikhil's dual identity shaped by British colonialism. This study concludes that British

colonial influence precipitated the formation of hybrid identities in Indian society, manifested primarily in Nikhil's education, lifestyle, culture, and social roles within the colonized milieu, and secondarily in his engagement with the Swadeshi movement.

## Introduction

In literature originating from the Dark Continent Africa, the Middle East regions, and the Indian subcontinent, characters often confront identity crises in the aftermath of colonization or the establishment of colonies abroad. British colonial rule in India, spanning from the 1700s until independence in 1947, profoundly impacted both the populace and the protagonists of Indian literature. These individuals contend with the enduring economic, political, and emotional legacies left by the British. The literature stemming from these experiences frequently combines emotional depth with political commentary. According to Oberg in Setiawan (2017), there exists a clear dichotomy between Western and Eastern cultures.

Rabindranath Tagore, also known as *Kabi Guru*, was a multifaceted Bengali poet, Brahmo religionist, visual artist, playwright, novelist, and composer whose contributions transformed Bengali literature and music during the colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Tagore made history as Asia's first Nobel laureate with his 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature. Among his notable works, *The Home and The World* stands out, reflecting on India's colonial history from the early 19th century. In this masterpiece, Tagore grapples with conflicting Western ideals and the resistance against them. Colonialism not only shaped

India's economic and political landscapes but also fostered cultural hybridity by blending Indian and British influences. This concept of hybridity, articulated by Bhabha (Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 2012), elucidates how colonial powers sought to redefine the identity of the colonized within a singular, overarching framework.

The concept of Hybrid identity, proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (2012), is a pivotal concept in post-colonial theory. His influential work *The Location of Culture* has significantly shaped postcolonial criticism. In Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and The World*, the character Nikhil embodies hybrid identity, an idea influenced by the psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon's metaphor of "Black Skin, White Masks." Pramod k. Nayar rightly says in his *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 'Fanon recognized the significance of cultural nationalism when he propounded the idea of a national literature and national culture (in his essay of the same title in *Wretched of the Earth*) leading to a national consciousness.'

## Hybridity and Cultural Identity

This research seeks to address the phenomenon of hybrid identity formation in post-colonial societies, where the imposition of the colonizer's culture—through economic, educational, political, and cultural dominance—forces individuals to negotiate their identities. This process is vividly portrayed in the character dynamics of *The Home and The World*, reflecting the impact of British colonialism on Indian society. The study aims to illuminate the lasting effects of colonialism on identity formation, particularly

through the lens of post-colonial literature, notably in Bengali literature. Furthermore, it aims to broaden understanding of how hybrid identities emerge not only in colonial contexts but also in contemporary globalized and migratory settings, where diverse cultural influences intersect (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Yanggi Mertania and Dina Amelia in an article mention that literary works serve as valuable sources for readers and researchers seeking to explore colonial discourse, as they often serve as mediums through which authors convey their ideologies (Woro Kasih, 2018).

The post-colonial approach is employed to define, analyze, and understand literary works from both the colonial and post-colonial eras. This approach is particularly effective in illuminating the interconnectedness among various realms of experience —psychological, ideological, social, political, and aesthetic—and demonstrates their inseparability in lived experiences. Postcolonialism also significantly influences literature, evident in works produced during and after the colonial period, predominantly authored by either colonizers or the colonized.

According to Tyson (2006), any examination of postcolonial literary works, regardless of the theoretical framework utilized, falls under the purview of postcolonial criticism. This indicates that literary works addressing postcolonial themes can be effectively analyzed through postcolonial criticism.

Hybrid identity has been explored to examine how Chinese-Americans navigate cultural clashes between

generations (Alitiyani, 2012). Another study investigates whether multicultural upbringing fosters hybrid identity, as exemplified in Ananda Devi's novel (Krisnadreddy, 2010). According to Bhabha, hybridity challenges colonial representations by reversing the colonialist denial of differences. This mirrors Said's *Orientalism*, which distinguishes between the "orient" (colonized) and the "occident" (colonizers) (Amelia, 2016). Bhabha's concept posits that all cultures influence each other, leading to the formation of hybrid identities under colonialism.

Homi K. Bhabha critically points out that colonial identity is not singular but ambiguous and hybrid, shaped by asymmetric interactions between colonizer and colonized cultures. In postcolonial discourse, identity emerges from a process of mixing amid disparities between these groups. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, articulated in "*Third Space in Postcolonial Discourse*," describes how colonial authorities attempt to impose a universal framework on colonized identities, resulting in a novel but familiar outcome (Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 2012). Bhabha extensively explores this process, demonstrating how it engenders new hybrid identities that blend original and imposed cultural elements. His theoretical framework has evolved from literary and cultural theory, offering insights into identity construction amidst colonial antagonism and inequality (Sayegh, 2008).

## Literature Review

The present article is largely based upon different book chapters, significant journals and film reviews. The ideas

of cultural hybridity, national culture and national consciousness have extraordinarily discussed in The *Post-colonial Studies The Key Concepts*(2007), by Ashcroft et al. and *The Location of Culture*. (2012), by Homi k. Bhabha and *the New Cambridge History of India IV.2: Women in Modern India* (1996) by Geraldine Forbes. Even Satyajit Ray's Bengali language romantic drama film *Ghare Baire* (1984) starring Soumitra Chatterjee,Victor Banerjee and Swatilekha Chatterjee is an outstanding portrayal of several themes like nationalism, women emancipation, tradition versus modernism and so on. I have also encountered a very interesting article '*Black Skin White Mask: Hybrid Identity of The main Character as DepictedIn Tagore's the Home and the World' by* Yanggi Mertania, Dina Amelia. The present paper shall be in light of the same themes and critical analysis of our culture and their culture.

**Colonial Discourses and the Swadeshi Movement**

Colonialism, as a process of establishing new communities in foreign lands, inherently involved dismantling or restructuring existing communities through practices such as trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, and notably, genocide and enslavement of indigenous populations (Loomba, 2005). In India, as a colonized society, various facets of Indian culture were profoundly impacted by colonial rule, including education, literature, women's roles, social class dynamics, and religion. Historian A.L. Basham asserts that administrative and judicial systems remained largely unchanged, while education and industry experienced

expansion rather than suppression under British rule. British educational policies in India encompassed elite religious schools for high-level education seekers and local elementary schools for village boys. The introduction of English education and European literature brought forth new intellectual challenges (Basham, 1975).

Religiously, Indian society exhibited a rich diversity of cultures across the subcontinent, reflected notably in Hinduism, Islam, and later Christianity, which emerged as major religions. Religion played a pivotal role in Indian life, influencing customs and rituals deeply ingrained in societal practices. Historian Geraldine Forbes notes that colonial officials recognized the central importance of religion in Indian society, where customs like sati and other religious practices were deeply entrenched (Forbes, 1996).

The Swadeshi Movement emerged with distinct assumptions about gender roles, potentially fostering change or reinforcing existing norms. As British rule evolved in the subcontinent, British priorities shifted from impartial governance to a strategy of westernizing India through economic and political reforms. In response, Indian intellectuals initiated the Swadeshi Movement as a project to reclaim independence.

Swadeshi, meaning "of our own country," symbolized the movement's focus on promoting Indian goods. Originating in 1905 amidst the historical dynamics of race and gender in Bengal, the Swadeshi Movement became a pivotal event in India's struggle for

independence from British imperialism, rallying people from all walks of life. Initially sparked by protests against the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, the Swadeshi Movement aimed to boycott British goods as a form of protest against colonial rule.

## Methodology

In examining the depiction of hybridity in the main character, the researchers employed a descriptive qualitative method supplemented by library research to support their study. Qualitative research, rooted in a constructivist perspective, focuses on individual experiences shaped by historical and social constructs (Aryangga & Nurmaily, 2017). This approach entails gathering data directly from the source material, in this case, The Home and The World by Rabindranath Tagore. As Kardiansyah (2016) notes, qualitative research data consist of textual elements such as narratives and dialogues.

The process involved reading the novel to identify pertinent information related to the research topic, organizing and categorizing data according to theoretical frameworks, and conducting a meticulous analysis and evaluation. Bogdan and Biklen (1982), as cited in Lianasari and Samanik (2016), suggest that data analysis begins with deconstructing and organizing data to facilitate comprehension.

## Discussion and Findings

Nikhil's character exemplifies a hybrid identity. He is portrayed as an Indian man from a wealthy family, which

enables him to receive an education and become an educated individual. Bimala observes, "*But my husband was modern. He was the first of the house to go through a college course and take his M.A. degree"* (Tagore 4). The author presents Nikhil as a modern, well-educated man in that era. He applies his education by educating his wife, introducing modern thought to Indian society, and supporting the political movement against British colonialism. Nikhil's hybrid identity is evident through his actions, behavior, lifestyle, and modern thoughts as depicted in the novel. To analyze Nikhil's hybrid identity within the colonized society in India, this analysis is divided into aspects such as education, socialization, culture, and lifestyle.

Education in colonial India was scarce until the British introduced educational policies (A.L. Basham, 1975). The British mandated education, leading Indians to start attending schools. Educated individuals from the colonized society gained knowledge from both British and Indian cultures, embodying Bhabha's concept of hybrid identity. As Meredith notes, the hybrid's potential lies in their innate knowledge of transculturation (1998). Bimala describes Nikhil as a modern man, the first in his family to earn a B.A. and an M.A. degree (Tagore 4-5). His "M.A. degree" signifies that Nikhil's modern thoughts are rooted in British education, particularly in humanities and social sciences. Taylor, in Voicu, explains that hybrids possess potential through their knowledge of transculturation (2011), a mixture of British and Indian cultures.

Nikhil's hybrid identity in education impacts not only himself but also those around him. He introduces modern thoughts from British education to his wife, Bimala, as depicted in the narration, *"The Chota Rani has got rid of all her fears by dint of English woman's teaching…"* (Tagore, 2011: 260). This shows that Bimala can face problems calmly due to her British teacher's influence, indicating Nikhil's role in educating his wife with modern standards of life. Nikhil's hybrid identity is also evident in his lifestyle. He frequently buys modern fashion clothes for his wife and family, a practice his grandmother disapproves of, calling it an absurd hobby (Tagore, 2011). In traditional Indian society, men typically wear Kurta and women wear Sari, but Nikhil prefers modern styles for his wife. His taste extends to home decoration, as Bimala notes, *"My husband had filled more than a hundred and twenty percent of the house with the twentieth century, against her taste; but she had borne it uncomplaining"* (Tagore 13). Nikhil often interacts with Europeans and invites them to his home, despite the ongoing struggle against British colonialism. Bimala, disliking his lifestyle, changes a copper vase to a European crystal vase in Nikhil's room to mock his habits (Tagore, 2011).

Nikhil's hybrid identity leads him to oppose patriarchal and traditional Indian cultural norms. He educates and introduces his wife to modern thoughts, urging her to see the world beyond the confines of purdah, which is contrary to Indian culture where women are expected to stay at home after marriage. (Tagore, 2011) Nikhil believes women have the same

rights as men to education and experiences, wanting Bimala to view the world clearly, unshackled by cultural shadows.

Nikhil also challenges traditional Indian funeral practices that burden the poor. When Panchu, a poor worker, faces pressure to conduct an expensive funeral ceremony for his wife, Nikhil advises against following the ritual. (Tagore, 2011) This action signifies Nikhil's rejection of his origin culture, questioning its rightness. Meredith (1998) argues that hybrid identity arises when cultural norms are questioned, creating a new space of cultural meaning.

Hybrid identity emerges from the intense cross-cultural exchange between colonizers and the colonized. As Ashcroft states, hybridity refers to new transcultural forms within the colonial contact zone (Ashcroft, 2007). Nikhil attempts to implement his knowledge in Indian society by innovating food and drink production from local plants. Despite his failures, he persists, supporting local inventors and entrepreneurs (Tagore, 2011: 19). Nikhil even starts a small bank, though it leads to bankruptcy due to high-interest rates offered to society. (Tagore, 2011)

Tagore critiques the Swadeshi movement for transforming into an elitist initiative that benefits the higher class while harming the poor. This disillusionment prompts Tagore to explore the internal conflict between embracing Western culture and rebelling against it, leading him to portray himself as one of the main characters, Nikhil, in the novel. Nikhil's character, situated

between British and Indian cultures, exemplifies a hybrid identity. As Meredith (1998) states, "The hybrid identity is positioned within this third space, as 'lubricant' in the conjunction of cultures."Nikhil attempts to apply his business acumen to the Swadeshi movement by purchasing Indian mill yarn and producing indigenous fabrics. He also tries to support Indian industries by selling Indian mill-made yarn in Suksar and other markets. However, these yarns fail to attract buyers due to their poor quality and high prices (Tagore, 2011). Nikhil perceives this problem from a different perspective, recognizing a fundamental flaw in the movement. Bhabha (2012) describes hybridity as a liminal or in-between space where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs, known as the third space. In this space, original identities do not simply vanish; instead, new cultural identities significantly influence the old ones. This creates what Bhabha terms an "ambiguity of identity," placing someone "in-between" or "in the middle."

Bimala's realization after joining the outside world brings her on the ground of reality. She says, "I was no longer the lady of the Rajah's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood." (Tagore 31) Interestingly enough, consciousness of nationalism has been vividly portrayed in her comments when she says, "I could not think of my house as separate from my country: I robbed my house, I had robbed my country. For this sin my house had ceased to be mine, my country also was estranged from me." (Tagore 144)

## Conclusion

The interdependence between colonizers and the colonized during colonialism profoundly influences the colonized society, leading them to adopt modern thoughts introduced by the colonizers. This results in the creation of a new identity that straddles both cultures. This hybrid identity is exemplified by Nikhil, a main character in Tagore's novel "The Home and The World." Nikhil, a nobleman educated by the British, embodies a blend of British and Indian ways of thinking and acting. His hybrid identity is evident in various aspects such as education, lifestyle, culture, and societal roles. Nikhil's hybrid identity is also prominent in the Swadeshi movement, a pivotal historical context in the novel. The Swadeshi movement aimed to ignite the spirit of freedom in India by boycotting British goods in support of indigenous industries. The British colonial influence, as depicted in the novel, positively impacts Nikhil's character. This is demonstrated through his efforts to educate his wife, introduce modern British fashion to her, socialize with Europeans, challenge Indian cultural norms, implement his knowledge to develop Indian society, and use his British education to support the Swadeshi movement. To encapsulate Nikhil's hybrid identity, the writers borrow Franz Fanon's proverb *Black Skin, White Masks*. This phrase reflects Nikhil, an Indian ("Black Skin"), who adopts British cultural elements ("White Mask"), influencing his way of thinking, lifestyle, and actions to resemble those of the colonizers. In essence, *Black Skin, White Masks* represents Nikhil as a

hybrid identity, as depicted in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*.

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# Science in Rural Reconstruction: Rabindranath's Sriniketan Experiment

Madhumita Roy

In "Swadeshi Samaj" Rabindranath clearly defines state and *samaj*/society as two completely different entities and underlines the importance of the latter in the context of India. Probing further, he analyses:

> In England the overthrow of the State might mean peril for the nation—that is why politics there is such a serious affair. In our country there would be danger only when the social body, *samaj*, became crippled... England relies on the State for everything, from the relief of the destitute to the religious education of the public; whereas our country depends on the people's sense of duty. Therefore, England has to exist by keeping the State alive while we exist by preserving our social consciousness. (51)

This essay turns out to be a significant manifesto of Rabindranath's interpretation of freedom, autonomy, and *swaraj*. As he consciously avoids the jargons of blatant nationalism, he directs his sympathy towards the deprived masses of the rural Bengal. What he prescribes is that

before aiming political decolonization we must make ourselves competent of self-rule. Recognizing the villages as the cradle of our civilization that once nurtured the spirit of love, cooperation, and warmth of human relationships, Rabindranath attempts to focus on the task of reviving rural health and its long-lost quality of self-reliance. He realizes that the prolonged years of colonization have turned our society dependent on external agency to address even a minor crisis in practical life. Quite skeptical at the scattered efforts of the Indian nationalists who dissociate themselves from the uneducated mass of rural Bengal and in a way echo the imperial masters, Rabindranath initiated his own venture of rural reconstruction first at his own estates of Shilaidaha, Patisar and then, at Sriniketan. While science was the watchword of the twentieth century India, Rabindranath sought to integrate science and technology to improve the living conditions of the rural people. Apart from his own son Rathindranath, he got active support and participation from Leonard Elmhirst, C.F. Andrews, W. W. Pearson, Kalimohan Ghosh, Santosh Majumdar, Dr. Harry Timbres, Gretchen Green and others. The paper attempts to show how Sriniketan became the epicenter where science realized its humanitarian purpose, where the East welcomed the West warmly and a poet's ideals found proper implementation in practical life.

In February 1922, a Department of Agriculture and Village Reconstruction was founded at Surul with Leonard Elmhirst as its director. In his essay "Sriniketan", Elmhirst clarifies the aims and objectives of the Department, of which the most important were:

> To win the friendship and affection of the villagers and cultivators by taking a real interest in all that concerns life and welfare and by making a lively effort to assist them in solving their most pressing problems.
>
> To carry the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and experimental farm to the villagers, in the endeavour to improve their sanitation and health, to develop their resources and credit; to help them sell their produce and buy their requirements to the best advantage; to teach them better methods of growing crops and vegetables and keeping livestock; to encourage them to learn and practice arts and crafts; and to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour.
>
> To give the students elementary instruction in the sciences connected with their practical work, to train them to think and observe accurately and to express and record the knowledge acquired by them for their own benefit and the benefit of their fellow men. ("Sriniketan" 10)

One of the key requirements of such rural upliftment programme was the surveying of the neighbouring villages. Before embarking on to this project at Sriniketan, Elmhirst conducted several village surveys to become familiar with the problems lying deep in the life of the villagers. His diary entries, compiled in the book *Poet and Plowman*, bear witness to how every minute detail of rural life finds importance in his observation. One such remarkable incident is his visit to the farm of a local farmer named Atabuddi. He writes, "We walked on from his (Santosh Majumdar's) farm to a

neighbouring village and sat down to talk to one of the local cultivators, whilst the man's wife went on quietly splitting up a bamboo into strips and weaving them into a tray which she could use for winnowing husked rice. This basket making is a highly skilled craft" (*Poet and Plowman* 43). It is important to note that apart from the farm of Atabuddi, what arrests Elmhirst's attention is his wife's art of basket making. Undoubtedly, Sriniketan would play a significant role in restoring the arts of weaving, basket making, pottery and others as alternative means for economic gains apart from agriculture. In a letter to Elmhirst, Rabindranath says:

> Europe has got her science not as complementary to religion but as its substitute. Science is great, but it only affords us knowledge, power, efficiency, but no ideal of unity, no aspiration for the perfect, % it is non-human, impersonal, and therefore is like things that are inorganic, useful in many ways but useless as our food of life.

In another letter he makes it clear about the nature of his Sriniketan work:

> But, I who am no scientist, set more value upon this human side of our service than anything which is academic... I shall claim that direct touch of life in Sriniketan, that sympathy by which our experience of men is truly formed and enriched. At the same time science must have its place there but not to swamp it and Sriniketan must never be hardened into a scientific laboratory but be a living growth and an active service of love.

Therefore, Sriniketan endorsed a contradictory pull that always characterized Tagore's stance vis-à-vis the use of

science and technology. On one hand, there was a conscious attempt to integrate the ideas of scientific farming, carry on experiments with varieties of crops, encourage the use of tractors and other machinery in the agricultural farms, and welcome innovation, yet, on the other, Rabindranath was aware of the resultant greed and individualism in the West, that have connected science with the forces of exploitation. Hence, Sriniketan was not about rendering services to the deprived rural mass, but making them self reliant by restoring their mutual trust. Rabindranath wanted Elmhirst to involve the local boys in his village work. In this context, the role of Brati-Balak organization was immense. Their chief function was to survey the villages, convince the villagers to adopt improved methods of farming by demonstrating their model farms, create awareness regarding health and sanitation among them, and spread literacy among the villagers.

While examining the socio-political and cultural history of Birbhum, Elmhirst found that the district was once rich in terms of cultivation. "In the ruins of their ancient temples, and the remnants of their irrigation systems there is conclusive proof of an elaborate community life... The community life is gone, the competitive life has come in and has brought death with it" ("The Robbery of the Soil" 28). Elmhirst was not against using the tools of modern world, but he proposed that with such modern machineries, the old community life of the villages must be restored "on a surer, a firmer and a sounder basis" ("The Robbery" 28). While Elmhirst looks forward to the use of technology in

agriculture, he also emphasises the need for "the proper treatment of soil with irrigation and manure" ("The Robbery" 29). Under Elmhirst's supervision, Sriniketan directly involved the local students in agriculture. They received practical training in improved, scientific farming. Moreover, they had own plots of land where they grew crops and even earned money by selling their agricultural produce. Sriniketan encouraged the students to meet the farmers and show them their own model farms. Moreover, special trainings were organized for the rural people. Journals like *Chasha*, *Bhumilokkhi* were published which contained articles on various aspects of agriculture (Sinha 282-83). While sifting through the minutes of the official meeting of the Board of Directors of the Department of Agriculture, I have come across the tentative budget for the coming year, decided in the meeting held on December 3, 1921. About Rs. 12,000/- is kept for Diesel Engine and Rs. 6,000/- for Austin Tractor. It is important to note that along with the use of machinery in agriculture, Sriniketan sought to endorse a scientific and rational outlook for an all round development of rural areas. Hence, it took initiatives to welcome innovation in all aspects of agriculture.

Since its inception, Sriniketan and the active members who were associated with Rabindranath's project of rural reconstruction emphasized the idea of mutual trust, and co-operation as the sole criteria to bring in rural development. Rabindranath conceived co-operation as an ideal and hence, co-operative method as potent instrument of restoring mutual trust in society. In the

appendix section of his *Samabayniti*, the poet himself mentions of a book *National Being* by the Irish poet and activist A. E. The book provides a vivid picture of successful implementation of co-operative principle in Irish society. It was true that initially it had to face a number of obstacles. Yet after repeated experiments, the method was endorsed in almost all spheres of Irish life (331-32). Tagore expects a similar change in economic and almost all spheres of rural life through the ideal of co-operation in his own country. In his discussion on the co-operative principle, he reiterates the need to use improved technology in cultivation. Citing the West as instance, the poet says that a farmer in England or America uses machines while cultivating his land, harvesting the crops, binding those harvests and even storing the crops in granary. He expresses his faith that if the farmers of his country resort to co-operative farming and thus, cultivate lands together on a sharing basis, their collective strength would allow them to use improved tools in farming in spite of its high costs ("Samabay 1", 315).

Rabindranath's visit to Russia in 1930 also acted as a catalyst to consolidate his faith in the working of co-operative principle. In the opening letter of his epistolary travel writing, *Letters from Russia*, the poet exclaims:

> What we ourselves have been attempting to do at Sriniketan, they are doing on a superior scale all over the land. How splendid it would be if our workers could come here for training! Every day I compare conditions here with India: what is and what might have been! ...A few years ago the condition of the masses here was fully comparable

> with that of the Indian masses: things have rapidly changed in this short period, whereas we are up to the neck in the mud of stagnation. (Tagore 4)

The poet admits that the dissemination of education among the working class of Russia has brought in an unprecedented development in their living condition. Compared to the poor, deprived working class of India where, according to Tagore, "national service ended in plaintive outbursts by our educated community on the platform of Congress and in newspaper articles" (*Letters*23), the workers in Russia appeared to be more trained, and hence responsive to new methods and ideals. The poet quotes a young peasant from Ukraine who admits, "I work on a collective farm. It was started only two years ago. We grow vegetables and send them to factories where they are tinned... Our production is at least double that of the neighbouring farms which are tilled by their owners themselves" (*Letters* 32).

In the context of Rabindranath's visit to Russia, it is interesting to note that Dr. Harry Timbres expressed his strong desire to accompany the poet in his trip. Harry Timbres was sent to serve as a doctor in Sriniketan by the American Friends Service Committee in response to the appeal of C. F. Andrews. In 1929, Timbres arrived in Sriniketan and stayed there up to the month of December only to come back again in 1931 with his wife Rebecca. Timbres' 1930 letter to Tagore expresses his strong desire to join the poet during his visit to Russia. From Birmingham, he writes:

> The trip would also be of great value to the medical work at Surul. The Department of Public Health of U.S.S.R. is solving problems quite similar to those in Surul. A survey of their methods of propaganda, education and training of public health workers would be very valuable to me in my work. I would like also to see some of their work in Malaria Control.
>
> The health organizations in Russia fascinated Rabindranath too. He appreciates how Russia has taken the initiative to diffuse the fruits of scientific inventions and modern day technology to its working mass. Evoking the dire situation in Bengal, where diseases like consumption are taking away millions of lives who are on the threshold of abject poverty and deprivation, Tagore laments the lack of sanatoria for treating such chronic illness. In Russia, on the other hand, there are Soviet Homes of Rest where the workers suffering from chronic diseases may stay and receive "not only medical treatment, but proper diet and nursing as well." (*Letters* 76)

While investigating the gradual degeneration of rural health in the neighbouring areas of Sriniketan, Timbres, very practically, suggests that the villagers must be taught to "purchase good health" collectively. As his initial steps to address the rural health problems Timbres resorted to village surveys that included "physical examinations of the villagers, malaria survey, investigation of tuberculosis, leprosy, hook-worm disease, dysenteries, venereal disease, conditions surrounding child-birth, nourishment, economic and social organization, housing conditions, and such like, and the inter-relation of these conditions"

(Majumder 145). Several village surveys were conducted under the supervision of Sriniketan Village Welfare Department that provided very important directions to proceed in the areas of economy, health, and education. One such survey of Ballavpur was done under the guidance of Kalimohan Ghosh, the then secretary of Village Welfare Department, that was published as a booklet in July 1926. Interestingly the survey reflects an extensive work on the population of the village, their livelihood, the types of land like Do land, Sali land, Suna land, Olan land and the varieties of crops that were cultivated in Ballavpur. Such survey reports have become authentic source, which confirm the reforms brought about by the Village Welfare Department in health and other sectors in the villages surrounding Sriniketan. The Ballavpur Survey report clearly mentions:

> The health of the village was very unsatisfactory about 2 years ago, but recently slow improvement is taking place in this direction through the combined efforts of the villagers. ...There is not a single doctor in the village... For the last two years arrangements have been made for the services of an M. B. passed doctor by the Village Welfare Society at a small cost. (28)

Secondly, he would believe that any health programme must aspire to gain confidence of the villagers and gradually train them and make them aware of certain preliminary health hazards and treatment procedures. While any other Public Health Departments adopted the conventional methods like sending a lecturer to the villagers to deliver talks on health and prevention of

diseases with which most of the villagers could not relate, Timbres emphasized the importance of "a small amount of personal attention to his needs and troubles, and medicine temporarily relieving his symptoms" (Majumdar 146). As he approves the need of awareness programmes through lectures, posters, slide shows and movies, he also underlines the importance and effectiveness of "talks with individuals or small groups of villagers" which must be complemented with "a very brief leaflet of advice explained and handed out with the bottle of medicine from the Dispensary, demonstration of nursing in the houses, supplementary feeding of a selected group of children in order to show the benefits of proper feeding" (Majumdar 148). Under Harry's initiative, a dispensary was established at Benuria in 1931 where, as Nepal Majumdar reports, minor surgeries were also performed (50). He even set up a Research and Control Laboratory in Malaria at Sriniketan. The consequences of his research on malaria mosquitoes appeared in the form of several articles in the issues of Visva-Bharati News.

Visva-Bharati News (May 1933 issue) provides a very interesting document of a *mela* at Benuri held on 10-11 March, 1933. Apart from the exhibition of handicrafts, there was a Health Exhibit, which "consisted of the usual posters and models, and had in addition a model village house... constructed on hygiene principles with proper lighting, ventilation, and drainage" (95-96). Moreover, a model birth room was also prepared at one end of the dispensary by Mrs. Timbres and Dr. Bhattacharya. Films were shown on Co-operation, Cholera, and Maternity

and Child Welfare. There was a lecture by Mrs. Timbres followed by demonstration on the issue of "cleanliness in the birthroom"(96). Thus, it becomes evident that the Village Welfare Department resorted to the familiar form of rural entertainment like a fair to dispense health education among the villagers. Sriniketan undertook various projects to impart training to the villagers that involved women education, night schools for the elders, and training programmes for the volunteers (Brati Balak), primary teachers and so on.

With an aim to diffuse education and proper manual training among the rural boys, Siksha-Satra was experimentally started in 1924 at Santiniketan. Initially W.W. Pearson and later, Santosh Chandra Majumdar took its charge. In 1927, after the untimely demise of Santosh Majumdar, the school was shifted to Sriniketan and named as Siksha-Satra. The school became an indispensable part of the poet's rural welfare project where science occupied a significant place in the curriculum. Along with imparting the knowledge of basic sciences, Siksha-Satra emphasized practical training. As Elmhirst mentions, the students of Shiksa-Satra worked as an apprentice in handicraft and housecraft. Several "outdoor crafts" were taught to them like poultry keeping and chicken rearing, seedbed preparation, manuring and planting, cultivation of flowers and vegetables, drainage and irrigation, woodcutting and jungle clearing (20). Elmhirst, quite interestingly, observes how various branches of science were appropriated in the curriculum of Siksha-Satra according to the needs of rural life and economy. Thus, "*Geology* becomes the

study of the fertility of the plot; *chemistry* the use of lime and manures of all kinds, of sprays and disinfectants; *physics* the use of tools, of pumps, the study of water-lifts and oil-engines; *entomology* the control of plant pests" (21). He also admits that children educated in such a school became useful agents for educating the adult members of their family. Moreover, the school organized educational visits, excursions, and even occasional visits to the neighbouring villages where the students could directly make an estimate of the living conditions of the villagers and the problems they face in their day-to-day life like the shortage of drinking water, predominance of malaria, ignorance of scientific farming, lack of co-operation and so on. Visva-Bharati Bulletin no. 21 mentions that the idea of co-operation and sense of civic responsibility was strongly instilled in the students. Apart from various trainings in fire control, road repair, drainage and other such activities, "First-aid and nursing also form part of the Siksha-satra training under the Medical Officer"(8). It is clearly mentioned that the students must observe the patients who arrive for treatment at the dispensary. Moreover, if a student fell ill, he received initial phase of nursing from his fellow classmates. Thus, Siksha-Satra played a vital role in the percolation of science, especially practical science, to the illiterate and deprived mass of the society. Such diffusion of science, through manual training, was aimed to educate them and make them financially independent. In the context of rural life, science was conceived with a number of possibilities to improve rural economy, reform rural health, and regenerate certain moral principles of acceptance, and co-

operation by eradicating superstitious beliefs and instilling a rational outlook towards life.

While Siksha-Satra was founded with the zeal to educate the rural community at Sriniketan, there were several other sporadic attempts to diffuse education among the villagers. *Chalantika Granthagar* or mobile library was one such effort to supply books to the rural women and encourage learning even in the remotest of areas. In 1936, *LokShiksha Samsad* was established at Santiniketan under the initiative of Rabindranath. With the primary aim of disseminating education in vernacular among the uneducated rural mass, the *Samsad* began functioning under the guidance of a committee of twenty- two eminent litterateurs such as, Charuchandra Bhattacharya, Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay, Suniti Chattopadhyay, Bidhusekhar Shastri, Rajshekhar Basu, Humayun Kabir, Indira Devi and so on. Visva-Bharati Bulletin No. 23 (August 1938) shows that the *Samsad* conducted examinations in Bengali and there were four levels, *Prabeshika* (Entrance examination), *Adya* (equivalent to School Final), *Madhya* (equivalent to Intermediate), and *Antya* (equivalent to B.A.). In the first two levels, arithmetic and science were offered as compulsory papers. The *Samsad* took the initiative to publish books in vernacular and the series of those publications came to be known as *Lok Shiksha Granthamala*. The titles like *Biswaparichay* by Rabindranath Tagore, *Prantatwa* by Rathindranath Tagore, *Ahar O Aharjo* by Pashupati Bhattacharya, *Prithwiparichay* by Pramathanath Sengupta, show that the Samsad undertook serious efforts to introduce modern science in vernacular. The curriculum

in the *Samsad* booklet, published in January 1943, provides a list of prescribed texts also. In the Entrance level, there was a combined paper on physical science and health. *Prakriti Parichay* by Sourindra Sarkar and Nripendra Singha and *Prithwiparichay* by Pramathanath Sengupta were offered as the basic texts for physical science whereas *Ahar O Aharjo* by Pashupati Bhattacharya was offered as a cult text on health. In the *Adya* (School Final) level there was a combined paper on mathematics and health where *Swasthaprabeshika* by Pashupati Bhattacharya and *Sushrusha ba Nursing Shiksha* by Ashwinikumar Chattopadhyay were taught. The books on basic sciences like *Prathamik Bigyan* by Charuchandra Bhattacharya and Girija Majumdar, *Bishwaparichay* by Rabindranath Tagore and *Prantatwa* by Rathindranath Tagore were offered in the paper on science. Interestingly there was an optional paper called Matrimangal, which was only offered to the women. *Prasuti Paricharja* by Bamandas Mukhopadhyay was taught in this paper. The syllabus was, thus, framed according to the needs of the rural society. If we consider the books on science which were published under the *Lok Shiksha Granthamala* series, it becomes evident that those books aimed to present various branches of modern science according to the popular taste, but there was no compromise with the subject matter. In the introduction to *Prithwiparichay*, Pramathanath writes:

> Gurudev has entrusted upon us a solemn responsibility of culling certain facts from the immense treasury of science and introduce the present day science education in the domain of mind of the students and the common mass. (7)

He also confides that the poet instructed him to avoid difficult technical terms while writing the book but in doing so, he must not dilute the subject matter. The book contains lucid descriptions of the genesis of earth, solar system, and the constituents of our atmosphere, scientific explanation of the natural phenomena like earthquake, volcanic eruptions, and the advent of life on earth. While *Prithwiparichay* deals with the physical and natural science, Rathindranath's *Prantatwa* is a significant work on life science. In the opening chapter, the book seeks to explain several life processes like Katabolism, Anabolism, Growth, Multiplication, and Reproduction. This is followed by an elaborate chapter on cell, the smallest unit of any living body. His discussion of the various constituents of plant and animal cells like cell wall, protoplasm, cytoplasm, and nucleus is complemented with proper diagrams. Apart from the plant and animal cells, the unicellular organisms like amoeba are also discussed. The book also offers vivid descriptions of various life processes like locomotion and movement, respiration, blood circulation, digestion and nutrition, reproduction, excretion in case of an animal body, and involves discussions on plant and animal anatomy. The series contains an interesting manifesto on bacteriology called *Byadhir Porajoy* by Charuchandra Bhattacharya. In short chapters, the book contains discussions on Edward Jenner, an English physician and scientist who was the pioneer of small pox vaccine. The elaborate chapter of the book on malaria and the work of Ronald Ross with the anopheline mosquitoes, the carrier species of malaria, appear to be very relevant for the people of a malaria-

infested district like Birbhum. It is also interesting to note that, along with his discussions on Edward Jenner, Louis Pasteur, Ronald Ross, and other scientists from the West, the author also highlights the works of two Bengali scientists, Sir Upendranath Brahmachari, noted for his contribution in the treatment of Kala-Azar, and Sri Sahay Ram Bose, a leading Botanist, known for his discovery of the antibiotic Polysporin. Apart from the lucid narratives, what make this book more interesting are the various photographs of Edward Jenner performing his first vaccination on a boy of 8yrs in May 1796, first microscope designed by Leeuwenhoek, the Pasteur Institute in Paris and other plates demonstrating the complicated structure of the bacteria of epidemic diseases like cholera, typhoid, diphtheria, plague, and malaria. In this way, the book aims to instigate the interest of a rural community towards science and in a way underlines the utilitarian aspects of modern science. Pashupati Bhattacharya's *Ahar O Aharjo* is another significant text that was prescribed in the curriculum with an aim to introduce proper dietary practices among the reading community. The book intricately analyses the food value of fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, and the role of various organs like mouth, tongue, stomach, liver, and intestine in the digestion of food. The theoretical discussion on nutrition and nutrients is supplemented with a model diet chart and other dietary advices for children, patients, and pregnant women. It is true that the book never altogether discards the use of scientific terms but the appendix section of the book explains all the technical terms used in the text like, Acid, Alkali,

Amino Acid, Insulin, Urea, Chloroform, Gland, Glycogen, Pepsin, and so on.

Thus, for Rabindranath, Sriniketan provided a significant platform where he could practically demonstrate his own understanding of science and its humanitarian aspects. In this context, one must remember the pertinent question that the poet once asked, "Can Science be Humanized?" While for the West, science became synonymous to power and was wrongly used to satiate individual greed for wealth, Rabindranath wanted to clarify that the Western science, when mediated through spiritual wisdom, would appear as a savior to humanity as well. Hence, Sriniketan, which was founded upon certain ideals of the poet, endorsed science and provided a corrective to the West's perception of modern science as a potent source of acquisitive power.

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# The Significance of the Religious Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore in the Modern World: A Comparative Analysis

Tirna Sadhu

**Abstract**

Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore are two towering figures in Indian philosophy and spirituality. Both have left an indelible mark on modern thought through their religious philosophies. This comparative analysis attempts to delve into the significance of their contributions in the context of contemporary global society. Swami Vivekananda was a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, he emphasized the universality of religion and the potential for human self-realization. His teachings advocate for a harmonious synthesis of science and spirituality, it encourages individuals to seek divinity within and to promote social welfare. Vivekananda's ideas have been instrumental in fostering a sense of global humanism and interfaith dialogue, resonating with the modern quest for peace and unity amidst diversity.

Rabindranath Tagore, a polymath and Nobel laureate, presented a complementary yet distinct spiritual vision. Tagore's philosophy was deeply rooted in the Upanishadic tradition, it celebrates the inter-connectedness of all life and the divine presence in the natural world. His poetic and philosophical works urge a harmonious relationship between man, nature, and the divine, advocating for an education system that nurtures holistic development and creativity. Tagore's emphasis on freedom, human dignity, and the universality of the human spirit aligns with contemporary movements for environmental sustainability, human rights, and educational reform.

This paper attempts to explore the intersections and divergences in Vivekananda's and Tagore's thought, highlighting their relevance in addressing modern existential and ethical dilemmas. Through an analysis of their teachings, this study aims to provide insights into how their philosophies can contribute to resolving contemporary issues such as religious intolerance, environmental degradation, and the crisis of meaning in an increasingly materialistic world. Efforts will also be made to prove that the enduring legacy of Vivekananda and Tagore underscores the timeless appeal of their spiritual insights and their potential to inspire a more inclusive, compassionate, and enlightened global society.

Key words: Vivekananda, Tagore, Science and spirituality, Upanishadic tradition, Global humanism, Interfaith dialogue, Holistic education, Religious intolerance, Environmental Degradation, Jivana Devota and Universal religion

## Introduction

Any exploration of religious philosophy in the modern world will remain incomplete without delving into the profound contributions of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Both their ideas have not only enriched spiritual thought but have also provided frameworks that continue to inspire contemporary discussions on spirituality, ethics, education, and global humanism. This comparative analysis repeatedly seeks to uncover the significance of their religious philosophies and how they resonate with and address the complexities of the modern world.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a chief disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, is renowned for his reinterpretation and dissemination of Vedantic philosophy. The world sees his prominent impact in his comprehensive approach to yoga which is encapsulated in his works on Jnana Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Karma Yoga. Vivekananda's teachings provide noteworthy emphasis on the universality of religious experience, the potential for human self-realization, and the harmonious integration of science and spirituality.

Jnana Yoga, or the path of knowledge, as has been elucidated by Vivekananda, emphasizes the pursuit of self-realization through intellectual discernment and wisdom. This philosophy encourages individuals to transcend their ego and recognize the unity of Atman (the individual soul) with Brahman (the universal soul). In a modern context, Jnana Yoga successfully offers a framework for addressingexistential questions and the search for

meaning in an increasingly complex and often materialistic worldview.

Raja Yoga, or the path of meditation, prominently focuses on the control of the mind and the development of concentration and willpower. Vivekananda's treatise on Raja Yoga asserts practical guidance on meditation practices, aiming towards the attainment of spiritual enlightenment. This aspect of his philosophy is definitely relevant today, as mindfulness and meditation practices gain widespread acceptance for their benefits to mental health and overall well-being.

Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion, highlights the significance of love and devotion towards a personal deity. Vivekananda's interpretation of Bhakti Yoga transcends sectarian boundaries and advocates for a universal love that encompasses all of humanity. In a century marked by religious intolerance and conflict, Bhakti Yoga's emphasis on love and compassion serves as a powerful antidote to division and animosity.

Karma Yoga, or the path of selfless action, volunteers the importance of performing one's duties without attachment to the results. This philosophy underscores the significance of altruism and social service, resonating with contemporary movements towards social justice and community service. Vivekananda's constant insistence on the practical application of spiritual principles in daily life underscores the relevance of Karma Yoga in addressing societal challenges.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a Nobel laureate and a polymath, approached spirituality from a different

yet complementary perspective. Tagore's works, such as *Gitanjali, Sadhana, The Religion of Man,* and *Creative Unity*, reflect his deep engagement with the Upanishadic tradition and his belief in the interconnectedness of all life. Tagore's philosophy celebrates the divine presence in the natural world and asserts the importance of beauty, creativity, and human dignity.

*Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), a collection of Tagore's poems, embodies his spiritual vision, where the divine is intimately intertwined with the ordinary. The poems express a profound sense of devotion and an awareness of the divine presence in everyday life. This work resonates the modern quest for spiritual satisfaction amidst the hustle and bustle of contemporary life.

In *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, Tagore expounds on his belief that true spirituality is realized through the harmonious integration of the individual with the extended universe. He advocates for a life of simplicity, contemplation, and active involvement with the world. Tagore's emphasis on the intrinsic connection between the individual and the cosmos provides a holistic framework for addressing environmental sustainability and the ethical treatment of all living beings.

*The Religion of Man*, one of Tagore's seminal works, articulates his vision of a universal religion that attempts to transcend dogmatic boundaries. Tagore envisions a spirituality that is inclusive, compassionate, and rooted in the recognition of the shared humanity. This vision aligns with efforts of the present times towards interfaith dialogue and global cooperation in addressing shared challenges.

*Creative Unity* reflects Tagore's belief in the power of creativity and art to initiate spiritual and social transformation. He argued that creativity is a divine attribute and that the pursuit of all artistic endeavours is a form of worship. In the modern world, where innovation and artistic affluence are highly valued, Tagore's philosophy underscores the importance of integrating creative expression with spiritual growth.

Comparatively, Swami Vivekananda's and Rabindranath Tagore's philosophies converge on the idea of universal spirituality but diverge in their approaches. Vivekananda's emphasis on structured paths of yoga and practical spirituality complements Tagore's more versatile and artistic engagement with the divine. Together, their teachings offer an ever evolving dimension to spiritual thought that addresses the multifaceted challenges of the modern world.

In the face of increasing religious intolerance, environmental crises, and a pervasive sense of disconnection in contemporary society, the philosophies of Vivekananda and Tagore provide valuable insights. Vivekananda's integration of science and spirituality promotes a balanced worldview that can bridge the gap between technological advancement and ethical considerations. His advocacy for interfaith harmony and social service is an immense necessity in contributing to a more inclusive and compassionate global society.

Tagore's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life and the spiritual significance of creativity offers a holistic perspective that can inspire efforts toward environmental

sustainability and cultural renewal. His vision of a universal religion rooted in human dignity and compassion is deeply soaked with modern aspirations for global peace and understanding.

## Literature Review

Vivekananda and Tagore emphasize the universality of spiritual experience and the interconnectedness of all life. Chakrabarti (2013) discusses how both thinkers advocate for a spiritual humanism that transcends religious and cultural boundaries, thereby promoting a global sense of unity and compassion. Their philosophies converge on the idea that true spirituality is inclusive and rooted in the recognition of shared humanity.

Sen and Bhattacharya (2016) highlight how Vivekananda's emphasis on practical spirituality and systematic practice contrasts with Tagore's emphasis on the spontaneous and creative aspects of spiritual experience. This divergence offers complementary perspectives that can address different aspects of modern spiritual and ethical dilemmas.

The relevance of Vivekananda and Tagore's philosophies in the modern world is a chief area of scholarly interest. Biswas (2018) argues that Vivekananda's integration of science and spirituality provides a balanced worldview that can bridge the gap between technological advancement and ethical considerations. On the other hand, Tagore's emphasis on environmental sustainability and the spiritual significance of creativity aligns with contemporary efforts towards ecological conservation and cultural renewal.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the depth and complexity of philosophical and religious concepts. The qualitative approach allows for a detailed examination of the texts and contexts in which Vivekananda and Tagore articulated their ideas, as well as their enduring impact on contemporary thought and practice.

The selected works of Vivekananda and Tagore is primarily being examined through textual analysis. A close reading of the texts is made to identify key themes, concepts, and arguments. The analysis focuses on understanding the core principles of their religious philosophies and how these principles are articulated in their writings.

Through a thematic analysis the recurring themes within the texts are analyzed and identified. This method helps in categorizing the philosophical and religious ideas presented by Vivekananda and Tagore into broader themes such as universal spirituality, human self-realization, interfaith dialogue, and the interconnectedness of life. Themes are identified through an iterative process of reading, coding, and categorizing the data.

Further, a comparative analysis is used to highlight the intersections and divergences between the philosophies of Vivekananda and Tagore. This involves comparing their approaches to key concepts such as the nature of the divine, the path to spiritual realization, and the role of religion in society. The comparative analysis helps in understanding how their ideas complement and contrast

with each other, and how these ideas can be applied to address modern challenges.

## Discussion and findings

### Swamiji's religious philosophy

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy is deeply rooted in Advaita Vedanta, which he regarded as a pure form of religious thought. According to him, the Vedantic religion does not contradict other religions. According to Vivekananda, the Upanishads, also known as Vedanta, Aranyakas, or Rahasya, represent this aspect of the Vedas. He noted that in these texts, religion is stripped of all external formalities, conveying spiritual truths in a purely spiritual language. As stated in "Selections from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda" (1991, p. 245), "Here we find at once that spiritual things are told not in the language of matter, but in the language of the spirit."

Vivekananda highlighted the profound influence of religion on humanity's development, asserting, "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mold the destinies of the Human race, none, certainly, is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion" (Vivekananda, 2015, p. 1). He elaborated on religion's power, noting that all social structures are fundamentally influenced by this unique force, which has served as the most powerful unifying element among human beings (Vivekananda, 2015, p. 1).

According to Vivekananda, every notable religion comprises three fundamental components: Philosophy,

Mythology, and Rituals. Regarding the first component, he introduced the idea of a universal religion, describing it as an eternal entity that reflects humanity's inherent religious consciousness. This consciousness manifests differently across various cultures and locations. Vivekananda likened universal religion to science, asserting that it is singular and unique.

For the second component, he characterized universal religion as inherently spiritual. In discussing the third component,Vivekananda emphasized the dynamic nature of religion, proposing that universal religion serves as a platform where all world religions can engage freely and harmoniously for the collective well-being of humanity. Through these perspectives,Vivekananda also established himself as a philosopher of humanism.

Swami Vivekananda first presented his concept of religious harmony to the Western world at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, where he articulated three key points: firstly, the world's religions are complementary rather than contradictory, secondly, there is no necessity to abandon one's own religion in favour of another, and thirdly the ideal practice involves embracing and integrating the finest aspects of other religions while remaining loyal to one's own faith (Bhajananda, 2008, p. 36-37).

While social scientists have often approached religion as a universal phenomenon, their understanding has typically been limited to aspects such as mythology, rituals, and institutions.Vivekananda, however, proposed a much higher conception of religion as a universal

phenomenon. He equated religion with transcendental spiritual consciousness, humanity's quest to achieve this consciousness, and the experiential realization of it. This universal spiritual consciousness, which he termed Universal Religion, represents the pinnacle of religious understanding (Bhajananda, 2008, p. 41). A staunch advocate of Hinduism and religious pluralism, Vivekananda did not consider other religions inferior to Hinduism. While Hinduism emphasizes spirituality, Christianity focuses on self-purification. As human beings, our responsibility is to seek unity within the diversity of world religions. Although distinct in various ways, religions share commonalities, such as the belief in an ultimate reality often referred to as God. Similarly, while all humans are fundamentally the same, we recognize distinctions such as those between men and women.

In contrast to the narrow concept of a universal religion, Swami Vivekananda's idea is genuinely inclusive, encompassing all religions worldwide. His concept is grounded in universal principles that reconcile the apparent contradictions among different faiths. However, it is not widely recognized that Swamiji outlined three distinct concepts of Universal Religion (Bhajananda, 2008, p.39).

Vivekananda's religious philosophy posits that religion is the highest motivating force in the human mind, unparalleled in its spiritual energy, through which one can achieve the infinite. He did not equate Universal Religion with any specific religion, such as Hinduism

(despite having made Hinduism accessible to people worldwide), but rather with humanity's shared spiritual heritage. He viewed all the world's religions as expressions of the universal spiritual consciousness inherent in humanity (Bhajananda, 2008, p.41).

In his influential work "Jnana Yoga," Vivekananda remarked that as the human mind expands, its spiritual reach also widens. He noted that we have reached a point where a single thought can now reach every corner of the globe through physical means. Thus, future religions must also adopt this universality and expansiveness (Vivekananda, 2015).

Vivekananda also discussed the relationship between the Infinite and the human soul, suggesting that divinity resides within every human soul and can be referred to as God. His concept of God is not personal; he criticized the conventional religious teachings about God creating the world from nothing or some material cause. Bhajananda elaborated that, for Vivekananda, the essence of every religion lies in the realization of divinity. Religion, according to Vivekananda, is not merely belief in God, adherence to a creed, or performing rituals. Instead, it encompasses the entirety of life, aiming to transform human existence into divine existence. This transformation involves turning every thought, emotion, and action into a spiritual practice, effectively converting one's entire life into a form of continuous yoga and devotion. This divine life can be observed in the lives of great saints and mystics across all religions (Bhajananda, 2008, p.48).

The world in which we reside is multifaceted, characterized by its sensory, rational, and intellectual dimensions. Vivekananda described this universe of ours, encompassing the sensory, the rational, and the intellectual, as being flanked on both sides by the boundless, the unknowable, and the perpetually mysterious. Within this realm lies our quest and inquiries, and the origins of what is recognized by the world as religion. Fundamentally, however, religion transcends the sensory and does not reside within the realm of the senses. It exists beyond reason and intellect, representing a vision, an inspiration, and a dive into the unknown and unknowable, rendering the unknowable more profound than known, for it can never truly be known (Vivekananda, 1931, p.1). His noble and respectful consideration for humanity was evident through his religious philosophy.

## Tagore's religious philosophy

Rabindranath Tagore is recognized as a key figure in introducing the concept of universal religion to modern Indian philosophy. He presented this idea to the public and philosophical domain through his influential work, "The Religion of Man." Tagore's religious philosophy is deeply human-centric, positing that one can realize the absolute as their highest self, existing within. In "Sadhana: The Realization of Life," Tagore explained that the Sanskrit word "dharma," often translated as religion in English, holds a deeper meaning in its original language. Dharma refers to the intrinsic nature, the essence, and the fundamental truth of all things. It represents the

ultimate purpose within us, guiding our actions. When we commit a wrong, it is a betrayal of our true nature (Tagore, 1915, p.43).

Tagore was a proponent of liberating people from superstitions associated with religion. He encouraged logical thinking and showcased unique perspectives in contemporary Indian philosophy. His early exposure to the teachings of the Upanishads profoundly shaped his philosophical outlook. In addition to the Upanishads, Tagore was significantly influenced by Vaishnavism, the Brahmo Samaj, and the Bhagavad Gita. His intellectual development was also enriched by modern Western thought, culture, literature, Christianity, the humanist philosophy of the Brahmo Samaj, and Vedic philosophy.

Tagore's perspective on Hinduism blended elements from the Brahmo Samaj and orthodox Hindu traditions. The Brahmo Samaj, in particular, had a lasting impact on his life. Influences from great figures such as the Buddha and Raja Ram Mohan Roy are also evident in Tagore's works and life. He is often seen as a theistic philosopher, believing in the reality of God, or God as the ultimate reality. For Tagore, God is not an abstract entity isolated from the world but is both inherent and transcendent. In his renowned book "Religion of Man," Tagore articulated that his understanding of religion is fundamentally aligned with that of a poet. He expressed, "My religion is essentially a poet's religion. It reaches me through the same unseen and indirect pathways as the inspiration for my music. My journey in religion has evolved along the same enigmatic lines as my journey in poetry. These two facets of my life are deeply

intertwined, and although their union has been long in the making, it remained unknown to me for a significant period" (Tagore, 1978, p. 5).

In his religious philosophy, Tagore presents the concept of God as the creator and unifying principle. God is immanent and beyond the grasp of reason or logic. The divine is manifested in creation, and human beings are seen as the image of God. Tagore emphasizes the harmonious relationship between nature and the human self, portraying God as a person who reveals Himself through human life. He also appreciates Vaishnavism's notion of Bhakti as a means of divine realization, underscoring the importance of personal experience with God. Tagore believes that man can perceive the divine presence but not fully grasp it.

For Tagore, the ultimate purpose of human existence lies in the realization of God's love. Love is central to his religious philosophy and represents the key to achieving a deep understanding and connection with the divine. He maintains that man's true freedom and fulfillment are found in love, where he becomes united with the all-encompassing Spirit, the breath of his soul. Tagore stresses that when individuals seek to elevate themselves by disregarding others, they become alienated from the divine. This aligns with the Upanishads' concept of "peaceful" or "at-one-with-God" individuals, who live in harmony with both nature and man.

Tagore emphasizes that vice and evil arise from a lack of true self-knowledge. Without divine love, human life is characterized by suffering and misery. Therefore,

achieving God's love should be the ultimate aspiration for every individual. He holds that man's self contains divine potential and should not be separated from the divine. God's infinite presence permeates human existence, and humanity's highest creation is a reflection of God. Tagore believes that human self is divine and encompasses the attributes of Brahman, the ultimate reality.

Tagore's religious philosophy is fundamentally anchored in his concept of Man. One of the distinctive terms Tagore used in his philosophy is 'Jivana Devota,' which translates to the "God of life" residing in the heart of man. This term emphasizes the intimate and personal aspect of God, who also brings about transformation within the self. Tagore's perception of God mirrors the humanism found in Advaita Vedanta, with the divine residing within the human being. Jivan Devota represents God within the human, embodying the highest self of humanity. Jivan Devota does not symbolize the Infinite Absolute but instead portrays a manifestation of the divine that is deeply intertwined with human life. God, according to Tagore, can be recognized by various names, such as the Universal Man. His philosophy was also influenced by Vedic thought, which emphasizes the divine presence within human beings.

Tagore's philosophy emphasizes self-realization as a key aspect of his life and beliefs. He strongly advocated for the self-realization that individuals can achieve. For him, worship of man is tantamount to worship of God. In other words, serving humanity is equivalent to honoring the divine. Tagore did not limit religion to any particular

group, caste, or institution. He believed that being Hindu, Muslim, or Christian is contingent on one's circumstances, such as the family they are born into and the traditions they grow up with. Tagore maintained that individuals should have the freedom to choose their religion and understand it without external constraints. Realizing one's self equates to recognizing one's humanity. The nature of man is inherently creative, and this creative capacity represents the essence of his religion. Man's intrinsic truth of life is expressed through his religion, reflecting his spiritual nature. True self-realization is linked to the realization of one's manhood. The creative power inherent in every individual is the essence of their true religion or dharma.

Tagore adopted a Universalist approach on multiple fronts and at various levels. He criticized the militant, hierarchical approach of his Hindu tradition and his nationalist peers, favoring instead a universal, egalitarian approach grounded in truth and non-violence (Hogan & Pandit, 2003, p.17). Tagore also opposed the sectarian identities of nation, religion, caste, race, region, and ethnicity, subtly advocating a "politics of Otherness" in contrast to the "politics of identity." Drawing inspiration from the Upanishads, Tagore emphasized that the entire world in its movement is permeated by a supreme unity. Therefore, true fulfilment is not found in the pursuit of personal greed but in surrendering one's self to the Universal self (Vivekananda, 1931, p.20-21). As noted by Radhakrishnan, Tagore's philosophy of life can be perceived from two perspectives. Some view him as a Vedantin, drawing his inspiration from the Upanishads,

while others see him as an advocate of theism akin to, if not identical with, Christianity (Radhakrishnan, 1918, p.2-3).

## Conclusion

Tagore's concept of religion is not centered on any institutionalized religion. Instead, he regarded religion as a personal journey of understanding one's spirituality. For Tagore, man embodies the image of God, and serving humanity is tantamount to serving the divine. He refrained from endorsing any specific religious practices, and his focus was on the individual's personal experience of God. In contrast, Swami Vivekananda emphasized a universal religion as a platform for practicing all world religions. He celebrated Hinduism and believed that it offered a viable path for followers to practice and understand spirituality.

Tagore's philosophy of religion is fundamentally monotheistic. He upheld the idea that liberation can be attained through love, and he associated this concept with the Buddhist idea of overcoming Avidya (ignorance). Tagore also believed that acts of love, charity, and kindness could guide individuals towards salvation. Vivekananda, on the other hand, rejected the Buddhist idea of liberation. He promoted the practice of Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Karma Yoga as the path to achieving salvation. For him, these three yogas were essential in reaching spiritual enlightenment. Tagore's understanding of God was personal, and he distinguished between the Absolute and God, positing that the realization of the supreme soul within one's individual

soul represented absolute fulfilment (Tagore, 1915, p.88). Vivekananda, however, did not view God as personal. To him, God was impersonal and transcendent, and he recognized the multiplicity and religious diversity within Hinduism.

Despite their differing views, both Tagore and Vivekananda were proponents of Advaita Vedanta. They were spiritualistic philosophers who emphasized the spiritual dimension in their teachings. Additionally, both of them endorsed the concept of liberation and aspired to establish a universal religion and universal brotherhood. Both Tagore and Vivekananda were theists and practical philosophers. They believed in unity in diversity and sought to promote a peaceful society through the practice of their respective religious philosophies.

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# Tagore as a Romantic Poet: A Study of Select Poems

Shreyoshi Dhar

**Abstract**

Scientific and technological development has proven to be highly beneficial in bringing about modernization in the world. Nevertheless, at the same time, it has bereft mankind of peace and harmony in their personal life. Man had begun to make constant efforts in constructing an individual identity and thus had started to lead a self-centered existence. This had affected the sensibility of Rabindranath Tagore to a great extent and he was prompted to draw values from European Romantic ideals and finally develop his own concept of Romanticism that demands human solidarity, spiritual unity, and individual freedom. He had tried to incorporate these ideas in his literary works, where he displayed his passion, imagination, and perception of the contemporary society. This article thus demonstrates Tagore's Romantic spirit as elucidated in his collection of poems which played a major role in reshaping the modern individuals on the personal level as well as the modern society at large.

**Keywords**
human solidarity, individual freedom, modernization, Romanticism, self-centered existence, spiritual unity

The 18th Century Europe has witnessed the effects of Industrial Revolution and the impact of Enlightenment values of reason on the lives of the common people. Due to industrial revolution, there was a sudden upsurge in the population rate along with the rise in the standard of living, which finally led to the depletion of natural resources. Machines during that time conveniently replaced human labour and the production level of different objects especially wool and cotton was increasing at a random rate. The transformation of the society from an agrarian economy to a modern one featured by industries, machines, and technologies became clearly evident. This had a direct impact on the common mass as they were bound to shift from the rural areas to the cities in search of work in factories. Even a large number of women joined the workforce to earn for their families. This rapid urbanization unfortunately resulted in dirty, over-crowded towns having poor sanitation system and this led to the spread of many diseases. The poor factory condition, the low payment of factory workers, and the dangerous work condition almost made it impossible for the poor working class to survive; it was only the merchant classes who got richer and richer as the international trade increased, making United States one of the leading economic powers. Meanwhile, a dominant philosophical and intellectual movement got its initiation at the same time which came

to be known as Enlightenment. This movement being essentially governed by authority and legitimacy primarily advocated certain ideals like liberty, fraternity, progress, tolerance, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. Faith and Christian doctrine occupied the back seat and the society in the Enlightenment age was based on natural law, initiating a new civil order. Scientific experiments and observations were quite prevalent.

The 19th Century Europe immediately called for a transformation in the philosophical and intellectual idealism. As a response to the Industrial Revolution and Enlightenment ideals, Romanticism as a movement set its foot in the continent. The English Romantic intellectuals and artists considered the movement to be an escape route from the harsh modern realities of the society. It felt as though the modern world was extending a deadening impact on the senses and spirit of individuals. This instigated these intellectuals to initiate a return of both the emotional and natural facets of life and spirit along with the ideals of the pre-industrial ideals. Romanticism as a movement mainly revolted against the aristocratic social and political norms characterizing the Enlightenment age. It also raised its voice against the scientific rationalization of the nature. The imaginative power of an individual was given maximum priority, encouraging in freeing oneself from the boundaries of the classical notions of various forms of art. Moreover, the Protestant Reformation that was responsible for the decline in religious works inspired the popularity of landscapes to flourish. The artists during the era took the

aid of the Romantic Movement to give wings to their passions, to establish a visceral connection with their artistic work, and to refuse to give any explanation to any criticism by justifying their choice via traditional defenses. Romanticism also helped in emphasizing nature over industry, acting as a foil to the moral degradation of the society. The main focus was on the celebration of true beauty and simplicity of nature. It was very much evinced that the French Revolution proved to be highly instrumental in creating new interest in nature and the fundamental simplicities in life. The revolutionary ideal of liberty, equality, and fraternity is seen to be resonating in the romantic art forms. The Romantic Movement thus clearly echoes the concepts of freedom and social change, provoking the artists of the era to explore different themes including rebellion, passion, and nature in their literary venture.

Romanticism as a cultural as well as literary movement has transcended the geographical boundaries of the European continent and crept into India conveniently due to the colonial rule that facilitated intercultural exchange. This Romantic inclination in literature proved to be a great impetus which ushered in the country by three major forces and thereby helped in shaping the destiny of modern Indian literature. The first being Sri Aurbindo—he had made a sincere effort to seek God in man. His philosophical treatise titled *The Life Divine* puts forth the prospect of ultimate revelation of the divine in every object. Second, the World poet Rabindranath Tagore was the one who was mostly impacted by the Romantic quest for beauty in both man

and nature. Finally, it was Mahatma Gandhi whose advocation of truth and non-violence also resonate Romantic ideals of the West. However, unlike the English Romantic concerns, Indian Romanticism fraught with mysticism and believed in emotions, intuitions, and enchanted feelings, thereby prioritizing these sentiments over reason and logic. The artists worked meticulously all the time to evoke the lost feelings of their common past and shared heritage. Celebrating nature has a different history in India especially to the Hindus. Hinduism being a pagan religion worships every form of nature as Gods and Goddesses.

The age of Romanticism had a great impact on the Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore. His world-wide exposure was deeply affected by his Eastern characteristic of sensibility especially in his obsession with the idea of 'Satyam, Shivam, Sunderam', being translated as 'Truth, Piety, and Beauty'. He always got fascinated by the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Thus, he emerged to be the supreme representative of Romanticism in the world of Bengali literature. Influenced highly by the Romantic poets of the West, Tagore developed a newer version of Romanticism based on the doctrine of experience. He was always possessed with the romantic view that apprehension of beauty directs one to experience the infinity. It has always been the tendency of man to suppress their true emotion and the Romantic poets like Tagore made an outlet of these repressed emotion in their poetic works. His idea directly hints at Wordsworth's statement about the art of writing poetry, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful

feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." (Web) His Romantic poetry collection can be paralleled with Francois Thomson's 'jewel raptures', W.B. Yeat's dreamy fairyland, George Russell's Irish folklore, Wordsworth's mysticism, and finally the Upanishadic doctrine of Vaishnavism.

The poetry collections *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, and *Stray Birds* by the Bengali poet mainly include poems which exhibit the Romantic fervor of the poet. Through these poems, again and again he had celebrated nature and the significance of individualism. The poem "New Rain" describes the mesmerizing scenes of the much awaited monsoon showers that has just arrived. The peacock's dance in this beautiful scenery causes the heart of the poet to flutter in joy. Here the poet seems to present the intertwining of the paradisiacal visions of Mother Nature with the youthful yearning for the charming lover of the narrator and creation seems to lie in the offing. In short, the poem is all about the joy and hope Indian monsoon brings for the people of the country, a very common sentiment for all Indians as India is an agro-based country.

Tagore often perceived the divine through various forms of nature including the river, the sky, the birds and other components and this often gets reflected in his songs and poems, especially when he penned down—

> In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path
> he comes, comes, and ever comes.
> In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds
> he comes, comes, ever comes. (Web)

Again, in a hymn in *Gitanjali*, Tagore displays the relevance of individualism amidst nature where he parallels the path of life with the course of nature—"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers." (Web) *Banabani* or *Voice of the Forest* is one of the most popular poetry collections of Tagore which contains some of his best Nature poems. Through the poems of this collection, the poet tried to convey his affection, gratitude and reverence for nature. He strongly believed that man should live in harmony with nature and try to realise that divinity prevails in all elements of nature. This harmonious relation with nature according to Tagore will help man to transcend the modern self-centered existence and help him to get relieve from mental stress and keep his tormented soul un-subdued by habits being free from the shackles of age old customs. Even the death anniversary of Tagore is till today celebrated in Santiniketan by invoking blessings from the five elements of nature – Earth, Water, Sun, Air, and Outer Space, who are worshipped as deities being in charge of all living creatures of the Earth. Usually five children are decked up as Panchabhuta who recite poems to invoke blessings on the young plant.

> Oh great souls, fly the banner to conquer the deserts.
>
> Oh the tender soul, bless every speck of dust on this earth with great piety.
>
> Let the ever silent soil sing the song of your glory,

> Oh beautiful soul, encompass with flowers and greeneries.
> Oh my traveller friend, come for a rest under the shadow of trees,
> Come oh the playmate of winds and enthrall the blue sky.
> In the dawn aspire hope on the woods and in the dusk, bless them with deep sombre.
> Oh Great Mind, sing the tune of a peaceful corner on this earth. (Web)

Tagore constantly tries to extoll the beauty and splendour of nature through his literary verses and his constant yearning for spiritual companionship with nature and his longing to be one with it or atleast identify with it can be observed in the lines from Gitanjali – "The evening air is eager with the sad music of water. Ah, it calls me out into the dusk," and 'Stray Birds': "My heart, with its lapping waves of song, longs to caress the green world of the sunny day." (Web)

Much like the Romantic poet John Keats, Tagore has traversed in 'the realm of flora and pan' and hence one can find in his poetry collections that mountains, rivers, birds, and universal elements of nature are painted with mystic and divine celestial light. Nature has always been a friend, philosopher, and guide to Tagore. He always considered a poem to be a speaking picture and hence most of his verses have been characterised by vivacious, grandeur, and lofty expression. Like Keats he had tried to seek truth in beauty and vice-versa. "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty*" in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", a Romantic poem by Keats, seems to echo The Upanishadic doctrine of 'Satyam, Shivam, Sunderam'. The harmonious relationship between Man and Nature is cherished and

celebrated in the works of Tagore where one can see how Western Romantic poets have impacted his Eastern sensibility.

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# Nation and Transnation in the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore

Natasha Chatterjee

**Abstract**

Rabindranath Tagore,was a renowned poet as well as novelist, he was awarded the most reveredaward that is the 'Nobel prize'in the year 1913.He is till date the most celebrated and respected personality in Indian literature.With the kind of literature that he produced, he delved in depth inside the complexities of the human sentiments, the dynamicsof society and the convolutions of culture.He traversed through many themes and explored them, in his novels Rabindranath Tagore's novels often one can find the themes of nation and transnation as one of the significant features in his novels. Tagore's minuterepresentation of these themes proffered deep insights into thefluidity of identity, therift between tradition and modernity, and the interrelatedness of humans surpassing geographical borders or frontiers. In The novels written by Tagore the concept of nationhood does not remain constricted within the territorial boundaries or diplomatic adherence, but it surrounds

anamalgam of cultural heritage, common past, and combined ambitions.This paper will mainly focus on the novels written by Rabindranath Tagore on the themes of nation and transnation and their implication on the human identities as well as the literature of that period.

**Keywords**

Nation, Transnation, Rabindranath Tagore, Geographical boundaries.

## Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore, is eulogized as the Bard of Bengal, he was not only a celebrated poet but also an accomplished author who wrote brilliant novels and as a result his readers were not confined to any specific geographical boundary nor his work is restricted to that period of time, till date his work is celebrated among his readers from all over the world. Among the multifarious themes that pervade his literary oeuvre, the concept of nation and transnationgets more attention in his literary works.In this paperwe will delveintosome novels written by Rabindranath Tagore that explores the topics of nation and transnation. Here nation means the land in which a person is born while transnation implies extending across one's own national boundaries.

## *Ghare-Baire*: (*The Home and the World*)

*Ghare-Baire*was a novel written by Tagore which was set in the first half of the twentieth century when Bengal was witnessing the Swadeshi movement against the colonial rule of the British empire.This novel explores

the conflicts between age old traditions and modernity, nationalism and multiracialism. The novel dwells around the lives of its three main charactersnamely Nikhilesh, who is a liberal nobleman; his wife named Bimala; and Sandip, who is a ardent and raging nationalist leader. With the passage of time Swadeshi movement gains impetus, Nikhilesh's wife Bimala gets attracted towards Sandip due to his charming nationalism, which was quite contrasting from her social protocols in which she was raised. This was also challenging for the customary gender roles. Theauthor tries to portray the intricate internal rifts and complicated dynamics among the characters, he beautifully explored the transformative power of unexpected events and the fluidity of human identity in a period of time when there were extensive social changes and political turbulence. In this novel the author examines the conflicts between tradition and modernity as well as East and West through his portrayal of the main characters such as Nikhilesh, Bimala and Sandip. As the novel was set at the times when there was colonial rule in Bengal, the narrative often explores the transformation of various unexpected events, adaptability of existence in an ever-growing globalised world.

### *Chokher Bali*:(*A Grain of Sand*)

Rabindranath Tagore's seminal novel *Chokher Bali* serves as a poignant exploration of the concept of transnationalism, a phenomenon that has gained significant attention in the realm of literary studies. Central to Tagore's portrayal of transnationalism is his depiction of characters who embody hybrid identities,

navigating multiple cultural affiliations with fluidity and grace. Through the narrative of Binodini, a young widow entangled in the lives of her friends, Mahendra and Asha, in colonial Calcutta, Tagore illuminates the ways in which individual lives are shaped by broader historical forces, transcending national boundaries and cultural divides. The novel's exploration of love, betrayal, and forgiveness serves as a poignant reminder of the universality of human emotions and the interconnectedness of human experiences across time and space.

Binodini, the protagonist of *Chokher Bali*, is a complex and multifaceted character who embodies the essence of Tagore's transnational vision. As a young widow navigating the social and cultural constraints of colonial Calcutta, Binodini's journey of self-discovery and redemption serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges faced by individuals grappling with the intersection of personal desires and societal expectations. Through Binodini's experiences, Tagore skilfully weaves a narrative that transcends the boundaries of nation and culture, highlighting the ways in which individual lives are inextricably linked to the broader historical and social forces that shape the character of an individual.

### *Gora*

The novel *Gora* is one of the most celebrated novels written by Rabindranath Tagore, the story is set in the backdrop of late nineteenth century colonial rule of the British empire. This novel project that era when the Swadeshi movement was gaining momentum. The protagonist, whose name is Gora, is a devoted Hindu

nationalist who vehemently believes in the supremacy of the culture and traditions of India.Nevertheless, Gora's perspective towards life is challenged when he unearthed that he is adopted and of mixed inheritance, with Muslim lineage. When this truth id disclosed to him it compels him to oppose his own prejudices and review his beliefs of identity and nationhood. The author tries to portray with the aid of Gora's journey of self-realization and his interlinkage with the characters from differing backgrounds, Tagore examines the intricacies of national identity, religious forbearance, and the interrelatedness of cultures. The novel offers a minute critique of non-flexible nationalism and eulogizes the diversity and inclusiveness of the Indian society.His groundbreaking work, "Gora," serves as a typical exploration of the complexities of national identity in colonial India.

### *Chaturanga*: (*Quartet*)

The novel *Chaturanga* written by Rabindranath Tagore is a story that delves intensely into the soul of its main character, Sachish, who is a captivating but deeply imperfect intellectual man, who is pull apartbetween his ideals and his aspirations. This story is based on a backdrop of colonial Bengal and it explores Sachish'sturbulent association with the female character, namedDamini, along with this his opinionatedrifts of ideology with hismentor, whose name is Jagmohan. Through Sachish's expedition of self-exploration and virtuous reckoning, the author tries to explore the complications of individualagencyalong with the conflicts between individualliberty and social

obligations.Chaturanga's exploration of affection, intimacy,treachery,and redemptionreinforces the ubiquity of humanexperience and the interlinking of lives across geographical and time-relateddivisions.

***Noukadubi*:(*The Wreck*)**

Another novel of Tagore that is influenced by the themes of nation and transnation is *Noukadubi*.This novel is based on a story of incorrect identity and fortuitous encounters which was written in the backdrop of colonial rule of the British empire. In the novel Ramesh is a young man who is newly married and is travelling with his newly wedded wife, when they met with an accident when their ship gets adrift in a sea due to bad weather conditions. After this his life goes through many serendipitous instances, Ramesh along his way comes across a woman named Kamala, who is a young widow, and after this they venture into a new journey of self-realization along with mutualvindication.Throughout the story Ramesh struggles with multiple questions of existence, identity and ownership. Rabindranath Tagore examines the cathartic potency of human relatedness and the likelihood of building new inceptions beyond cultural boundaries. In this novel the various emotions of love, loss and reunion emphasizes the adaptability as well as the flexibility of the human spirit along with the metaphysical power of empathy as well as understanding.

***Sesher Kobita*: (*The Last Poem*)**

The novel *Sesher Kobita* written by Tagore is a touching love story that goes beyond the divides of time, space,

and societal accords. *Sesher Kobita* which means 'The Last Poem' follows the romantic associations of the two main central characters, Amit Ray and Labanya, who crossed each other paths by coincidence during atour in the Himalayas. Though in the initial stage they had several differences due to contrasting backgrounds and disposition, both of them gets attracted to each other, and enter into an intense romantic liaison. But as any relationship has their own ups and downtheir love story also facevarious confrontations and oppositions, which include traditional expectations, individual insecurities etc.Their relationship went through many turbulent paths, the author here examines the ubiquitous themes of love, yearning, and self-realization, surpassing the confines of national specifications and cultural distinction.

## Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's novels explore an opulent tapestry of narratives that questions the complications of nation and transnation in colonial India. Through his refinedrepresentation of characters, backdrops, and themes, Tagoreincite readers to contemplate on the fluidity of identity, the permeabilityof borders, and the interrelatedness of human experiences beyond time and space. In a world that is steadily becoming globalised the questions of belonging as well as cultural exchange remain pertinent in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore where his thoughts that he pours in his literature go beyond the geographical barriers and talk about the universal plight of human beingsandtherefore it remains equally relevant in today's time. In all these novels that

are discussed over here Tagore profoundlyand distinctly examines the themes of nation as well as transnation, with in depth details on the intricacies of identity, belonging along with cultural exchange. Through these novels Tagore portray innumerable characters through his most beautiful narratives where the volatility of boundaries is most evident thus giving a clear example of nation and transnation in the ever- growing globalized world.

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## About the Contributors

**Dr. Rituparna Chakraborty** is Assistant Professor& Head, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University. Rituparna Chakraborty has done her M.A. in English from West Bengal State University and M.Phil. from Rabindra Bharati University. She was awarded Ph.D. from Raiganj University. She has cleared the UGC-NET examination. She has presented research papers in a number of National and International Conferences. She has also published several articles in UGC-CARE listed journals and International Peer-Reviewed Journals. Her areas of interest include: Popular Literature, Gender Studies and Postcolonial Studies. She is a Nominated Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), University of Edinburgh and Research Affiliate of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTS).

**Soumyarup Bhattacharjee** is presently an Assistant Professor of English at Swami Vivekananda University, West Bengal, India. He is also pursuing his PhD at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay. His current research is centred on transcultural

approaches to contemporary Gothic literature in South and Southeast Asia. His other areas of interest include adaptation studies, postcolonial Asian writing, and contemporary horror literature/films.

**Agnideepto Datta** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore. He has completed his postgraduate degree from University of Calcutta and has received his M.Phil. degree from Vidyasagar University. He is currently pursuing his doctoral degree from Bankura University. His research interest includes Genocide and Incarceration studies, Philosophy and Literature, and South Asian Literature. He has presented multiple papers in International Conferences and has his research articles published in International Journals and edited volumes.

**Anirban Banerjee** is an Assistant Professor of English at Swami Vivekananda University in Barrackpore. He has done his M.Phil. research from Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol. His area of research is myth and mythopoesis. He has published a paper on the heritage of Bengal as seen in a village full of terracotta temples.

**Debarshi Arathdar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore. He has completed his post-graduation from the University of Delhi and is currently pursuing his PhD from the same institution. Prior to joining Swami Vivekananda University, he was employed as a Guest Faculty in several colleges at the University of Delhi. His research interests include Cognitive Literary Studies, Narratology, Phenomenology, Contemporary Literary

Theories and Philosophies and the interfaces between A.I. and Literature. He has presented his research at both National and International Conferences. He has published several articles in internationally acclaimed Peer-reviewed Journals and contributed Book Chapters in forthcoming projects. His research aims to unveil the complex intricacies of the mind's creative and comprehensive relation to texts at large.

**Dr. Shantanu Siuli** is an Assistant Professor of English at the School of Humanities & Social Sciences; Swami Vivekananda University; Barrackpore. He has completed his Masters from University of Calcutta and his PhD from Seacom Skills University. With an experience of over 10 years in the academic sector, Dr. Siuli has published several papers in peer-reviewed international journals alongside having attended multiple international conferences. His research interests revolve around 16th & 17th Century Literature, Renaissance Studies, Ancient European Classical Literature, Divine- aesthete Theory and Devotional Literature on Interdisciplinary Approaches.

**Shyamal Mondal** is an Assistant Professor, Department of English at Mahishdal Raj College, affiliated to Vidyasagar University. His research interests focus on the postcolonial writings and literary theory. He teaches courses in undergraduate and postgraduate composition and literary studies. Currently, he is pursuing his Ph.D. from Swami Vivekananda University.

**Dr. Shubham Bhattacharjee** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda

University, Barrackpore. He has received his Ph.D. from Rabindra Bharati University. During his research period, he engaged classes at Rabindra Bharati University from July 2019, initially as a Junior Research Fellow and subsequently as a Senior Research Fellow. Previously, he had also pursued his B.A. (Hons.), M.A. and M.Phil. from the same institution. He also possesses a second M.A. Degree in English Language Teaching from Netaji Subhas Open University, alongside a Post Graduate Diploma in Translation and Transcultural Studies. He is currently pursuing MBA in Human Resource Management from Indira Gandhi National Open University. Dr. Bhattacharjee has cleared the UGC-NET and WB SET examination on multiple instances. Prior to joining Swami Vivekananda University as an Assistant Professor, he worked as an Assistant Professor at Sister Nivedita University. Dr. Bhattacharjee has presented research papers in numerous national and international seminars. He also has several published articles in UGC-Care List Journals to his credit. His areas of interest include Romantic Poetry, Victorian Poetry, Modern and Postmodern Literature, 20th Century Literary Theory and Criticism etc.

**Dr. Madhumita Roy** did her post-graduation and Ph.D. from the Department of English, Visva-Bharati. Since 2012, she has been researching on Rabindranath's engagement with science. She worked as a Research Assistant in Kalanukramik Rabindra Rachanabali Project under Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati from 2010-12. She also worked as a Project Assistant to the renowned Tagore Scholar Prof. Uma Dasgupta in her book,

published by Oxford University Press, that came out in 2018. She worked as a Project Fellow in the UGC Sponsored DRS SAP project in the Dept of English, Visva-Bharati and also acted as a guest faculty in the same department. She also taught in the Department of English, Adamas University for more than four years. Currently, she is working as an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University.

**Dr. Tirna Sadhu** is an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore. She holds a Master Degree in English Literature from the Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan and has completed her PhD from the same institution. She has an experience of 10 years in the academic sector and has published several articles in reputed journals.

**Shreyoshi Dhar** is currently serving as Assistant Professor, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University. She is pursuing her Ph.D. programme from Rabindra Bharati University. Previously, she had also completed her B.A. (Hons.), M.A. and M.Phil. from the same institution. She is also in possession of a second M.A. Degree in English Language Teaching from Netaji Subhas Open University, alongside a Post Graduate Diploma in Translation and Transcultural Studies from School of Languages and Culture, Rabindra Bharati University. She has cleared the UGC-NET examination on multiple instances. Prior to joining this institution as an Assistant Professor, she worked as a Guest Faculty in Bengal School of Technology and Management, had

engaged classes at Rabindra Bharati University since December, 2022 as a Junior Research Fellow along with being a Resource Person at Rani Rashmoni Green University, Tarakeshwar since April, 2022, where she was in charge of the day to day functioning of the Department of English. She is also currently pursuing her MBA course from Indira Gandhi National Open University. She has presented research papers in numerous national and international seminars and also has several published articles in reputed journals to her credit. The areas of her interest include Victorian Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism.

**Natasha Chatterjee** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore. Her area of interest is Indian English Literature. She has done her Masters in English from Dr. C.V. Raman University. She has done her B. Ed from Dr. C.V. Raman University. She has done A-Level from DOEACC Society. She is doing her Ph.D. on the selected novels of Sudha Murthy and Anita Desai. She has presented papers in various national and international conferences. She has also published many articles in various journals.

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