

*Sobia Tahir*

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE:  
PHILOSOPHY, PAINTING  
& POETRY PERSONIFIED**

Ah, Poet, the evening draws near; your hair is turning grey.  
Do you in your lonely musing hear the message of the  
hereafter?

It is evening", the poet said, "and I am listening because  
someone may call from the village, late though it be.

I watch if young straying hearts meet together and two  
pairs of eager eyes beg for music to break their silence  
and speak for them.

Who is there to weave their passionate songs, if I sit on the  
shore of life and contemplate death and the beyond?

The early evening star disappears.

The glow of funeral pyre slowly dies by the silent river.  
Jackals cry in chorus from the courtyard of deserted house  
in the light of the worn-out moon.

If some wanderer, leaving home, come here to watch the  
night and with bowed head listen to the murmur of the  
darkness, who is there to whisper the secrets of life into his  
ears if

I, shutting my doors, should try to free myself from mortal bonds?

It is a trifle that my hair is turning grey.

I am ever as young or as old as the youngest and oldest of this village.

Some have smiles, sweet and simple and some a sly twinkle in their eyes.

Some have tears that well up in the daylight, and others tears that are hidden in the gloom.

They all have need for me, and I have no time to brood over the afterlife.

I am of an age with each, what matters if my hair turns grey.<sup>1</sup>

Multi-faceted genius Rabindranath Tagore is no doubt justified in his above quoted claim; verily his hair is never grey. His creations are still youthful and pulsating with energetic spirit of life while such mood and temperament is very rare in the sub-continent. Rabindranath was born on 6th May 1861 in Calcutta. He was the 14th offspring of his well-known father Devinderanath Tagore who is called Maharishi out of reverence. Maharishi means the great sage. Rabindranath inherited his genius from his father Devinderanath who himself was an intellectual of high calibre. Rabindranath belonged to a very noble and distinguished family of Bengal who had enriched art and culture for centuries. They were given the title of Thakurs (the honoured) by the Muslim rulers of Bengal.

The British converted this Thakur into Tagore. Rabindranath's father Devianaranath was one of the founders of modern Indian Society. He was an important member of the movement 'Brahmu Samaj' whose objective was religious and social reformation. Devindranath worked with Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the very spirit of the movement. His other eminent colleagues were Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Keshab Chandar Sen and Pandit Tattav Bhushan. Rabindranath absorbed almost all qualities of his worthy father and remained his disciple thought his life. Tagore paid tribute to his father in the following words:

I am proud to say that my father was one of the great leaders of that movement (Brahmu Samaj), a movement for whose sake he suffered ostracism and braved social indignities. I was born in this atmosphere of the advent of the new ideals, which at the same time were old, older than all the things of which that age was proud.<sup>2</sup>

In this socio-political milieu when the conflict of old and new values was on its peak, Rabindranath grew up to his adolescence. In 1869 he was sent to Oriental Seminary Calcutta. He had started writing poems then. Though very intelligent, he took no serious interest in institutional education. During 1871 and '72 he attended Bengal Academy and Anglo-Indian school. He travelled to England in 1878 for the sake of higher education and learnt theoretical Western Music in University College, London. Anyhow he returned India in 1880 without having any degree. On December 9, 1883 he married Marnalini Devi. In 1900 he changed various places throughout Bengal but in 1901 he ultimately settled permanently in Shantiniketan. *History of Shantiniketan* is also very interesting. *Shantiniketan* literally means 'Tranquility Abode' which was founded by Maharish in 1863 near Calcutta, when he recovered from very painful and acute anxiety which

he suffered through decades. *Shantiniketan* consisted of vast academic asylum (*Asharam*) and a stately villa where Devinderanath stayed for the rest of his life till 1905. Devinderanath Tagore established there faculties of Philosophy and Music. After his death Rabindranath maintained *Shantiniketan* with extraordinary care, love and devotion. This asylum is now called 'Vishwa Bharti International University'. Tagore's sentiments for *Shantiniketan* can be assessed from his following verses that he wrote about it;

She is our own, the darling of our hearts, *Shantiniketan*.  
 Our dreams are rocked in her arms.  
 Her face is fresh wonder of love every time we see her  
 for she is our own, the dearling of our hearts.  
 In the Shadows of her trees we meet,  
 in the freedom of her open sky,  
 Her mornings come and her evenings  
 bringing down heaven's kisses.  
 Making us feel anew that she is our own,  
 The darling of our hearts.  
 The stillness of her shades is stirred by the woodland  
 shisper;  
 her amlaki groves are aquiver with the rapture of leaves.  
 She dwells in us and around us, however for we may  
 wander.  
 She weaves our hearts in a song, making us one in music,  
 turning our string of love with her own fingers;  
 and we ever remember that she is our own,  
 The darling of our hearts<sup>3</sup>

From *Shantiniketan* he started the publication of monthly literary magazine 'Bangladesh' in 1901. Rabindranath possessed a very strong and comprehensive philosophico-artistic mental faculty. He was simultaneously a poet, a novelist, a dramatist, a short story writer, a painter, a calligraphist, a musician and a philosopher. As far as his philosophy is concerned, he was not a philosopher in the technical sense nor can he be classified as a logician, epistemologist or even a hard rationalist. He was rather a social philosopher with

romantic approach. He himself has written about his philosophical development in his book 'that the major content of his philosophy was derived through the beauties of nature. He may be categorized as a 'natural theologian' in a very loose sense of the world. The rising sun, rainbows, lush green vegetation of Bengal, misty evenings, brooding trees, pale moon, morning dews, singing brooks and birds inspired his whole creative work. This romantic approach of Tagore can be easily traced in most of his poems. This is an exemplary piece:

O South Wind, The Wanderer, come and rock me.  
Rouse me into the rapture of new leaves. I am the  
wayside bamboo tree, waiting for your breath to  
tingle life into my branches.

O South Wind, The Wanderer, my dwelling is in the  
end of the lane. I know your wayfaring, and the  
language of your foot steps. Your least touch thrills  
me out of slumber,

Your whisper gleams my secrets.<sup>4</sup>

Tagore had never been an atheist in any part of his life. He believed in the impersonal philosophical God of Upanisads, the Brahma. He affirmed a Deity on romantic grounds. He has expressed his views about God in a letter to Bertrand Russell. In this letter dated 13th October 1912, he quotes two lines from Upanishad.

Yato vacho nivartante aprapya manasa saha  
Amandam Brahmno Vidvan na vibheti  
kutushchana' 'From Him words, as well as mind,  
come back baffled yet he who knows the joys of  
Brahman (the Infinite) is free from all fear.<sup>5</sup>

He further writes;

Through knowledge you cannot apprehend him;  
yet when you live the life of the Infinite and are not  
bound within the limits of the finite self you realize

that great joy which is above all the pleasures and pains of our selfish life and so you are free from all fear. This joy itself is the positive perception of Brahman. It is not a Creed which authority imposes on us but an absolute realization of the Infinite which we can only attain by breaking through the bonds of the narrow self and setting our will and love free.<sup>6</sup>

Rabindranath was an ardent admirer of ancient Indian wisdom and was thoroughly impressed by Philosophies of Upanishads and Bhagvad Gita. It is a general impression about Indian Philosophical thought that it is basically an intellectual leisure of hermit or recluse. Its stance is pessimistic and anti-life and it has nothing to do with the collective salvation mankind. Tagore was aware of this objection. His own life was the practical contradiction of this misconception since he led an extraordinary active and busy life. Anyhow he wrote extensively about this aspect of Indian philosophy and proved the priority of action to speculation and idle thinking. He reinterpreted many aphorisms of Bhagvad Gita in which Sri Krishna has declared himself above and beyond everyday activities. According to Tagore this assertion does not mean that a man should lead lazy and worthless life, rather he should participate in all the activities without the longing of reward. In the collection of his philosophical essay, 'Sadhna', he says, about work,

Deeds are better, however cruel they may be, than the hell of thinking and doubting. So long as the purpose remains in the mind it looms large and fearful. In action it becomes pleasant and easy. Just as the vapor is dark and diffused but when it dissolves into water-drops it becomes refreshing and sparkling (in shape of dews).<sup>7</sup>

Tagore never advocated that determinism which is part and parcel of Indian tradition, he was a great upholder of freedom of will. According to him, man is free both in

thought and action. Tagore was thoroughly pro-working class which was very uncommon in elites of India that time. In his most famous poetic work 'Geetanjali' he denounces the trivial activities of leisure class in the following words,

O, give up your idol worship and leisured meditations. Whom you are looking for in this silent dark corner of the shrine? your God is not here, He is there where the peasant is ploughing his land, where a labourer is breaking stones to make road. God lives with the masses in sun and rain. Sainly seclusion is an eternal grave, secret of LIFE lies in perpetual struggle and work.<sup>8</sup>

Tagore was the practical portrait of his own views. He was an exceptionally devoted, dedicated, hardworking and industrious person. No one has ever seen him asleep during day light. To have a nap in the noon after lunch is an established Indian tradition but Tagore used to work in hot summer noons of Bengal when the temperature in Shantiniketan was unbearable.

Tagore's fame soon crossed the boundaries of his native land and India itself. His works were translated in almost all the major and civilized languages of the world. Renowned English poet W.B. Yeats translated his poetical collection 'Geetanjali' into English which literally means 'spring of songs'. This work of Tagore's won Noble Prize for literature in 1913.

Tagore was basically an humanitarian at heart and conceived mankind as a unity and a whole; he never believed in the schisms of caste, creed, colour, religion, sect and gender. Tagore's artistic approach was thoroughly anthropocentric, man was the pivot of his poetry, philosophy and even painting. He searched his God too in the depths of human soul. He writes at a place.

The Gods who belong to the multitude and the Gods of the books are not my gods. They have never answered my questions and never consoled me. But, at last, I have found the Divine breathing in the living world of men.<sup>9</sup>

His same humanitarian views prevail in the context of religion and he says:

Religion is not essentially cosmic or even abstract, it is true only if it touches the Brahma in man; otherwise it has no justification to exist.<sup>10</sup>

Tagore's poetic style was sweet, mellow and soft and its strength and universal appeal lies in its soothing tranquil effect. He believed throughout his life in non-violence and his poetry is the reflection of this belief. This attitude of Tagore can be traced in his following verse.

God's great power is in the gentle breeze, not in the storm.<sup>11</sup>

Tagore's poetry was no doubt a gentle breeze while the subsequent 'storm' was Qazi Nazrual Islam whose aggressive 'Vidrohi' was an exact opposite of 'Geetanjali.'

Music was the strongest passion and quest for Tagore. He expressed the deepest yearning of his soul through musical notes. He was founder of a new style in music which is called after his name Rabindra Sangeet. Music was in his very flesh and blood since he belonged to the eternal land of music. Being a Bengali, Tagore was able to comprehend the minutest notes of music in river waves, in tree leaves, bangles and in brass vessels too. He says about his musical compositions:



All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea. 12

In another place he writes:

When the freshness of dawn droops in the sun,  
when in the noon the air hangs low with heaviness  
and the forest is silent, my songs return home,  
their languid wings dusted with gold.13

In the ecstasy and joy of creation he announces:

The light of thy music illuminates the world. The  
life-breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The  
holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony  
obstacles and rushes on. 14

I was walking by the road, I do not know why,  
when, the noonday was past and bamboo branches  
ruled in the wind.

The phoe shadows with their outstretched arms  
clung to the feet of hurrying light.

The koels were weary of their song.

I was walking by the road, I do not know why.

The hut by the side of the water is shaded by an  
over hanging tree.

Some one was busy with her work and her Bangles  
made music in the corner.

I stood before this hut, I know not why.15

Though poetry, painting, music and philosophy were his major occupations, Tagore participated with equal zeal in socio-political activities of his age. He was always aware of his responsibilities on this front. Tagore considered a healthy and stable political system necessary for the economic uplift of poverty - stricken

backward masses of India. Tagore longed for the social justice and equality for the downtrodden people of a rigidly caste-bound society. His outlook was liberal and progressive in political matters. He declared democracy as the best political system for his nation after freedom. In one of his essays he writes about democracy.

In the political life of modern age the idea of democracy has given mankind faith in the individual. It gives each man trust in his own possibilities and pride in his humanity. <sup>16</sup>

The plight and misery of Indian women always agitated Tagore. Women had always remained victim of religious, tribal and other local prejudices of the male dominated Indian society. Many sick and stale institutions made them second rather than third rate citizens. One of them was Purdah (veil), the irrational isolation and segregation of women from mainstream of life. They were forced to cover their faces too. Tagore condemned this in the following words.

We are really the slaves of convention. We are first of all shocked to see women outside their homes because we are not accustomed to it and then we try to justify our feelings by making it out to be unseemly or improper. Tradition is really at the bottom and the arguments are only as excuse. So long as our women remain hidden behind the Purdah our country will be a half truth to us. <sup>17</sup>

Rabindranath was a strong upholder of the equal rights of women, he says;

The further we banish women from us, and smaller the place we give them in our lives, the weaker does our manhood become. <sup>18</sup>

Tagore found the feminine contribution necessary for the intellectual and cultural growth of life as is apparent from his following opinion:

Though biologically woman's function is different from that of man, but Psychologically she is identical with him, if human world in its mentality becomes exclusively male, then before long it will be reduced to utter inanity. For life finds its truth and beauty, not in any exaggeration of sameness but in harmony and diversity. <sup>19</sup>

All this shows that Tagore's outlook was through and through progressive and liberal. One of its proofs is when 'Progressive writer's Association' came into being in 1936, Tagore sent a message of warm greetings to Syed Sajjad Zaheer, one of its apostles. Tagore did believe in his ancestral religion, but his approach was wholly humanitarian and secular. He advocated the separation of state and religion and strictly denounced the abuse of religion for political motivations.

Painting was another zest of his life, which he started at the age of 69. It was a new opening of his boundless creative genius. In his writings we find that he wished earnestly to become a competent painter from his youth. In a letter to his niece Indira on 13th July, 1893, he wrote;

To tell you the honest truth. I do not quite know what my real vocation is or should be. If I were to confess without fear or shame, I may as well tell you that very often I cast looks of longing after the fashion of a disappointed lover towards the muse of art. But alas she is difficult to win, for, I am past that age when I could woo her ..... 20

But seven years later we find him on the threshold of art and he is not so much 'age conscious' too. In 1900 he wrote to his scientist friend J.C.Bose;

It will be some surprise to you to hear that I have been painting in a sketch book. Needless to say, my pictures are not meant for any salon of Pais, nor do I have the least apprehension that the National Gallery of some country will suddenly take into their head to acquire these paintings. 21

Anyhow his wish to become a full-fledged painter was materialized in a rather later age. He emerged as a painter at 69, which was the fulfillment of his long cherished ambition. His imaginative faculty being rich in terms of words and a sense of rhythm, it was only very natural that he would crave to give the images a visual life in portraying them in paints. But when he appeared on the painting canvas, he appeared with a bang as a rebel denying the very strong current of Bengal school of painting, visualizing the future of Indian painting in a different and significant way. His mind revolted against the then existing conditions of art and urged the artists to take heart and make daring experiments. He could not compromise with the Bengal school painters of the day who were becoming more and more stagnant. Tagore was no doubt a reconstructor and reviver in this nonetheless dead field. Even Nandalal Bose, a great exponent of the Bengal school had to admit.

We need to be re-educated into the fundamental values of art and none can do it better than he who is creating before our own eyes forms whose vigor baffles our classifications and whose "vigor compels the admiration of the artist. If "Rabindranath seems rough and destructive, it is because he is breaking the ground anew for us that our future flowers may be assured of their sap. 22

Tagore's remarkable creations were born out of a sense of rhythm which was inherent in him. He converted his verbal expressions into a rainbow of

colours Tagore himself called this process a 'liberation'. His paintings were the product of his vital imaginative faculty. Through the passage of time, painting became his Chief occupation. Tagore himself in a letter dated 7th November, 1928 to Rani Mahalanobis writes;

The most important item in the bulletin of my daily news, is my painting. I am hopelessly entangled in the spell that the lines gave cast all around me. I have almost managed to forget that there used to be a time when I wrote poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Out of this hard work he made a good collection of painting just in two years between 1928 and 1930. He held his exhibitions in England, Germany, Denmark, Russia and America which were a tremendous success and gave him the stamp of International recognition. Tagore's was an untutored hand in painting. However, he learnt the techniques to paint as such. Yet he painted so assiduously, vigorously and brilliantly. His paintings express a restless mind which cries out in agony or anguish. Their general impression is of melancholy. However Tagore shines brightly in the galaxy of his contemporary painters viz Masson, Paul Klee and Kandinsky etc.

Tagore was a globe-trotter, through his numerous world tours he lectured extensively on various subjects in renowned Universities. He was knighted in 1915 but he renounced this title in 1919 after the tragedy of Jalianwalabagh (Amritsar). In 1925 he presided over the First Philosophical Congress in Italy. On Feb. 8, 1935 Banaras Hindu University bestowed him with the honorary degree of D. Lit. Oxford University also honoured him with the same degree.

In 1941 his 80th birthday was celebrated throughout India with great devotion and love but until then Tagore had fallen ill and became very weak and exhausted with over-work. He died peacefully in his 'Transquility Abode' (Shantiniketan). Tagore never believed in any life hereafter, resurrection, soul, and immortality, yet he could not block his ruminations about such subjects. In one of his poems he expresses such 'fear' of rebirth.

Each day the thought recurs to me: shall I be reborn under this star-spangled sky? Will the peaceful rapture of such wonderful evenings ever again to be mine, on this silent Bengal river, in so secluded a corner of the world?

Perhaps not. The scene may be changed; I may be born with a different mind. Many such evenings may come, but they may refuse to nestle so trustfully, so lovingly, with such complete abandon, to my breast. 24

Anyhow if rebirth ever occurred, Tagore will be again Tagore with the same mind in the same Bengal since his 'soul' was essentially 'his' which cannot incarnate any other body.

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