



art

All Those Strange Shapes : The Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore

By Manzoorul Islam

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S first painting exhibition took place in Paris in 1930 — not in India, or anywhere near home. He was nearly seventy, maintaining good health, but suffering from a mild form of colour blindness. His paintings belonged neither to the Indian, nor to the western tradition. They were a critique of the dominant form of Indian painting, especially the Bengal school, whose nostalgic involvement with the past often created ineane initiations of the 16th or 17th century Moghul painting (the ambience certainly was time capsule); but he brushed off any involvement with the European art movements that were raging in his time. Thus his expressionism kept its distance from the German expressionism that fascinated art lovers across the continent and beyond, and his surrealism was a complete Indianisation, if at all, of the European surrealism that lifted Freud from printed pages and pasted his dream sequences flat out on

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canvas. In the space of eight to ten years, Tagore exhibited his paintings in most major cities of Europe and America, drawing an occasional favourable review but mostly indifference, and an inexplicable hostility from the critics. At a time when western art critics were labouring under an orientalism of their own making — which neatly classified Indian art as something that resembled the Bengal school — Tagore was a difficult-to-label phenomenon. The critics' sense of unease was heightened by the often disturbing and bizarre images that Tagore drew in pen and ink that clashed violently with the image of the saintly Indian bard who reminded one of Upanishadic figures with his grace and charm. Unable to classify Tagore's paintings as truly Indian and unwilling to give him any place beside the European masters, critics decided that Tagore was an once in a while event and his paintings were some late spurts of creativity. They had their curiosity value, yes but beyond that they were not

to be taken seriously. A painter he was; but not a master painter, and not certainly comparable to his standing as a poet. Strangely enough, the Indian literary establishment tended to believe too that Tagore's paintings were not as important as his poetry or fiction. These were at best a famous man's whims; a childish game at enlarging some entrenched visions and images, from the past.

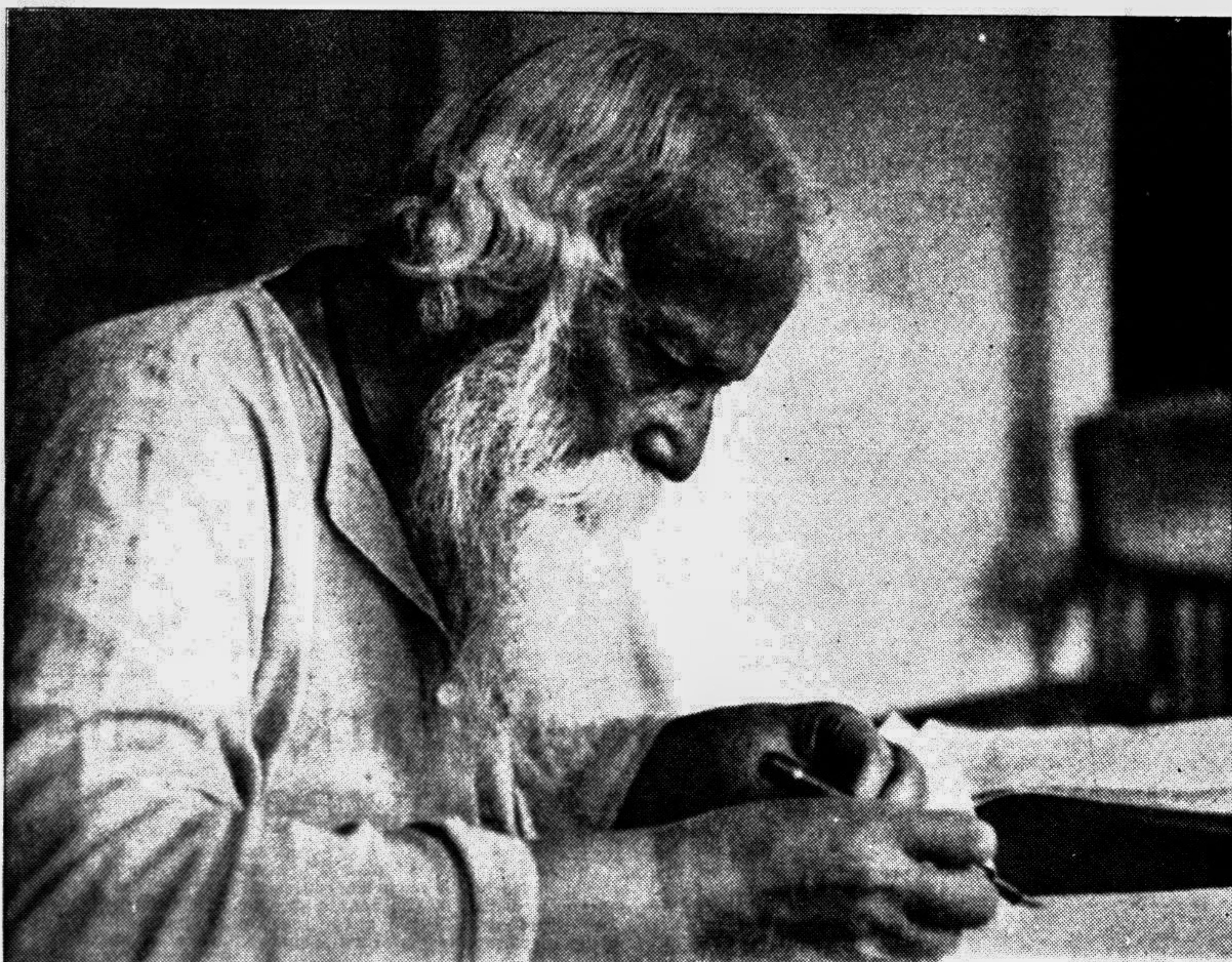
And the idea that Tagore's paintings represented some late-at-life activities persisted — as they persist even today.

IF facts alone are considered, Tagore's paintings are indeed a late undertaking. He was well past sixty when he picked up his brush (his pen, rather). In the space of ten-twelve years he drew more than 3000 sketches and paintings (water colours, some oil) and etchings. But there are enough evidences to suggest that Tagore's paintings are a product of life-long involvement with man and nature. He did draw and doodle

when he was a boy, and early records show his interest in animals and plants. But the more substantial paintings were done not on paper or canvas, but inside his head. His poems and songs are a series of haunting images, flashing more beauty in their metrical line than does a whole canvas of an accomplished painter. But the images of his paintings are different from the images of his poems. To locate their origin one has to go to his fiction, particularly *Torn Leaves* and his reminiscences of his childhood. The peculiar geometry of Tagore's painting is to be found in a couple of letters he wrote to his elder brother and some other relative back in 1890s, as is his fascination for darkness. In a letter, Tagore wrote about a dream he had in which the women of his household underwent a metamorphosis after they had taken a certain potion or drug. Their heads became elongated, and their faces angular, and they looked very comical. This description could be easily applied to a few

studies Tagore did of women's torso thirty years later. In at least three paintings, the women have elongated heads and angular faces. Then, in a few others, darkness is piled upon darkness, and one layer is separated from the other by a thin white line — actually a hairline margin left unattended while Tagore applied ink or colour all around it. In the *Torn Leaves* Tagore writes about the darkness of the night sky as he sat on the roof of his houseboat, Padma, and contemplated on the immensity of the space around him. In the 1890s Tagore was a particularly unfortunate and devastated family man. He had lost his wife, his son and a few other dear ones. He wanted to find release from the incessant pain of loss. He chose Padma and a series of journeys along the waterways of Bengal. On these long trips, he used to be alone, except for the boatmen and the servants, and he had all the time in the world to look around 'with an eye made quiet' by the power of sadness. Many letters of *Torn Leaves* are full of the descriptions of the feeling of vastness, of darkness visible and invisible, and the dialogue between his self and the soul. So are the paintings, where Tagore's tentative perspectives open up on depths that only an eye trained on the silent and dark spectacle of night sky over the Padma can read. Critics who fail to realise the depth of these perspectives come up with a close-ended interpretation. In many landscape paintings a merging vista appears to foreclose any possibility of depth behind it, but where Tagore allows the merger to take place in darkness, there is always something beyond — or in the depth of — this darkness.

TAGORE'S surrealism — his fantastic figures, swirling and interlocking forms that dissolve as soon as they take shape, as in a dream, his apparently chaotic shapes stepping out of a dark vision or nightmare — would similarly go back a long way into the past. His childhood reminiscences particularly *Jivan Smriti*, record his dream (or nightmare) encounters with strange shapes and figures. These shapes would sometimes haunt his waking hours, but he was more fascinated than frightened by them. In the vast loneliness of his childhood (he was often left alone, under the care of the servants), he would create a make-believe world — as all children do — and people it with the strange shapes and figures. These were his companions, all the more fascinating perhaps because they were so very different from him. The later paintings



1993: The prodigious genius at his writing desk. Photo taken by Satyandranath Bishee

took up that pursuit in all earnestness, and created images that were in such stark contrast with his 'official', saintly image. Critics were at a loss, trying to explain this contradiction, raising a 'can he who made the lamb make the tiger too' kind of question. How can the saint Tagore scoop up absurd faces and twisted and contracted figures from some abysmal depths of his subconscious? Who are they, anyway? A Yeatsian would easily recognise a mask-face dichotomy, a Freudian would jump at the Id-libido binary, or a more sedate (early) modernist would find a Baudelairian beauty-evil conflict in these images. There may be some truth in these pairings — Tagore might indeed have felt a sense of joy and abandon in finally putting his saintly self to sleep, and releasing the locked images from

some deep libidinous self; but the truth is at the same time more profound. It was more a case of continuous search for a wholeness rather than a dichotomous projection of divided psychological images that gave birth to the disturbing pictures a seventy year old public man feverishly drew. The ugly pictures did not represent the other side of the beauty and grace that he cherished, but a continuation: not disintegration but transformation of the aesthetic ideal he upheld. Ugliness is part of life, it coexists with beauty, it is coterminous with grace. Ugliness, when its elements are all transparent and visible, may not remain ugliness. Better still, if one removes the perspectives against which ugliness is judged, the parameters that define it, and the referents against which it is measured, ugliness may become something else. Like the darkness that engulfs you on the roof of the houseboat on the Padma, and suddenly becomes transparent. Better still — becomes illumination itself. At the heart of darkness, there is light, says the Upanishad (or is presumed to say).

Tagore's paintings are disturbing because they want us to look at them with an unprejudiced mind, and with an intelligence that does not believe in relative value judgements. Our sense of perspective, right and wrong (line, form, colour), and our set notions of beauty and truth have to be readjusted, and brought in line with what the paintings themselves propose. What they do propose is nothing but a revolutionary aesthetic in which label-seeking discourse is made to stand on its head.

book extract

Damini

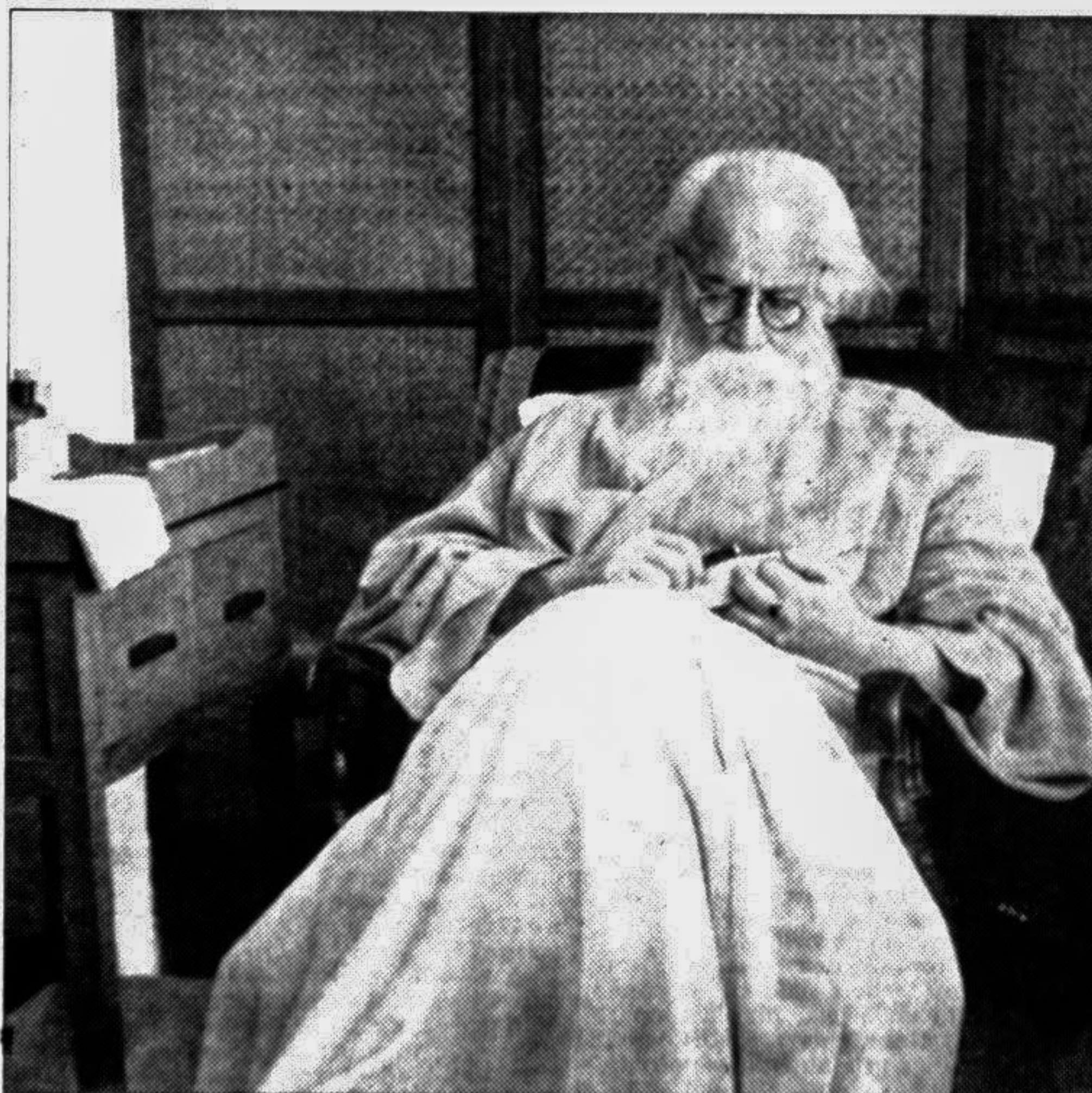
Following is an extract from *Quartet* — a translation of Rabindranath Tagore's widely-read novel *Chaturanga*. Translated by the poet and critic Kaiser Haq, *Quartet* is a volume in the prestigious publishing house Heineman's Asian Writers Series.

IDIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH experience to know the secrets of the female heart. My superficial observations led me to believe that women are ready to lose their hearts where they are sure to be requited with sorrow. They will string their garland for a brute who will trample it into the horrid slime of lust; or else they will aim it at a man whose head it won't reach because he is so absorbed in a world of abstraction that he has virtually ceased to exist. When they have a chance to choose their mates women shun average men like us, who are a mixture of the crude and the refined, know Woman as women — in other words, know that women are neither clay dolls nor the vibrations of veena strings. Women avoid us because we offer neither the fatal attraction of murky desire nor the colourful illusion of profound abstractions; we cannot break them through the remorseless torment of lust, nor can we melt them in the heat of abstraction and recast them in the mould of our own fancy. We know them as they really are; that's why even if they like us they won't fall in love with us. "We are their true refuge, they can count on our loyalty; but our self-sacrifice comes so readily they forget that it has any value. The only *baksheesh* we receive from them is that whenever they need us they use us, and perhaps even respect us a little, but...enough! These words probably

stem from resentment, and probably aren't true. Perhaps it is to our advantage that we get nothing in return — at last we can console ourselves with that thought.

Damini avoided Guruji because she bore him a grudge; she avoided Sachish because she felt exactly the opposite towards him. I was the only one around for whom she felt neither anger nor attraction. For this reason whenever she got a chance Damini would chat with me about her past, her present, what she saw or heard in the neighbourhood — trivial things like that. I never imagined that such an insignificant event as Damini jabbering away as she sat slicing betel-nuts on the little verandah in front of our rooms upstairs would affect Sachish so much in his present mood of abstraction. Well, it might not have been such a trivial event, but I knew that in the realm in which Sachish existed there was no such thing as an event. The divine workings of Hladini, Sandhini and Jogmaya in that realm were a perennial romance, and therefore beyond historic time. Those who listened to the whistle of the ever-steady breeze that played there on the banks of an ever-flowing Jamuna wouldn't, surely, see or hear anything of the transitory events in the mundane world around them. At any rate, till our return from the cave Sachish's eyes and ears had been pretty inactive.

I myself was partly to blame. I had



1940: Recovering from illness

begun to play truant every now and then from our discussions on mystic ecstasy. Sachish began to notice my absence. Once he came looking for me and found me following Damini with an earthen bowl of milk that I had bought from the local cowherds to feed her pet mongoose. The task would hardly suffice as an excuse for truancy; it could have been easily postponed till the discussion ended; and in fact if the mongoose had been left to forage for its meals the principle of kindness to all creatures wouldn't have been grossly violated and my reputation for decorum would have remained intact. Consequently, I was quite flustered at Sachish's sudden appearance. I set the bowl down at once and tried to retrieve my self-esteem by sneaking away.

But Damini's behaviour was astonishing. She wasn't embarrassed at all, and asked me, 'Where are you going, Sribilashbabu?'

I scratched my head and mumbled, 'Well...'

'Gurujī's meeting has ended by now,' Damini said, 'so why don't you sit down?'

My ears tingled with embarrassment at hearing such a request in Sachish's presence.

'There's a problem with the mongoose,' Damini said. 'Last night it stole a chicken from a Muslim house. It's not safe to let it loose. I have asked Sribilashbabu to buy a large basket to keep it in.'

Sachish seemed rather keen to inform Sachish about Sribilashbabu's submissiveness in the matter of feeding milk to the mongoose or buying a basket for it. I was reminded of the day.

Gurujī had asked Sachish in my presence to prepare the *hookah*. It was the same thing.

Without a word Sachish walked away quickly. Glancing at Damini's face I saw her eyes cast lightning shafts after Sachish. Inwardly she smiled a cruel smile.

God knows what she made of the incident, but the practical outcome was that she began to seek me out on the flimsiest of pretexts. One day she cooked some sweet dish and insisted on serving it exclusively for me.

But Sachish... 'Asking him to eat will only annoy him.'

Sachish came round several times and saw me eating.

Among us three, mine was the most difficult position. The two main characters in the drama were thoroughly self-possessed in their performance. I was conspicuous for the sole reason that I was utterly insignificant. At times this made me angry with my lot, but neither could I help my craving for whatever little my auxiliary role brought me. Such dire straits!