

Rabindra Jayanti Special

Rabindranath's Last Poems : A Reading

by Azfar Hussain

The 134th birth-anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) falls on May 8, 1995. In order to mark his Jayanti, The Daily Star takes this modest opportunity to present the following article which seeks to reread Tagore's *Last Poems*, focusing particularly on the poet's active, energetic response to life and man even in the face of increasing sickness and threatening death.

It is interesting to see that in his poems written during the period between 1939 and 1941, Rabindranath Tagore seems to have written energetically a language that accommodates his intense, unfailingly warm response to life. One may argue that this is the kind of a response one happens to read in almost all the phases of Tagore's poetic career, for he is a poet who is consistently in love with life like any other great poet. That is true. But what is actually meant by 'an intense response to life' here is a special capacity for close-reading the depths and voids of life even in the face of sickness and death. Tagore at this point appears to be quite conscious of the fact that death would soon swallow him, but then he is equally — perhaps more acutely — conscious of, and convinced by, the fact that "Death cannot swallow life, which is immortal", as he says it in the second poem of *Shesh Lekha* (*Last Poems*). Of death, the poet further says in the same poem: "It only casts its shadow like Rahu / This I know for certain". What the poet means by *Rahu* here is the demon who is supposed to devour the sun during an eclipse. In fact, Tagore's *Last Poems* brings to the fore a great struggle with this *Rahu*, which, in the final analysis, turns out to be a struggle for nothing else, but for life itself. He goes on to say in the second poem: "That death is not / The ultimate expression of the changeless — / This I know for certain." / The self said: "The world is!" Here is an attempt to put death under erasure, at least linguistically, and to notch up the world's win in its unflinching, unshaking *isness*. This very *isness* of the world — or of life itself — lit up with a certain amount of epistemological and epiphanic illumination is what Tagore seeks to celebrate in his *Last Poems* in his warm response to life itself. It also needs pointing out that this is no monolithic pattern of response to life that one can possibly discern in *Last Poems*; indeed, various other ways of reacting to the tension between life and death

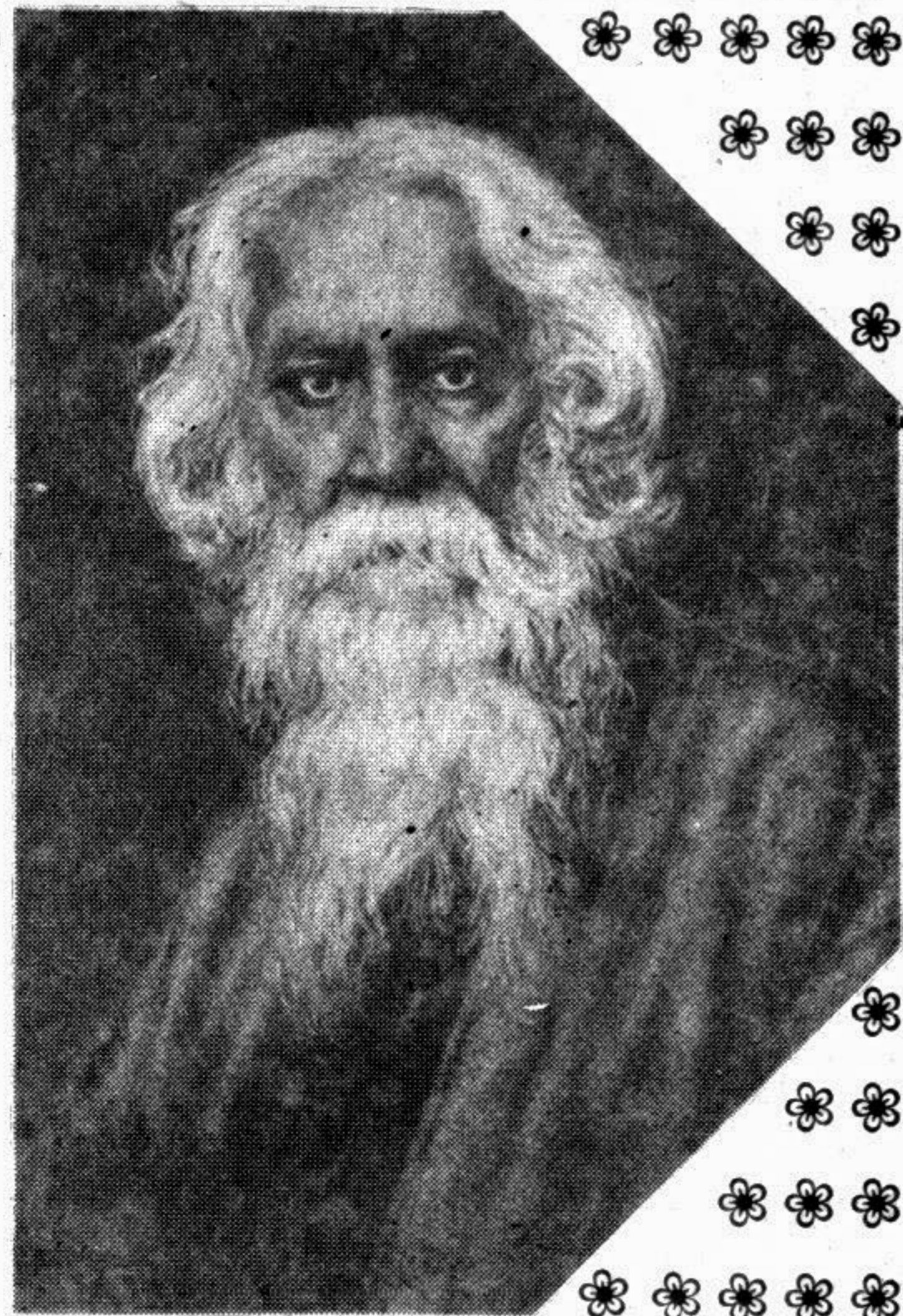
figure in this collection of poems. A few of these will be discussed only later. Let me now turn to the opening poem of *Last Poems* to see what kind of response to life the poet exhibits. It was the poet's wish that this poem, unmistakably song-like in quality, should be sung at the commemoration service after his death, and it was. This poem opens with a line charged with the lyrical *elan* of a familiar spatial image that captures a sense of sprawling oneself uninvitedly across the infinite as it were: "In front stretches the ocean of peace". The typical Tagorean penchant for oceanic expanse has been viewed from time to time as a mark of Tagore's romanticism; but here, the ocean is more than something that can be merely denominated 'romantic'. One sees that the ocean here is the one that is naked, pure, immediately accessible to the poet's sense-experience; it is not an ocean that once overwhelmed him, awed him to the extent of involving the poet in inexhaustible imagistic and rhetorical pleasures. Here, however, the ocean is evoked without rhetoric; and whatever image is attributed to the ocean is tellingly minimal. This ocean, in fact, provides the desired space for the intended voyage of the poet who, as we know, right from the beginning of his poetic career, has almost consistently kept up the voyage-motif animated by his inordinate zeal and zest for life. But, what is interesting to observe here is the rhythm of the voyage proposed. The poem does not explicitly refer to death anywhere; no reference to sickness do we find either. Yet, 'death' seems to lurk like shadows in the world evoked by Tagore in the poem which has lines like "On my journey to the shores of eter-

nity. / May the bonds of earth dissolve". And the voyage the poet is keen to embark on appears to be a death-defying one, giving also the impression that death does not put an end to life, but that it is only an extension of life itself. In other words, death is once against put under erasure; it is, in a way, also defamiliarized, and what is quietly foregrounded, with a certain amount of epistemological certitude, is life itself, as the poem ends with such lines as: "And I come to know fearlessly / The Great unknown". For Tagore, the celebration of life is certainly not without the celebration of man whose unremitting renewal is what he has unfailingly taken an interest in. As has been indicated, Tagore does not respond to life without responding to death which, for him, is part or an extension of life itself. In fact, Tagore defies death only through accepting and defamiliarizing it, and this is the kind of response to life (or to death) which is more apparent in *Last Poems* than it is elsewhere in his oeuvre. In order to defy — or for that matter, accept — death, Tagore constantly speaks of the renewal of life in the Shelleyesque fashion, as particularly exemplified in the sixth poem of *Last Poems*, where the poet says: "The sacred moment has come / That brings the Great Birth!... The hill of sunrise rings with the call 'Fear not / And ushers in the dawn of a new life'. But, who is born? Whose life is renewed against death? The poet answers unequivocally: "The heavens thunder the song of Victory: / 'Man has come!'". Man comes again and again — that is the typical Tagorean experience, somewhat energized by the principle of continuum and flux bearing the textual traces of the *Upanishads*, Chinese Taoism, Heracleitian philosophy and Bergsonian *elan vital*, is what one can fairly easily detect throughout the whole oeuvre of Tagore. But, in *Last Poems*, the very coming of man, partly textually evoking the Yeatsian second coming and partly capturing the Nietzschean declarative tone in which the arrival of the *Urbemensch* (Superman) is announced, is not just a cyclical existential phenomenon; but is indicative of the reassertion of one's inherent creative energy and strength whereby death and life, man and god, light and darkness — all such apparently irreconcilable binaries can be fused into a higher form of reality and that is the Great Birth! as the poet says. It is this higher form of reality onto which death alone loses its grip, and whereby death is also defeated or at least denied of its sovereign identity. In conventional Tagore-

criticisms, this poem has been described as merely anthropocentric. Anthropocentric doubtlessly it is, for in the poem only 'Man' with a tellingly upper-case 'M' occupies the centre-stage. But, then, what is further emphasised, and what really accounts for the upper-case 'M' in man is his creative *elan* which can enable him to accept death, and also conquer death by subordinating it to life itself. In other words, it is the death-conquering creative man that Tagore brings to the fore. And we cannot but feel that Tagore himself exemplifies such 'Man'. For he is not dead; conquering death through creativity, he remains alive, singing continuously: "Man has come!". Thus, we see that Tagore's *Last Poems* represents the poet's quiet but active response to man, death, life and creativity, in the face of growing sickness Tagore was subjected to during the period in which these poems were written. One of the characteristic aspects of *Last Poems*, however, is yet to be taken up. It is an aspect which has been mostly lost sight of in traditional Tagore-criticisms. This aspect once again relates itself to Tagore's response to life. The kind of epistemological certitude and quietude Tagore has exhibited in his response to life and man has already been indicated in some instances. But, the other side of the epistemological reality is yet to be looked into. It is the anguished Tagorean agnology which now deserves notice. In fact, one would begin to see that Tagore is not all certitude; but that his response to life, as in *Last Poems*, is to a great extent characterized by a tormenting pull between epistemology and agnology, between knowledge and ignorance. This tension, however tormenting and anguished it might be, does not exhibit signs and symptoms of restlessness elsewhere. The poet's realization of this tension is so strong, sharp, pointed and real that it hardly needs rhetoric, or even metaphors; it only needs bare statements, naked words, or even whispering syllables of silences, as inevitable as breath.

The eleventh poem of *Last Poems* captures one of the high epiphanic moments ever occurring in Tagore's life. The poem begins with a note of discovery: "On the shores of *Rupnarayan* / I awoke and realized / That the world is not a dream. / In letters of blood I beheld my own forms". Tagore's metaphorical and imagistic minimalism, which is in fact one of the most predominant stylistic features of *Last Poems*, is what unfailingly sharpens and heightens the unveiled but quiet intensity of the poet's realization that the world is not a dream. His new love for life and the world manifested in a statement totally stripped of metaphors and images is now expressed undauntingly thus: "I have loved the hard Truth — She never deceives! / That life is but a severe *tapasya*. / Till life's end!". One also notices here that Tagore tries to come to terms with the truth and with life through epiphanically defining them. The question, however, remains still: "Has then Tagore's epistemological struggle found a definitive spot whereon one can assuredly put one's finger?" Tagore himself answers — and does not answer — the question dialectically in the 13th poem of *Last Poems*, yet another naked, minimalist, rather stylistically hermitic poem beginning with a line like "The day's first sun had asked: / One can say that this is the kind of a poem which was never attempted by Tagore earlier. The tension between knowledge and ignorance is reflected subtly in the poem, and one is able to feel its intensity, particularly when one keeps the *Rupnarayan* poem in the background, and foregrounds the 13th poem for a reading. As we enter the poem, we inevitably face an essential question effortlessly formulated: "who are you?" Given the style of the poem which invites comparisons partly with Blake's style and partly with Jimenez's — a style marked by a near-absence of metaphors and images, one cannot but feel that this 'easy' formulation is no easy task; one rather feels that this ease with which the question is asked is an outcome of a massive struggle, both at the epistemological and stylistic levels. One also feels that the very act of asking this question no doubt demands courage and mental aplomb. Indeed, Tagore has looked straight into the first day's sun, going back to time past, and has come up with the question, and also that with the answer that follows: "It received no answer". One sees that the poet activates a kind of dialectic here — the dialectic of answer and no-answer, words and silences, evolving fairly mildly a tension between epistemological certitude once so unblinkingly surfaced in the verbally austere pronouncement of "I came to know myself", and agnological anguish suggested as minimally as possible in "It received no answer". The question, however, does not stop. The poem written mostly with silences represented by the "twilight's silence" keeps the question alive so as to keep one's search almost unending. Now, the day's last sun utters the same question (it is, however, the last question) — "who are you?" The same answer re-

turns: "It received no answer!" The poet's suggestion which one can hardly miss here is interestingly paradoxical: the fact that there is no answer itself constitutes an answer, howsoever tentative it might be. Like Czeslaw Milosz, that famous Polish poet, Tagore could also say: "I saw absences". This poem indeed captures, among other things, a play of presences and absences in a way hitherto absent in Tagore's earlier poetry. One can certainly say that Tagore's *Last Poems* mark a progression towards what has come to be known in the words of Jimenez, the Spanish poet, as *naked poems* which can amply suggest bare truths characterized not only by their presences, but also by their absences. In *Last Poems*, Tagore's response to life is not only a response to death defamiliarized in that the latter extends the former, but is also a response to man's never-ending search for answers to those questions that perpetually exhaust and increase one's inner creative potentials.



TAGORE'S WOMEN In Life and Literature

by Zaheda Ahmad

EVEN in the very minor affairs of life, the freedom that our women lack has always angered and saddened me. Is it not by an accident that I have been born a man endowed with all the rights and privileges that our society accords to its male members? Yes, not every human being is destined to be happy. Be that as it may, but for a human being, nothing can be worse than a life without freedom.

That was Rabindranath writing to his youngest son-in-law Nagendranath in 1922. For Rabindranath, it was not a piece of sentimental rhetoric, but the pronouncement of a long suffering, aggrieved father who had learnt that bitter lesson from the hard school of his own life. One of the less well-known facts of Rabindranath's life was the unhappy married lives of the two daughters that he had the misfortune of watching from the sidelines. So, in his case, life's bitter experiences equipped him to deal much more compassionately with the whole range of women's issues in our society.

But true to his own convictions, he simply could not keep the issue of female liberation separate from the broader issue of human emancipation. In his eyes, emancipation from bondages — religious, social, economic and intellectual — was equally essential for both men and women, without which no human being could reach the height of his or her full potentials. This is why one finds that the term "emancipation" is the most widely used one in Rabindranath's literary oeuvre.

Given such concerns, it is quite natural that Rabindranath would take a very hard look at the various aspects of women's real-life problems. With the unerring instinct and compassionate care of a loving mother, Rabindranath portrayed the deplorable conditions, the pains and sufferings of our womenfolk — rich and poor alike — at the hands of a male-dominated society. For the literate Bengalis — or for that matter, the Indians — it was an unforgettable experience to come face to face with such an impressive number of Tagorean heroines. He still remains unique in the sense that neither before nor since do we find, in our literary world, such an impressive crowd of female characters who challenged, objected to, and rebelled against, the norms and usages of an oppressive, patriarchal social system.

But surely, no one, even a genius like Tagore, could create such a world without going through a long process of intellectual transformation. Indeed, Rabindranath's views on various women's issues were never static. His long creative career saw the development of his ideas about, and ideals of, womanhood through a constant process of evolution and transformation in keeping

with shifts and turns in his inner and outside worlds. Indeed, his early ideas on various women's issues can hardly be said to be reassuring, not to speak of revolutionary. Thus, in 1878, we find a youthful Rabindranath, not yet out of his teens and on his first ever visit to the West, while holding men responsible for the sad plight of our women, saying, "It is not due to male oppression but because of the laws of nature that women have to take care of their children within the bounds of family life". A decade later, he entered into a bout of polemical writing, in the pages of "Bharati and Balaka", the journal edited by his eldest sister Swarna Kumari Devi, with the Marathi feminist leader Pandita Ramabai who had been preaching the gospel — inflammable and unacceptable in the eyes of the Indian male — of equal gender ability. Joining in the fray, the editor once commented, "How could the writer [Rabindranath] be so sure that women can receive and assimilate ideas but cannot create? This is something utterly beyond our comprehension."

Similarly Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) *A Doll's House* (1879) — that noble literary endeavour movingly portraying a woman's urge to seek and establish her own distinct human identity and fulfillment — did not appear to have touched Rabindranath much. His comment on Nora's rebellion was, "Really, the condition of women in Europe appears to me to be extremely unacceptable". Rabindranath's quarrel with another noted Bengali female writer Krishnabhavini Das (1864-1919) on the contents of ideal female education, is another example of his doubts about the nature of education suitable for women's fulfillment.

But those contradictions apart, Rabindranath was unequivocal in his strong condemnation of female oppression and denial of their human rights in the name of religion and social conventions. Not surprisingly, while Krishnabhavini, faced with mounting criticisms from the reactionary elements in her society, almost instantly beat a hasty retreat from her radicalism for Rabindranath, there could be no going back. The supreme humanist could only move forward.

Hence in the early decades of this century, we find Tagore changing his course rather sharply. But the process, of course, had started much earlier. For in the early 90s, we find him coming out with another first in *Chitrangada* — a play in which the royal heroine sought her own fulfillment in an equal partnership with Arjun, her male suitor. She quite resolutely looked upon that relationship as a mutually satisfying bond nurtured not on the conventional ingredients of sexual satisfaction alone, but on a much desirable and hence durable foundation

built on shared ideals, pleasures and pains of life together. This was the ideal of a new womanhood, though not entirely new in the sense that Chitrangada, while objecting to the use of women as a sex-symbol, objected initially to the attempt of winning over Arjun by the same questionable exploitation of female charms.

From then on, Rabindranath never had to look back. It is impossible to do justice, in a few lines or with a very broad brush, to the full range of Rabindranath's female characters. We can only take a cursory look at a few of them. In his "Letter from a wife," we find Mrinal, the first literary rebel in Bengal (talking of finding herself "in writing poems secretly, that was where I found my emancipation, my own self"). In her quiet determination and resolute rejection of all the domestic rules that for so long kept her in chains, she triumphed over her male "superiors" including her husband. But the realist that Tagore was, he knew he could not turn Mrinal into a Bengali Nora unlike whom Mrinal found her salvation not in desertion but in death.

The mother and the sweet heart — these are the two ideals of womanhood that captivated Tagore throughout his long literary career. Again and again, these two rolemodels he idealised and idolised in his various literary writings. But there was an exception to this also. He was not slow to recognise the shame, deceptions and the hollowness that had come to characterise the existing realities obtaining in our society. His Kumu — the exquisite heroine of his novel *Jogajog* was trained to idealise marriage and motherhood from her early childhood. And yet in the end, what she finds are these: "There are certain things in life which a mother cannot surrender even for the sake of a son. When a human being wants freedom, nothing can prevent him/her." There was Haimanti who gave her life quickly in the knowledge that even a loving husband, being a prisoner himself, cannot set her free. It is said that the failed marriage of Tagore's eldest daughters Madhuri inspired the distressed father to draw the immortal picture of Haimanti. A real life tragedy indeed.

All Tagore's heroines — Shashikala, Chandara, Haimanti, Mrinal, Kumu, Labanya — to name only a few, had, to a varying extent, radical non-conformist ideas on the whole range of women's issues affecting their lives. Tagore, never an extreme social radical, made all his heroines appear towering over their male counterparts by making them behave rather ludicrously in their own arena. In their own ways, these Tagorean women rendered their male counterparts into so many worthless, empty-headed human beings fit for contempt and nothing more.



There is perhaps no better way to kill a writer than to prescribe him as a text in the college and university syllabi. Something more, by way of enmity as it has been done to Rabindranath killing him doubly as the intellectual and literary *kaipatara* of the Bengalee people. He has been for fifty years a standard subject for PhD dissertation. And finished is the poet who loved to be called as such and himself called his good self by the same epithet, although his creations outside of poetry are not any less ponderous or of lesser value. And as a writer of fiction inclusive of his inimitable short stories, he seems to have been very largely ignored by novelists and short story writers coming after him in his own language. Wasn't Rabindranath the greatest of the modern Indian philosophers? Greater than Sri Aurobindo or Vivekananda or Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan? Decidedly yes. But he is nowhere read or discussed as a philosopher, and the text-books on even Indian philosophy do not mention him even for once. He was undoubtedly our best thinker on education and the arts, Bengali linguistics and indology. Our institutes of education do not offer anything on him and our institutes of language and history establishments in the universities or in

What are We Getting, for What?

Waheedul Haque

the Asiatic Society ignore him equally. His was the best insight into the Indian, or precisely, Bengali society. We have cared to take a cue from him in our political and cultural expedition to build a destiny for this nation roaming as it has been in wilderness for centuries. Who among the new builders of Bangladesh or of India has read Rabindranath to see light? Tagore the music composer and Tagore the painter are artists who are far more living today than Tagore the writer or even Tagore the social trend-setter. How is that and why? There is, in fact, a global move away from things intellectual, things impinging upon the reflective sensibilities in man. And humanity as a whole, specially in the West, has been showing pronounced preferences for formal, rather than conceptual, constructions, either aural or visual, having impact on physical sensation. This has been going for pretty long in the West and the Paris-centred wonder-sprouting of a revolution in the visual and plastic arts at the opening of the present century contributed in no mean manner to

the erosion of the conceptual comprehension of the human and the physical aspects of the universe. The whole human family, spurred by Euro-American examples, went for man's doings rather than musings. Or for art rather than literature and philosophy. Man fashions a song or paints a picture and he is the man in. He writes serious novels, he is the man out. The industrially advanced North is also advanced in literacy and general education. With all that is happening there — the entertainment boom boosted by the universal TV culture — society there would have long dried up of the language-based intellectual activity. Thanks to that very very broad base of education there, say, even in small linguistic societies such as Swedish or Norwegian, the writers while becoming ever so specialised as a specialist clientele's hero, retains a wide enough audience as to influence the cultural development of their human milieu. In the South, Bangladesh to wit, less than one per cent of the population read a newspaper. The number of those reading a book must be far less

than that. And the strength of that miserable minority is progressively being dissipated by an increasing number of those who can buy as well as read a book becoming a TV-addict or a band music buff. The base of educated people is razor-thin here, and the razor is shorter than standard. Coming back to the Tagore topic, we are confronted by a horrifying situation. Those who could, for their cultural background's sake, read a Tagore poem or any other's once in a week or a month, are picking up an audio cassette of Tagore songs once in a while and be done with their pretension to culture. With these few moving away from literature or the print material, Rabindranath is being pushed to a very diminished existence in Bangladesh. There could still be some hope left, if the buyer of the cassette would only care to listen to it in the manner he would have done while reading a poem or fiction by Tagore or any other lesser mortal. People talk of Tagore music literally flooding the national psyche of Bangladesh. That is an exaggeration in bad taste.

But there indeed has been a great increase in the consumption of Rabindra *sangeet*. What does it really signify? A growing taste for good music? A general move towards culture? Things are no so simple even if we welcome the news. There has also been a big increase in the number of pupils taking lessons in Rabindra *sangeet*. For one not knowing the musico-cultural situation, this could be a piece of wonderful news. Not so far music teachers of any standing. For they very well know this is hardly any sign of a newfangled love of good music, welling up from maybe a love of Rabindranath. This is a trendy thing to be sure. But more than that, to the average Bangladeshi middle-class mind, Rabindranath offers a last hope for all having no potential for music. How? Ever Rahim Karim and Anwara believe that Rabindra *sangeet* is hardly any music at all. It is more recitation than music. So those that are tone-deaf or do not have simply the voice that can couch a song — all twin eagerly to Rabindra *sangeet*. This is confirming Tagore's musical creation as less than truly musical in a most unusual and unlikely manner. This we are getting in lieu of a potential reader of Tagore's poems or other writings. *Naaker bodoley norun pelam tak doo-adum doom*.