"Tagore Syndrome": A Case Study of the West's Intercultural (Mis)readings

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Abstract

The case of Rabindranath Tagore is taken as a representative example of the way the West approaches non-Western literatures and, secondly, of the way its critical decisions influence the critical stance in the latter ambiances. In India itself, Tagore was a well-established, but simultaneously a controversial author, when Yeats wrote his famous preface to Tagore's own translation of Gitanjali and saw to its promotion, which eventually made Tagore the first non-European to become a Nobel laureate for literature. The most prestigious literary award in the world turned Tagore into a star overnight and, equally dubiously, secured him in the literary establishment in his homeland. The initial enthusiasm, however, much too soon slackened and gave way even to not infrequent denials of Tagore's kind of poetry (at least outside India). The short survey of Tagore's rise and fall in the West is taken in the paper only as a starting point for examining the mechanisms backing such a trajectory. Attention is given to the repeating model of non-Western authors coming into favour only due to the mediation by a Western author; to the questionability of criteria involved in the process and its capriciousness; to the felt and still existing need of Western literature to renew itself, hence reaching out for an Other, but eventually recoiling onto itself; to some of the reasons for such a situation (like forced readings unsupported by genuine desire to learn and change); to harnessing and/or rejecting the Other; to the ways the West shapes non-Western literary (and not only literary) taste, etc. Essentially, the paper warns of the implicit dangers in the Western practice of either repudiating the Other or appropriating it as a matter of fashion/curiosity/cultural correctness.

Keywords: Tagore, Western, non-Western, literary criteria, intercultural, exotic.

1 THE RISE AND FALL OF A POET

"[T]hese prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years [...]" (Yeats, 1913). This is William Butler Yeats in 1912, writing his famous Introduction to the English version of Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali, published the following year. We have here peeped into the second sentence of the Introduction. Yeats is so excited that he cannot postpone sharing it with his readers. He actually goes so far as to claim that "Tagore's lyrics [...] display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture [...]". In 1935, however, Yeats begins a letter to his friend with the words "Damn Tagore" (as cited in Sen, 2005, p. 95). What happened in those twenty-odd years to turn a qualified admirer into a detached denouncer? Actually, since Yeats' reaction was characteristic of the West, rather than an isolated instance, we had better ask what happened with the Western readers of Tagore?

Tagore was a writer of prodigious production. By the time he came out of his teens he had accumulated an opus that in itself would have been quite sufficient not to make the long eighty years of his life seem only modestly productive. He wrote in Bengali, his mother tongue, and enjoyed an extraordinary reputation among his countrymen, though not undivided. Indeed, not few
were those objecting to the audacity of his style, all kinds of technical innovations and the unconventional treatment of only seemingly traditional motifs. In the West he was completely unknown.

All that dramatically changed at the poet's age of fifty-two. In 1912 Tagore presented a friend of his with a manuscript containing 103 poems in prose, translated to English by himself. The manuscript reached Yeats, who saw to its publication, prefaced with his introduction. The next year, the booklet, entitled *Gitanjali*, won him no less than the Nobel Prize, the first awarded to any non-Westerner (not infrequently one can read that it was the first Nobel Prize given to a non-European, which is not true, Theodore Roosevelt having got it in 1906 for peace; it is a fact, however, that Tagore was the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature). The award rocketed him into heights that had not been seen before and have not been seen since. Amit Chaudhuri (2001) does not exaggerate when he observes that Tagore became "the first global superstar or celebrity in literature" (p. xviii). In the years to come he would be applauded, garlanded and adored wherever he went, including the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy. He made a dozen foreign tours, that took him to almost every continent. Among his enthusiasts were the most eminent men of letters such as André Gide and Boris Pasternak, both of whom translated him. In India, voices of dissension generally subsided and Tagore was by and large hailed as the national bard, pride of the country. It seemed as if the prophecy from Yeats' Introduction was becoming flesh and blood:

> These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but, as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth.

But then something went awry. To all appearances, the West was becoming tired of Tagore and Tagoreism. Among the disenchanted, once again, we find outstanding writers. Ezra Pound, to name one. In 1937 Graham Greene drew the line: "As for Rabindranath Tagore, I cannot believe that anyone but Mr Yeats can still take his poems very seriously" (as cited in Sen, 2005, p. 89). We saw, however, that at that time Yeats had already damned Tagore. Nevertheless, his rejection was not total and he did include some of Tagore's early poems in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* he prepared in 1936. During the uneasy years between the two world wars, even after his glamour had started to wane in the West, Tagore preserved the aura of a spiritual authority, capable of transcending the current turmoils and battle cries. He died amidst these cries, in 1941. And the post-war West seemed to have completely forgotten even that Tagore. In the mid-1960s, Anna Akhmatova, admiring and translating the Bengali minstrel, looked like a lonely bird still defying a flock that had flown away a long, long time ago. And today, on the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth, *The Guardian*’s columnist Ian Jack (2011) is left with nothing but astonishment when, opening the Oxford and the Penguin dictionaries of quotations, he finds "[n]ot a single entry. They skipped from Tacitus to Hippolyte Taine as if there was nothing in Tagore's collected works (28 thick books, even with his 2,500 songs published separately) that ever had stuck in anyone's mind."

## 2 The Rise and Fall of a Poet's Public

Multiple are the reasons behind this shooting parabola. We shall here try to trace them, moving from the apparent to the less obvious. First of all, what has been stressed innumerable times has to be repeated once again: among those who have been able to read Tagore in the original it is a matter of common agreement that translations of his poetry, to any language, are only a very feeble echo of its original richness and sound. Bengali has been called the Italian of India and one of the most melodious Indo-European languages, occasionally even the most melodious. Moreover, contrary to Tagore's own and the bulk of subsequent translating practice, what we find as uneven poetic prose is, in Bengali, verse respecting rhythm, metre and rhyme that can be easily put to
music (much of his poems are in fact songs and rely more on their formal features than on the content). Translating his own lines Tagore must have felt the way he did when translating songs of Bengali bauls, wandering poet-singers, describing the job as presenting butterflies with their wings torn out. There are at least two reasons to Tagore's avoiding more formal translations of his own poems. Firstly, he never felt sufficiently confident of his English and had serious doubts even about his translations in prose. Secondly, he considered any attempt at saving the beauty of the original a wild goose chase in the first place, the discrepancy between the original and any target language being, to his mind, unsurmountable. He even openly discouraged his aspiring translators from learning Bengali and resorting to the originals themselves and asked them to rather start from his own English translations. Fortunately, the aspiring translators have not always paid heed.

Tagore's translations of Tagore bring us to the next point. Numerous places in his letters and other writings, as well as personal accounts of people he was acquainted with, bear witness to the pains he took in order to produce a Tagore he considered was palatable to the average English reader. In other words, he deliberately and systematically worked to falsify his original poetic self, expunging or at least moderating everything he deemed "too Indian", rephrasing or even adding what in fact had to serve as veiled footnotes, "explaining the unexplainable". Edward Thompson's *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, published in 1926, with the second, revised edition dating from 1948, offers quite a number of such missed translations, which more often than not succeed only in watering down the splendour and pregnancy of the original imagery. This tendency seems to have increased in the course of the years and we find Tagore constantly adapting and re-adapting the English versions of his plays even in his advanced age, but it started as early as his English debut: the *Gitanjali* he was awarded for is far from its Bengali version, but rather a patchwork made of selections from ten books of poetry (with at least one poem created as an amalgam of what was originally two poems). I suspect Thompson (1948) is right in taking it to be Tagore's finest translation. Whatever he subsequently translated for the Western readership will be heavily boiled down, rearranged and then served. Furthermore, even when it comes to his original works, Tagore was often enough rebuked for his repetitiveness; trying to conform to a safe pattern, his English translations result much more so. These facts undoubtedly figure as a major reason for the change in the Western perception, exemplified again by Yeats' weariness with the "sentimental rubbish" of Tagore's later books and with his bad English (which, however, was probably just a misplaced rationalization of some other issues). Though never getting tired of rewriting his works, Tagore was at a different level well-aware of the inadequate position he had found himself in. Here is a part of his letter to Thompson, dated 2 February 1921:

> You know I began to pay court to your language when I was fifty. It was pretty late for me ever to hope to win her heart. Occasional gifts of favour do not delude me with false hopes. Not being a degree-holder of any of our universities I know my limitations – and I fear to rush into the field reserved for angels to tread. In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. [...] When I began this career of falsifying my own coins I did it in play. Now I am becoming frightened of its enormity and am willing to make a confession of my misdeeds and withdraw into my original vocation as a mere Bengali poet. I hope it is not yet too late to make reparation. (Thompson, 1948, p. 264)

Just as in the case of Yeats, appealing to language problem does seem rather a way of beating about the bush. Instead of pandering to what he perceived as the Western literary taste, Tagore would have done greater service to both East and West had he offered authentic literature of his own self and his background. Acclaimed as he was, he missed the historical opportunity to educate the West and joined, instead, in complacently fondling the prejudices existing in the Western mind. Still, the most responsible is the West itself, for it missed its own chance to be educated. The self-Westernized Tagore was not that Western, after all. For what one can gather today from the enthusiastic atmosphere prevalent at the time, even if a newly made devotee had been acquainted with the fact that singing and playing to one's own poems was not a Tagorean invention, but Indian tradition, he or she would have gladly sacrificed this knowledge to the coveted image of the
saintly, white-bearded wise man from the East, the singular incarnation of all arts and insights. This figure landed in Europe at a moment most fragile and vulnerable for the continent, and the messianic effect produced obviously had least of all to do with literature. No adequate translation would have corrected the distortions created in such an exalted state of mind. When the exaltation was over, it was over with Tagore.

Tagore himself was not unaware of the distorted reactions. In 1920, at the peak of his glory, he wrote to C. F. Andrews concerning some immoderate advocates of his: "These people [...] are like drunkards who are afraid of their lucid intervals" (as cited in Sen, 2005, p. 96). In another letter he is even more specific: "People have taken to my work with such excessive enthusiasm that I cannot really accept it. My impression is that when a place from which nothing is expected somehow produces something, even an ordinary thing, people are amazed – that is the state of mind here" (Tagore, 1997, p. 90). This is a very acute observation. If Tagore ever was guilty of condescending to the West, the West did the lion's share of the job, its eternal thirst for the exotic producing a Tagore very different from the Tagore that actually existed. For its own part, Bengal, afflicted with the colonial complex, readily mimicked the accolades imparted by the always better knowing ruler. The previous objections to Tagore's way of writing were by and large smoothed out and the poet became "a fetish [...] the holy mascot of Bengali provincial vanity" (see Chaudhuri, N., 1987, Ch. 5). The problem with the exotic is that it has a shelf life. Once this expires, the exotic becomes just another platitude.

A good part of the blame for Tagore falling out of favour with the West certainly goes to those of its intellectual community who belittled the Indian dimension of his work and magnified the Western, in the desire to show that by praising Tagore the West actually praised itself. Very illustrative of such a stance is Luigi Luzzatti's (1920) Introduction to the Italian translation of Tagore's *The Crescent Moon*. He represents Tagore as a true Westernized Indian that did away with his native background and introduced a poetry hitherto unknown in India, highlighting the poet himself, singing about himself. Although Luzzatti draws on a great many of quotes from Tagore's poetry to prove his thesis, they do not exactly seem to corroborate his point. It is true that Indian classical literature avoids the first person singular, but this is certainly not true of popular, devotional and related poetry, where it is even common for the poet to openly mention his or her own name at the end of the poem. And this is precisely the kind poetry Tagore avowedly drew upon. His readings of English poetry and the influence it made on him were largely exaggerated, to the expense of his rootedness in native ground. Luzzatti should have gone back to the Introduction by Yeats, who saw the relationship between East and West in Tagore much more clearly. Instead, Luzzatti's own Introduction gets completely out of hand when, towards the end, it signals that "Europe awarded India, that had given heed to its teachings" (p. xvi). True, such criticism could also be heard among Tagore's countrymen back in India, as noticed by Thompson, but the latter, who was particularly familiar with the situation, advertently adds that "such things were said by, at any rate, a minority of his own countrymen" (p. 316), probably those who never came to terms with the poet's singular poetic vein, that expressed foremost his own idiosyncrasies, and only laterally any supposedly European ways. In other words, if Tagore at all sounded too little Indian, it was primarily because he was too much of an individual, re-articulating his own tradition in a fresh voice, and only very much secondarily because he was imitating European patterns.

3 "TAGORE'S SYNDROME": ECHO AND PIZZA EFFECTS

Admitting the alleged untranslatability of Bengali verse, admitting Tagore's own oversights in gaining his Western reputation and the relative flatness of much of his later writing, admitting the flaws in some of his Western interpreters, I would still argue that the main culprit for the poet's disappearance from the Western world is the latter's superficial curiosity and only slack readiness to open itself to the Other. Tagore's case has remained the gaudiest instance of one culture going from one extreme to the other in its appreciation of something belonging to a different culture. What began as excitation of the moment was doomed to soon exhaust itself once fresh fuel stopped coming and the interest not being genuine enough to enable any kind of deeper and sustained
study. The episode ignominiously ended with Tagore even being accused of getting credit for the work of Yeats, who had supposedly "rewritten" *Gitanjali* (Sen, 2005, p. 96). Tagore's Western illness became first and foremost part of the anamnesis of the West itself. It was not his fall so much as the fall of his public.

This is the extreme version of the behavioural pattern we are repeatedly coming across, with Tagore only as a – or rather the – case in point. It typically manifests itself in a somewhat different way, with the West appropriating the Other by adapting it to its own point of view and sensibilities. Although I argued this was not predominantly so in Tagore's case, it typically best acknowledges the Other when the latter is best representing qualities acquired from the West. I would call that the *echo effect*. In exemplifying it, let us stick to India. More than with Tagore, this indulging in its own reflection, its own echo, becomes visible in the four living Indian authors connected by the Booker Prize, what is generally considered the second best prize in literature at the global level. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* not only won its author the 1981 Booker, but also the 1993 Booker of Bookers, the only one awarded so far. In 1997 Arundhati Roy got hers for the debut novel *The God of Small Things*, with Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* following suit in 2006. Only two years later, it was awarded to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. It is certainly not my intention here to question any of these (though I do have an opinion about each). My present concern is rather to propose these cases as much likelier instances than Tagore's of the West paying homage to its own taste and/or caprice of the moment. *Midnight's Children*, and Rushdie in general, is hailed as a grand representative of magical realism, a mode of writing the West has come to love so much, being well-suited to its postmodern preference for undermining any stable concept of reality and creating pastiche. However, once the West outgrows its own fashion, it is my suspicion that Rushdie's dashing reputation will be among the first to suffer. *The God of Small Things* is very near to making linguistic exuberance its protagonist, which, coupled with a tragic, cross-religious love story in an exotic setting, sounds like a pretty safe formula for gaining the sympathies of a Western panel. I find Kiran Desai's example peculiarly interesting as it can be seen against that of her mother, Anita Desai, who, sustainedly, writes much more careful, penetrating, but, alas, traditional, prose, and has therefore only managed to be short-listed for the Booker, three times, which is in all probability the farthest she will ever get. Finally, *The White Tiger* contains at least two winning factors: the always welcome semi-childlike perspective, and raw, unimitated depiction of an exotic urban world. Once again, I am not arguing here that all or any of these writers won their awards *because of* the reasons I summarily sketched, but these *are* worth considering as elements of an extraliterary pattern that keeps repeating itself in the Western appreciation of non-Western literatures.

If somebody might get the impression that the above remarks have put us off the track, let me clarify that, just as any syndrome, what I here propose to call "Tagore's syndrome" cannot be represented by one case only. Rather, it should be understood as a common denominator designating all kinds of variations within the given phenomenon. Tagore's simply happens to be the most celebrated and, at least in some respects, the most exemplary case. Let me rephrase the symptoms observed hitherto, in somewhat idealized lines, for the sake of clarity. The West loves when the non-West writes like the West. In Luzzatti's words, it loves when the non-West gives heed to its teachings. (Of course, much of the present examination could be generalized to encompass spheres outside writing itself, but this would require separate elaboration and a different kind of text). If the non-West does not write that way, the West loves it to be at least exotic, juicy, wild, anything that can tickle its curiousity, stimulate its constant excitability, momentarily quench its thirst for the new, as long as it remains unmenacingly different and safely distant. Consequently, such writing and such writers are particularly vulnerable to impermanence, a shooting star fading as soon as its novelty becomes as boring as that of the stars of yesterday. Myself coming from a country bordering on or even belonging to the recently war-torn Balkans, I had ample opportunity to witness instances of foreign book markets showing interest in Bosnian, Croatian or Montenegrin authors *because* they were coming from that most exotic part of Europe (the fact that geographically they *are* part of Europe only enhancing the exoticness), writing about
first-hand experiences of something so exciting as ethnic war. (By the way, the same can be said about the cinematographies of the countries in question.)

The easiest and safest way to recognize Tagore's syndrome is exactly the presence of such non-literary factors intervening in supposedly literary evaluation. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, Western judgements modify non-Western perceptions, due to the colonial complex now turned postcolonial. We have already observed the phenomenon in the changed reactions of Tagore's countrymen to his writing after the Nobel Prize. The effect has been noticed for some decades now and was labelled by Agehananda Bharati (1981, though he first used it as early as 1970) as *pizza-effect*. Once looked down upon in its native country as a meal of the simple, pizza was made a hit by Italian immigrants in America and only then came back to Italy, now as a delicacy in its national cuisine and accepted world-wide. The same thing, adds Bharati, happened with yoga, become trendy in India after it had gained popularity in the West, or with Satyajit Ray, another Bengali, whose films became Indian pride only after Western critics had made him their darling (pp. 21-22).

### 4 FINAL REMARKS AND A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

Arduous as it is, and for various reasons, constant care has to be taken to read literature simply for what it is. Though there are a number of factors that can and should be taken into account as contributing to our better appreciation, no extraliterary concern may claim to become the criterion of literary excellence. In this respect, contact with a different literary tradition or practice represents particularly slippery ground, there being so many distractions to tempt one into evaluating what should be simply appreciated. The road from impression to judgment is crowded with sirens and colourful blossoms the traveller may enjoy, but not follow.

Taking India as a representative of the non-West, exemplified primarily by Rabindranath Tagore, the present text has done nothing toward evaluating its or his literary quality. It has rather intended to clear some of the shrubbery and thus contribute to preparing the ground for a genuine start in unprejudiced literary examination. Tagore's solitary case turned into a syndrome, and everything should be done to eradicate it. It creates imbalances that severely undermine the chances of establishing authentic literary scholarship, not to mention the harm it does to realizing the lofty ideal of world literature and its study. Every time I revisit Tagore's case I seem less and less capable of spotting truly literary motives behind his past reputation in the West. The non-West, in its turn, is too easily conditioned by the West, and then eagerly sticks to the newly-created standards even after the West has abandoned them. So we find that the Western disenchantment with Tagore stirred up Indian enthusiasm for him, making Indians, and especially Bengalis, highly uncritical. As noticed by William Radice (1994a), Tagore's authoritative translator and interpreter, they "have become fiercely protective towards him, and find it as difficult to face up to flaws and failings in him as parents do in a much-loved, vulnerable child" (p. 26). It would be instructive and highly advantageous to remember that what began as infatuation ended in fizzling out and creating the opposite kind of infatuation. Amidst such a literary scandal it becomes virtually impossible to discern Tagore's real literary worth (or to approach any nearer to that ideal goal).

Speaking for a while more through the emblematic case of Tagore, clearing up the ground has also to involve proper translation. This is actually the first specific step. In both his Preface (1994b) and Introduction (1994a) to Tagore's *Selected Short Stories* Radice points out that adequate translations of his literature are a job yet to be done, a job in which Radice himself certainly has the lead. These would replace all kinds of Orientalized translations produced so far, or, only seemingly at the opposite pole, Tagore's imprudent concessions to the expectations of the West and his underrating of the latter's ability to widen its own perception. The readers' horizon of expectation is something that needs constant enhancing, when it comes both to producing a text and to its translation. And then, if Bengali verse really is that untranslatable, why are bilingual versions of Tagore's poetry rather rare exceptions than common practice, in an age when Westerners have long become used to read one another's poetry in precisely that manner? Why not attach also a recording of them being sung, the more so since that has been intended as their proper setting from
the very start? Secondly, the West has been unjustly selective in its readings of Tagore, leaving his stories, essays and other genres of his many-sided creativity beyond its ken. On the other hand, his less literary and non-literary writings have unduly affected the way the West has been reading the purely literary ones. Radice takes up this subject in a separate article (2010), stressing this filter of Tagore's ideas and ideals and the need to focus on the literary works themselves and on what and how they are saying as such. Before these steps have been taken – and all of them – we are bound to keep half-consciously staggering along the vast expanse between the poles of condemnation and adoration.

At this point I hope it is needless to say that Tagore's has remained only the most dramatic instance of the perils inherent in both the (post)colonizer's patronizing of the (post)colonized and the latter's trying to please the former. One cannot possibly be too alert when it comes to maintaining intellectual hygiene, letting the Other speak for itself and trying to hear it with an ear untrammelled by one's own voice. In the present times, when colonialism has only become more sophisticated, one should be the more attentive about the insidiousness of seemingly innocuous trifles and catchwords. It is potentially offensive, and at a deeper level certainly detrimental, to speak of the greatest Indian poet Kalidasa as the Indian Shakespeare, particularly when the identification is one-way; we should cultivate ourselves into an amazed reaction at such rhetorics, just as we would react to hearing somebody call Shakespeare the English Kalidasa, a thing unimaginable only due to the ingrained partiality of the game. The game was very popular in Tagore's youth, too, when, even among Bengalis, the best way to honour a writer of their own was to insert him into a pervertedly domesticated copy of the English literary pantheon. So Tagore became the Bengali Shelley. The shortness of an informative article on Tagore or Kalidasa, such as those we found in encyclopedias, should normally make its author think twice before affording the spatial luxury of pointing out that the first was hailed by Yeats, while the second made Goethe sigh. Even when not deliberate, let alone malevolent, such description nevertheless subsists on the underlying assumption that it is actually this that recommends and guarantees the quality of those foreigners. If that chap Kalidasa was able to move grand Goethe, he must be worth one's time! The "collateral effect", however, is that in such practice non-Western authors are given the opportunity to fully exist only through their Western colleagues. They become the latter's avatars.

Rereading this text I find a thing or two that might look like exaggeration or unwarranted generalization. Of course, the matter is much more complicated and deserves further elaboration. Drawing the line, however, I do not feel the need to introduce any changes. I unreservedly believe in the far-reaching importance of the subject here sketched, as well as in the need to forgive the clarion its occasional shrillness, if it is trying to warn. I have attempted at making Tagore's case appear essential to a much wider phenomenon, since "[n]o reputation which was in reality so well founded ever suffered so greatly" (Thompson, 1948, 264). It is essential to understand why that should not happen again.

References


