Temples of Fire: The Incomparable Tagore

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On my 21st birthday my father sent me a copy of Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali, first published in the West by the Macmillan Press in 1913. It was an unmarked edition issued in 1966. When I left home at 18 in 1964, he had not mentioned Tagore in any systematic manner to me, though Gitanjali had been for us a kind of literary touchstone, a magical text largely unread but necessary nevertheless for self-legitimation. For the diasporic Indians it opened a window to an Indian literary culture no longer accessible to them in an unmediated form. It was thus as a totemic symbol that the text existed in my family. But the gift of it in 1966 completed a triad of texts I associate with my father. The first of the triad was the vulgate edition of Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanasa, the Avadhi Ramayana, which he gave me as a parting gift in 1964. Wrapped in a red cloth and venerated as such (I don't recall opening it during my entire four years in New Zealand), it was a text which supposedly inspired you by its mere physical presence. The other text was a local production entitled Pravas bhajanamjali which was clearly modelled on any number of the so-called chalit bhasha (a Bhojpuri phrase as well) poems of Tagore. Recalling these three texts, I now begin to see a continuity of design which explains why my father prized them so much. And it is perhaps that same sense of aesthetic continuity that brings me back to Tagore even though my knowledge of Bengali is limited to what it, as a language, shares with the various Hindi dialects (Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Braj Bhasa) that I understand and, of course, Sanskrit, the finest language of them all.

Any reading of Tagore by a non-Bengali speaker, however, must be incomplete. And I must stress my inadequacy in this respect. The more I've read Tagore in translation - from his mystical verse through his verse drama to his narratives - the more convinced I've become that Tagore does not translate very well into European languages. In this respect Tagore resists the kind of access that one has to, say, a Dostoevsky or even a Rimbaud in translation. He is in fact not unlike the medieval Indian poets, Chandidas, Krittabas, Jayadeva among them, who are notoriously untranslatable. This is largely because Tagore shares with these great devotional poets a mastery of the language that is so powerfully cadenced, so subtly nuanced that its emotional content, in translation, becomes almost bland and bereft of intensity. The highly complex modulation of rasa, for instance, that one detects behind the translated text, clearly becomes so over-simplified in translation as to trivialise the enormous complexity of Tagore's Bengali. It is salutary that I make this point since in the commentary that follows, the citation of Tagore in translation fails to do justice to his expressive use of Bengali which he used both out of choice and as a gesture of political defiance. For, it is often overlooked by bourgeois Indians generally that Tagore had no time for those Indians who uncritically adulated Western ways and adopted the bizarre chee-chee forms of English discourse. The social and political revolutionary in Tagore is precisely what the Western readings of Tagore have eschewed. And, in some ways, this was largely due to the enormous success of his first major Western publication in English, Gitanjali, a collection of poems which, unfortunately, was not identical with the original Bengali collection that appeared in 1910.

In his remarkable introduction to the first edition of Gitanjali, W B Yeats observed that 'Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity'. What Yeats notices here is the immense cultural continuity of Tagore. Like any great writer Tagore's sensibility is firmly grounded in the tradition and yet he is able to add to the tradition, modify it, embellish it in a way that after him the tradition itself will never be the same. Such is the extent of Tagore's greatness, but greatness also has its heavy burden of responsibility since in the hands of lesser writers, or critics, that greatness might be distorted and its achievements collapsed into some broader category of poetic endeavour. In some ways, W B Yeats has this failing since he clearly reads Tagore as a devotional
poet, a renouncer who may be related, for purposes of comparative literature, to the medieval European mystics, Thomas a Kempis and St John of the Cross. And, unfortunately Gitanjali has a tendency to invite such conflation or comparative syncretism.

The special strength of Tagore's verse is alluded to by Yeats when he writes, 'as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers'. In Bengal, this is the nature of the living Tagore. His poems are sung by lovers who find in them a renewal of their own passion and youth; his narratives are constantly being adapted to the demands of other semiotic systems, film, television, drama and so on. Thus when we read poem 15 of the Gitanjali the ideal reader thoroughly conversant with the source language would immediately recall the songs of the itinerant Indian minstrels present in the Bengali original.

I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of music I have a corner seat.

In thy world I have no work to do;
my useless life can only break out in tunes
without a purpose.
When the hour strikes for thy silent
worship at the dark temple of midnight,
command me, my master, to stand before
thee to sing.

When in the morning air the golden
harp is tuned, honour me, commanding
my presence.

This is a highly devotional song but the translation hides a number of things. The first is that it is meant to be sung. It is possibly set to a particular raga and the effusions of bhakti are related to a kind of divine outpouring in which it is not the devotee who speaks but God himself. The song is therefore like a self-consuming artefact; it has no independent existence of its own; it excels only insofar as it is the voice of the 'master', the Lord, who 'commands' the poet's presence. In the meaningless samsara that we inhabit our ahamkarik voice is a cacophony of discordant voices, pitiable sounds that try to usurp the place of song. But in that 'dark temple of midnight', in the state of shunyata, the poet's song is a cry from the heart since it is now inspired by a being who is the karmic force itself. 'In thy world I have no work to do', writes Tagore, but only so long as 'work' is now bonded to fruits of action, as karmaphalayoga. Deny this unity of work and consequence, Krishna had said. Look at me, I work without consequence, for if I don't, the order of the cosmos would collapse. That is the message of the Sanskrit song behind the Gitanjali as the Gita of Tagore insinuates the memory of the Gita of Krishna. So we sing, and so the minstrel in Tagore sings because the song has its own karma, is part of a pattern that transcends individual existence. The Bengali speaker breaks out into a song at this moment, participating, creatively, in the enormous force unleashed by Tagore's seemingly simple, and in translation almost pedestrian, poem. The Indian who doesn't speak Bengali breaks into a language that he knows: aj sajana mohe anga laga lo janama sakala ho jai.

In poem 18 the singer becomes the lover in a typical bhakti conflation of the erotic and the devotional:

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens.
Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait
outside at the door all alone?
In the busy moments of the noontide work
I am with the crowd,
but on this dark lonely day
it is only for thee that I hope.
If thou shouest me not thy face
if thou leavest me wholly aside,
I know not how
I am to pass these long, rainy hours.
I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of the sky,
and my heart wanders
wailing with the restless wind.

The structure that Tagore deploys here is clearly the lover-beloved pattern so dear to Indian devotionalism. Jayadeva's Gitagovinda is written in that form and Tagore consciously inserts his poem into these prior intertexts. The dominant rasa, however, here is one of shringara in its love-in-separation, vipralambha, manifestation. The devotee as the 'female' lover waits alone at the door. Beyond clouds gather in an echo of Kalidasa's Meghaduta. But these are 'darkening clouds', they are, probably, what in Hindi one would call sawan ke badal (the Bengali variant might not be too different) and they draw upon the brooding melancholy of the poetic persona as heavy clouds threaten to consume the subject. Jayadeva's Gitagovinda has similar opening lines:

meghair meduram ambaram vana-bhuvah shyamas tamala-drumair
naktam bhirur ayam tvam eva tad imam radhe griham prapaya

'Clouds thicken the sky;  
The forest is dark with tamala trees  
In the night Krishna is afraid  
Radha, you alone must take him home'.

Tagore clearly knows the tradition extremely well, but where Jayadeva had stylised his Radha and Krishna, the lady in waiting here contrasts her dark lonely present condition with the 'busy moments of the noontide work'. Unable, at this juncture, to be part of the crowd, the individual, the young soul, the bala jiu, yearns for a vision of her Lord-husband. The homologous transfer of the profane on to the sacred allows a parallel devotional text to be activated so that the poem easily (in a sahaja sort of a manner) oscillates between its two meaning-potentials. Yet the intensity of the poem arises from the simple fact that what Tagore emphasises is the state of love-in-separation itself as the purest condition of the lady in waiting. The poet Tagore knows that the richest of songs, the deepest of emotions, arise from the state of constant in medias res, the point at which the subject intervenes without any real inkling as to whether her desires will be fulfilled. In the final image of the poem there is a kind of dissolution of identities. The 'restless wind' becomes the metaphor that carries the wandering, wailing heart. Unlike the signature line (the bhanita) of the old medieval poets, Tagore doesn't close off his poem. Impressions merge into one another as the poetic image deepens precisely the sense of the dark night of the soul implicit in these lines. And there is no remorse, no accusation either. The poem strikes one as pure song, a poetic gem in which a woman waiting for her lover may be read simultaneously as a poem of unfulfilled desire, sacred or profane, as well as a sensitive virahagit in its own right. For Tagore the solution is often both and neither.

Even as we emphasise the devotional in Tagore - as W B Yeats had done in his introduction - we become aware of an urgent political voice, a social conscience, a defiant humanism in the margins of Tagore's verse. Such I think is the hidden agenda of the following prose-poem.

I thought that my voyage had come to its end at the last limit of my power, - that the path before me was closed, that provisions were exhausted and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.

An exhausted, otiose poetic voice retreats into the usual repose for the Hindu - self-renunciation or nivritti. 'To take shelter in a silent obscurity' is precisely what the classical Hindu world-order endorses. But this is
the kind of fatalism against which Tagore had warned in his letter to Pramantha Chaudhuri in January 1898. Writing about the 'two contradictory and warring forces in him' he continued, 'The first calls me always to rest and complete passivity, the second does not let me rest at all'. Bedevilled by these conflicting tendencies Tagore is conscious of the consequences of an unresolved desire for Western activity and Indian contemplation. He saw 'impotence and indifference' as a very real possibility unless, of course, the push towards retreat was modified by the reality principle which he associated with the West. And it is here that the Brahmoist sympathiser and defender of women's rights endorses action over inactivity. The otiose, the exhausted is the voice of the first part of the poetic persona. It is as if Tagore wishes to strategically place the seductive counter-argument first. It is an engaging voice since it offers 'shelter in a silent obscurity', a return to what Schopenhauer called the oceanic sublime, and Freud, more accurately one thinks, the death impulse of the unbridled libido. But that alternative, powerful as it is, must be rejected since repose is no answer. One must do one's action, remain a man-of-the-world (pravritti) because only then can one fulfil God's will which 'knows no end ' in humankind.

The second voice in the poem offers the positive argument in favour of the eternal possibilities of the human spirit: 'thy will knows no end in me'. The old is constantly being rejuvenated, new songs break out from amidst the state of hopelessness and despair until, finally, a 'new country is revealed'. The last of these, it seems, is a clear statement about the capacities of the collective human spirit as it must now fracture the colonial continuum of history. The polemic is clearly directed towards a nation which has lost its sense of purpose, its 'old tracks', a nation seething under the combined weight of imperialism and a social order that is in the habit of stunting innovation and change. The Bengal renaissance (which fed directly into the Indian Nationalist Movement) in the hands of Tagore proposes to transform inertia into action, repose into a positive, constructive force. Tagore's revolutionary zeal and social responsibilities, however, do not involve a catchcry against the West or against Hindu spirituality; rather he situates action centrally into the life of the spirit through an identification of action, karma, with the will of God. Tagore's lyrical form thus hides a distinctive authorial ideology and this is what is so often missed by readers of Tagore in translation.

Even W B Yeats' panegyric is marked precisely by the absence of the political in Tagore. This is surprising since Yeats' own verse resonates with a very real awareness of the revolutionary capacities of the Irish under British imperialism. To transform Tagore into a unversalist rut, to suggest that Tagore could be ignorant of the context in which he was writing, is to appropriate Tagore towards one's own secure, non-radical ends. Through the limitations of the received form of poetic devotionalism Tagore writes a subtext that connects directly with the special historical moment of his own origins. Tagore was not a mere devotional poet, a singer of tales, divorced from the real conditions of life around him. What his verse gestures towards so powerfully are ways in which Hindu metaphysics might be re-read and deconstructed, how assumed social behaviour might be transformed into action and change. In the process what Tagore finally endorses is not the absolute categories of religion and culture but their negotiation and transformation. To speak in largely theoretical terms, Tagore used the genres of lyric, 'hymnody' and song to construct complex texts which could not be reduced to one single unitary meaning. The parallel texts that we as readers are asked to construct finally demonstrate that Tagore could not in the end accept the essentialism of consciousness. Consciousness has to be socially constructed. We become what we are, we are not karmically fixed in time. But this social construction of consciousness had to be done within a moral order for which the figure of an eternal absolute was necessary. One way in which we can understand Tagore's radicalism in this regard is through his use of women in literature. It is to Tagore's incipient 'feminism' that I must now turn.

Re-reading Tagore's short stories, I was surprised to find that so many of his main characters are women. Probing further I began to see that many of the social evils of Indian society are directly related to the mistreatment of women. Traditional Hindu society in particular had locked Indian women into an exchange mechanism where they functioned as commodities in a crude pre-capitalist framework. Unfortunately even as a commodity women had no intrinsic value unless of course they brought a dowry, produced sons and died before their husbands. It was a terrible burden to live under, and worse still if you were a child-bride. Tagore takes up the evils of dowry in Denapaona ( 'The Debt'), extreme forms of mis-
marriage in Subha, condemnation of child-marriage in Shubhadrishhti ('A Lucky Book'), and the perils of widowhood in Jibita o mrita ('The Living and the Dead'). In the much more radical proto-feminist text, Stir patra ('A Wife's Letter'), the heroine (Mrina) finally leaves home to underline the enormous injustice done to her sister Binda whose miserable marriage to a madman had ended in suicide. This was the only way in which she could symbolically atone for an entire history of sexual abuse. In a markedly Hegelian drama, Rathayatra/Kaler yatra ('The Way of the Car/Time'), Tagore, especially in the later expanded version, spoke of the shudra caste as the only caste capable of real historical development because he saw them as the real working class of India. The Hegelian agenda becomes evident in his belief in the next stage of history when poets would bring about a golden age. ('Poets are the legislators of the world', Keats had written.) But the identification of the poet with the shudra cause is certainly quite radical and brings us immediately to the current crisis over the untouchables of India. It is difficult to see how Tagore would not have supported the absolute need for positive discrimination towards the harijans in this instance. When a nation is tainted by such a history, then man must act to correct millennia of subjugation. In Tagore, the harijan, as the shudra before them, would have found a pillar of strength and support.

I would like to return to Tagore's 'feminism' with reference to two remarkably poetic works. The first is a collection of poems entitled Palataka, 'The Fugitive' (1918/1936); the second is an early dramatic work entitled Chitrangada, or Chitra in the English translation. The original of Chitra was published in 1891; the English translation, by the author, probably in 1915. What has struck me about the first poem in 'The Fugitive, and Other Poems' collection is the use of an essentially female discourse to describe this 'Eternal Fugitive' (Poem 1). The subject remains elusive as Tagore plays on the Sanskrit root (palaya) of the title of the poem itself. 'Is your heart lost...?' the poet asks or:

Is the aching urgency of your haste the sole reason why your tangled tresses break into stormy riot and pearls of fire roll along your path as from a broken necklace?

One could conceivably argue that the person being addressed as a woman is some kind of a cosmic force or even a goddess, perhaps time itself - the poem leaves these possibilities in mid-air - but since the subject is inscribed in an essentially feminine descriptive system or form of representation I can't help but feel that what Tagore is foregrounding is in fact the primacy of woman. It is the woman's 'fleeting steps' which transform the 'dust of this world' into 'sweetness'. Like Krishna's own claims about his eternal karma, the figure in this poem is moved by the same ontological imperative:

Should you in sudden weariness stop for a moment, the world would rumble into a heap, an encumbrance, barring its own progress and even the least speck of dust would pierce the sky throughout its infinity with an unbearable pressure.

The female shakti embodied in the feminine form is offered as the triumph of the human spirit and Tagore returns to these metaphors over and over again. He does not then go on to distinguish between socially and biologically constructed definitions of gender since the language of radical feminism was not available to him. What he did possess in good measure was a rich and diverse pan-Sanskritic tradition of the representation of women in Hindu culture. We find this abundantly in his paeon on Urvashi, one of the paradisical Apsaras of desire (Poem 11).

Neither mother nor daughter are you, nor bride Urvashi.
Woman you are, to ravish the soul of Paradise.

Though Urvashi's beauty is constructed in the conventional language of desire ('the blood dances in men's hearts' upon seeing her) she is nevertheless presented in an entirely non-voyeuristic manner as a celebration of the essential beauty of the female form. And desire here is crucial to self-expression for the male at any rate. In the next poem (Poem 12) Tagore contrasts a female 'rivulet swift and sinuous', dancing and laughing as she sings and trips along, and the awkwardness of the male as he gazes at her 'speechless and stock-still'. The contrast is made more explicit in the next two verses which must be quoted in full:

I, like a big, foolish storm, of a sudden come rushing on and try to rend my being and scatter
it parcelled in a whirl of passion.

You, like the lightning's flash slender and keen, pierce the heart of the turbulent darkness, to disappear in a vivid streak of laughter.

Tagore deploys this contrastive pattern over and over again, whether it is through the figure of the woman who 'plies her needle in silence' or through the 'girl who gathered twigs' for the ascetic in deep meditation. We know that when the ascetic had finally completed his austerities, he refused paradise for the girl. 'I want the girl who gathers twigs', he told the heavenly gods. In all these instances, however, Tagore is not simply repeating, in a parrot-like fashion, a purely formal descriptive system for women. What we find instead is a wholly new sensibility that seeks to bring women into the very centre of discourse. Even in his poems that centrality is firmly and consistently endorsed. In short there were few Indian writers who had given the same 'space' to women. In this respect Tagore shares with Kalidasa (who might have 'reasons to be envious', Tagore wrote in another poem) this remarkable capacity to make women the centre of their great creative moments.

In his verse drama Chitrangada (Chitra) a similar attitude to women is to be found. Though the abbreviated English translation I use here (albeit in Tagore's own hand) lacks the poetic strengths of the Bengali original composed in free verse, it is nevertheless a powerful enough play even as a text-in-translation. In Chitra Tagore uses a minor episode from the Mahabharata (I,207,1) about Arjuna's infatuation with the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana as the backdrop for his own drama. As any reader of the great epic would know, the king agrees to part with his daughter on condition that when a son is born he shall continue his, the king's, dynasty. Behind the king's request lies the tale of an entire dynasty in which, by the grace of Shiva himself, a single child was born to each of the dynastic kings. All of Chitravahana's ancestors had sons but to him a daughter was born. This girl, Chitra, was trained to behave like a son and had grown to accept her position as the king's successor. Arjuna accepts the king's demands and, according to the Mahabharata, lived with her in the city for three months. (In Tagore's note to the English translation 'three years' is the period given).

Tagore re-writes this minor episode from the epic to make two distinct ideological statements. The first is that male primogeniture is not God-given - after all Shiva had only promised the dynasty a child, not a male child. Furthermore, as Chitra tells Madana (Eros) even the divine word cannot finally move the creative force within a mother's womb: 'the divine word proved powerless to change the spark of life in my mother's womb'. There is nothing really God-given about male power and patriarchy she seems to be saying to our modern ears. A second related statement, I think, is much more extensively treated in the text. This deals with the dual processes of desire and duty as Chitra is finally given the opportunity to make a more radical affirmation of womanhood after her inner sexual desire, through the intercession of the gods Madana and Vasanti, has been fulfilled. 'Take from my young body this primal injustice, an unattractive plainness', she had begged the gods so that she could become attractive in the eyes of Arjuna. She requested one day's beauty, but was granted for 'one whole year the charm of spring blossoms'. Yet in her intense sexual relationship with Arjuna she recognises the inner self she had left behind. Arjuna acts as a catalyst that enables Chitra to re-define womanhood in much more complete and positive terms. In a peculiar confirmation of precisely this principle, Arjuna also yearns for the mysterious 'warden' of the country whom the transformed Chitra had marginalised. Unaware of Chitra's own identity, Arjuna wants to know this woman-guardian of the kingdom who 'in valour is a man, and a woman in tenderness'. Confronted by Arjuna's desire for the 'bare simplicity of truth', Chitra finally acknowledges her own self, without powder and pomatum, whalebone and patches, as she confesses her own essential womanhood. The decisive passage occurs at the end of the play and must be quoted somewhat fully:

I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self ..... To-day I can offer you Chitra, the daughter of a king.
This is Chitra's defiant cry of womanhood, a request that she be read not as a goddess, nor an object of self-pity, but simply as woman, as the daughter of a king. Chitra's momentary fling with glamour only takes her back to her duty and her role as someone who, born a woman, had to live the life of a man. Women, says Tagore, are not by definition excluded from heroic roles. After all even in the great epic, it is women who finally carry the secrets of genealogy. It is Kunti and not Pandu who finally knows the secret of the birth of the five brothers - at one level they are all illegitimate. Faced with such a statement about herself, Tagore's Arjuna opts for the ambiguous statement: 'Beloved, my life is full!' We never know what he really means by this. Is Arjuna's life now full as a result of the knowledge that Chitra gives him or is it that Arjuna, faced with the real identity of Chitra and the moral force of her argument, simply retreats into the social decorum of an excuse: 'Sorry lady but I lead a life that is so busy that I can't possibly take you as a wife'? Tagore leaves the ending open because the ambiguity is part of the structure of the play as Tagore wants us to engage with the issues raised in the text and not accept what might be a simple solution. Tagore's narratives generally are marked by this open-endedness. He does not tell the reader what he/she should think. And I think it is precisely because of this that we can read Tagore in such a refreshing manner. Like all great writers his was not a closed world. Nowhere is this more evident than in his treatment of woman. Hence my rather unusual reading of Tagore as a kind of a 'feminist' author as well.

As we celebrate Tagore's 130th anniversary - or 50th of his death - it is important that we return to Tagore's actual texts and re-read them in a manner in which, perhaps, his own contemporaries didn't read them. Every author is read historically and authors who do survive the test of time are those who can still speak to us across the historical divide with a sense of urgency and relevance. Tagore is pre-eminentely relevant to us, if only we would cease to fetishize him - as the diasporic Indians did - and read him with an open mind. Clearly there will always be things in a great writer which no longer appeal to us - Shakeapearian puns for instance are a case in point - and we should not be unduly worried by them. But if we can blast open the continuum of history, as Walter Benjamin writing in the shadow of the holocaust said we should, we might be able to render Tagore that much more meaningful to us. As a partial reader of Tagore (the greatness of his poetry, at one level, is not accessible to me), I can only explore those issues in the Tagore corpus which strike me as being absolutely crucial to us here and now. It is for this reason that I have emphasised Tagore's social and moral vision and his remarkable readings of women in Indian society. In his portrayal of women especially I find an understanding that transcends sexual difference. To have read women with that level of sensitivity at a time when even western women were not liberated is surely just one indication of his greatness. In a similar vein he condemned Fascism and communalism, issues which in their fundamentalist avatars rear their ugly heads even now. And, of course, there was no redemption for those who had no self-pride or self-respect. In one of the poems to which I do have unmediated access, he used Sanskrit to underline precisely this point: 'bhipskhayam naiva naiva ca' ('O never, never, to beg') he pleaded because to beg was to demean oneself and one's nation.

After receiving his Nobel Laureateship Tagore asked the waiting crowd at Shantiniketan to judge him by his works and not by his accolades because an artist must always be judged by his works alone. Today we pass a judgement on Tagore and find that he continues to enrich us. If Kalidasa and the great epics stand behind him, then the great cinema of Satyajit Ray stands before him. In this respect Tagore is the great divide, the watershed by which Indian literary and cultural history will be measured. Shortly before his death on August 7 1941 he wrote a poem in which he recalled his poetic vocation in uncompromising terms. 'I am a poet of the world', he said and whenever the age demands that the poet's voice be heard, he is there to rise to the occasion. It was not a hollow boast; it was the necessary claim from one who had expressed in art the great genius of the Indian Mind.

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