

Rabindranath Tagore: A Sage in the Dust – A Bilingual Edition of Selected Poems.

Sajed Kamal

REVIEWED BY AHRAR AHMAD

RABINDRANATH Tagore remains the central figure in the Bengali cultural narrative. His literary production has been prodigious (his complete works fill 27 volumes, and more are forthcoming), multi-faceted (including poems, plays, novels, dance dramas, short stories, essays, travelogues, belles-lettres, reviews, lectures, translations), and wide ranging (romantic, spiritual, naturalist, political, playful, and philosophical). He also composed almost 2,500 songs many of which continue to touch the hearts of most Bengalis, his paintings had been exhibited in many national and international venues to much acclaim, and he built a university that remains highly respected for the quality of the research and scholarship it generated, as well as the novel pedagogical and humanistic perspectives it nurtured. While feminist, post-modern, post-colonial, Marxist, communist and stylistic critiques of Tagore are possible, and have been made, nobody can deny his formidable, almost overwhelming, presence

about his "relevance" to the modern world, and more specifically to the West. Tagore's appearance in the Western literary firmament was as dazzling as it was fleeting (the English *Gitanjali* was published in 1910, he received the Nobel in 1913). But, after the initial blush of discovery and celebration was over, the Western response to him became progressively distant. Poets like Philip Larkin, novelists like D.H. Lawrence, and thinkers like Bertrand Russell referred to him in language that was chilly if not dismissive. Even his previous sponsors like Yeats and Pound were quickly disenchanted, and there followed years of benign indifference. All this can partly be attributed to imperial hubris, partly to the unpopularity of some of his political positions (e.g., on nationalism, on British rule in India, on his admiration of some countries and people like the Soviet Union, Japan and even Mussolini, on returning his knighthood conferred on him by the British monarch, and so on), and partly because of his perception as the Orientalised "other" who, at best, deserved a politically correct nod, but did not merit being "rammed down our throats." It should be pointed out that even in his own country "modernist" literary movements also expressed some impatience with him, a position effectively discredited by Abu Sayeed Ayub's magisterial book on the subject.

The arguments regarding his value today and his variable reception in the West continue, and even in the 150th anniversary of his birth (2011) or the 100th anniversary of his Nobel (2013), questions about who reads him anyway, and why they should, cast a shadow over those commemorations. In 2011, the TLS carried an edgy notebook submission by JC (James Campbell) followed by a perceptive article by Seamus Perry; the *Guardian* published a provocative essay by Ian Jack, and a spirited response from Amit Chaudhuri, all of which testify to the enduring nature of this debate. Most Bengalis, who look upon Tagore with adulation if not reverence, remain mystified and incensed that his position can even be subject to debate.

Third, part of the reason for the mixed reception of Tagore in the West is that the quality of the initial translations did not do adequate justice to Tagore. His own translations with their "thee's and thou's, and dosts and hasts" indicated linguistic mannerisms that were jarringly quaint. Other translators faced awkward challenges. Tagore wrote in "high" Bangla with its own stylised norms and conventions; many of his poems, as William Radice has noted, were actually intended as songs where melody and prosody were intertwined and was difficult either to disaggregate or "transcreate;" much of his poetry, as Ketaki Kushari Dyson has observed, tends to be abstract and allegorical not always amenable to the more prosaic directness of the English language; and finally, much of his writings was suffused with a spiritual lilt and longing that was culture-specific and deeply personal, with references to local lore, myths, symbols and sensibilities that were often not easily accessible to Western readers. Consequently, the results of some of the early efforts felt frothy, mawkish and arcane. They were often perceived as "an embroidery seen from the back," and failed to resonate with Western audiences. (While European poetry also suffers in English translations, there is a shared tradition, and common frames of reference, that allow them to migrate better, and become more easily digestible, across linguistic frontiers. Tagore did not have that advantage).

Thus, for a variety of reasons, and for a fairly long period of time, Tagore translation projects were scattered, inadequate and largely unappreciated. Tagore himself was never very eager about translations and rather severe in his judgments regarding the translations of some of his works by his doting friend and supporter, Edward Thompson. *The Complete Poems and Plays of Tagore*, published in English in 1936, does not even list the names of translators (other than Tagore) whose efforts were presum-

ably included in that text. This lacuna was addressed in the anthology edited by Amiya Chakrabarti, which was published under the auspices of the UN as a 100th birth centenary edition in 1961, where the translators whose works were included had been actually identified.

Fortunately for Rabindranath, and his many admirers, there has been a steady spate of translations that have appeared over the last several decades. Apart from Dyson and Radice (already mentioned) other talented and dedicated translators also embarked on that journey with admirable results (Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Joe Winter, Aurobindo Ghose and others). An additional, and entirely welcome, aspect of this development is the effort of Bangladeshi to contribute to these offerings as well. Dr. Anisur Rahman, published his *Songs of Tagore* in 1999, which was particularly unique and evocative because of the translator's own knowledge of, and devotion to, Tagore's music, (it also included many paintings from contemporary artists that were appropriate to the songs). Fakhruddin Alam from Dhaka University and Radha Chakrabarti of Gargi College, University of Delhi, collaborated in bringing out an anthology published by Harvard in 2011, which is one of the most comprehensive, sophisticated and handsomely produced collections of Tagore's work published so far, and contains many translations undertaken by younger scholars and poets in both Bangladesh and India. This publication has generated spirited discussion and lively interest. In the language of "geek-speak" Tagore may be "trending" anew. Sajed Kamal's recent effort is a significant addition towards buttressing that very trend.

Kamal, who comes from one of the most illustrious families of Bangladesh (his mother was a universally respected poet and cultural personality, his father a translator, his brother a musician and professor, one of his sisters a prominent human rights activist, the other an accomplished painter), has lived in the US most of his life, but is profoundly engaged in the literary and political realities of his "home" country. He is a well-known environmental and civil liberties advocate, a teacher, essayist, poet, painter and translator. He has won many awards and acclamations, is thoroughly steeped in the works of Tagore, straddles multiple literary/aesthetic formats, languages and traditions and, hence, is exceptionally qualified to undertake this challenge.

This volume of his translations of some fifty poems from Tagore bears eloquent testimony to his ability as a poet, his integrity as a translator, and his sensitivity as a multi-cultural interlocutor. It is particularly notable for three reasons.

First, there is an informed and engaging introduction which not only indicates the translator's perspectives and priorities, but also places Tagore within a wider context. It grapples with the inherent ambiguities and challenges of translations, indicates the reasons for his selection of poems, and demonstrates his wide reading of Tagore in both Bangla and in translation, as well as his familiarity with recent scholarship on him.

Second, unlike most other available translations of Tagore, he has chosen to follow European traditions (that has also been replicated in translations of Urdu *shairs* and *ghazals*) of publishing this volume as a bi-lingual edition. Therefore, it saves the trouble of looking up the *Rachanabali* (Collected Works) to see what the Bangla version had stated and how successfully the translator has captured the mood, the essence and the rhythm of the original. Western readers, who may otherwise benefit from his translations may not find this to be a very useful feature. But Kamal is honest in forthrightly admitting that he is primarily seeking to reach that particular audience whose literary appetites and interests are expressed in, and involve, both languages.

Finally, and most importantly, Kamal has chosen to translate a wide range of poems

which rescues Tagore from his initial portrait as a "mystical" escapist or romantic sentimental. There are poems dedicated to children where Tagore demonstrates a light-hearted, almost mischievous, imagination. He includes poems (e.g., *To Civilization*) that speak to Tagore's frustration with the "merciless, all-devouring" (materialist) civilisation that takes away "the wilderness" and "the freedom" that allow humans to feel the heartbeat of the universe." He tackles very difficult poems (e.g., *Urbashi*) which indicates Tagore's notion of beauty manifested both as metaphysical yearning for the ideal as well as a natural impulse towards the sensual.

Consistent with his effort to include poems that present Tagore in a different light, Kamal offers some poems in which Tagore is revealed as a fervent social critic and a feisty populist. Several of these poems deserve special mention. In "Deliverance" Tagore exposes the hypocrisies and cruelties of the gender inequities inherent in the traditional institutions of marriage in Bengal where young women are compelled into silence and submission, robbed of their human agency and forced to remain vulnerable and self-denying (even though the poem ends on a happy note with the protagonist being able to escape patriarchal oppression, and eloping with her childhood friend even as she is cursed by her stern and unforgiving father). On that same theme, in the "Woman of Power" Tagore demands that women should have the liberty to choose their own partners, invokes her need to "throw away that cover of weak modesty" and asks, "Why wouldn't you give woman, her right to conquer her destiny, O God?" In his "Religious Obsession" he resolutely rejects any vestige of religious extremism as "blind obsession driven to kill and be killed" and even praises the atheist who may, in fact, be "blessed by God," and who "through reverence ... lights, the lamp of intelligence, (and) though he doesn't believe in the scriptures, he believes in the welfare of humanity." In "Royal Arrangements" he gleefully mocks corruption where spies "sniff around" to locate if an honest person "is on the loose" who must be "reported to the king" and for his own protection, "be put in jail."

In two poems Tagore becomes more explicitly political. In "Africa", Tagore laments the ruthless conquest of that continent and the sheer brutality of Western imperialism whose "shameless inhumanity" and "spiked boots ... left a lasting mark on your humiliated history" while, all the time, in their own lands, "church bells were ringing ... children were playing in their mother's laps, poets sang hymns to beauty." But it was in his poem "Question" that Tagore displays a particularly iconoclastic and defiant tone. He decries the suffering of "the helpless under the dark shadow of defeat," and expresses exasperation at his inability to redress the situation while "the voice of justice (wept) silently and secretly at the crimes of the powerful" and as young people, in their frustration and desperation "dashed their heads against the rocks" in utter futility. He ends the poem by contrasting the usual advice of all God's prophets about compassion and mercy for everyone, and posing this provocative question to the Divine Being:

"So with tearful eyes, I ask you: Those who have poisoned your air

Those who have extinguished your light –

Have you forgiven them? Do you love them?"

Kamal is to be commended for his choice of poems which are refreshingly varied and are, often, overlooked in more conventional compilations. Tagore appears in a more heterogeneous form, with interests and passions that not only make him more appealing, but also more relevant. The translations remain consistently astute and elegant. For those reasons, the volume deserves our attention, and the author our gratitude.

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RABINDRANATH TAGORE A SAGE IN THE DUST

A BILINGUAL EDITION OF SELECTED POEMS



TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
SAJED KAMAL

in the Bengali literary and aesthetic landscape.

But, for several reasons, the position of Tagore in the West has been problematic. First, he suffers from what US Business Schools would describe as a "branding" problem. He has been presented to the world as a mystic, a seer, a sadhu from the East. There is no doubt that the meditative, incantatory, esoteric tone of the English *Gitanjali* influenced this notion. This was also because of Yeats who encouraged this image in his enthusiastic, but reductionist, introduction to that slender volume of poems. It should also be pointed out that Rabindranath himself, with his flowing robes, long beard, and "prophetic" demeanor, became complicit, however unwittingly, in the construction of a public persona that was striking but one-dimensional. This characterisation led to a myth of an Eastern "wise man" dispensing sincere, but wooly and preachy, insights to Western audiences. The incredible diversity and depth of his talents were smothered under that over-extended stereotype.

Second, there have been persistent questions

HENRY



by Don Trachte

BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

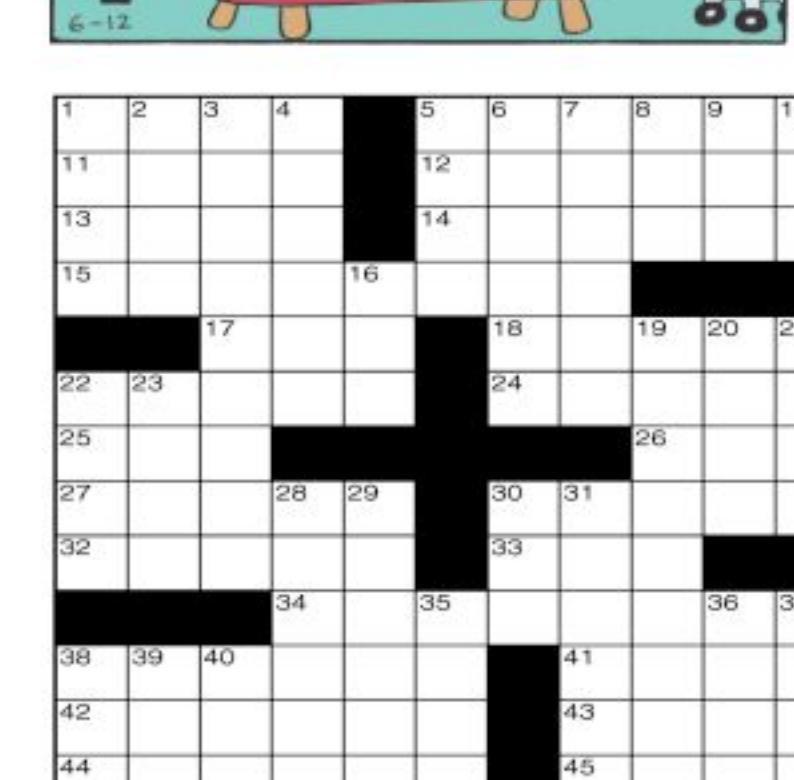
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS
1 Porch items
5 Black eye
11 Track shape
12 Puget Sound city
13 Gag
14 Eugene setting
15 Outdid
17 Had something
18 Trumpet accessories
22 Coffee bar order
24 Digging tool
25 Memorable time
26 Young fox
27 Tito Puente's music
30 Helps, in a way
32 "Midnight in Paris" director
33 Redio's Glass

34 Rides on the slopes
38 "Tender Mercies" star
41 Money for release
42 Tooth layer
43 Sailors' saint
44 Tripled trios
45 Whole lot

DOWN
1 Magic spell
2 Stratford river
3 Answer one's phone
4 Gumshoe
5 Organ part
6 Groups of women
7 Became frosted
8 Seasonal drink
9 Punk rock off-

shoot
10 Operated
16 Casserole bit
19 Pretend to be knocked out
20 Fix copy
21 Match parts
22 Monument Valley sight
23 Uttered
28 Bagel choice
29 Short sock
30 Feel poorly
31 Graft
35 Woes
36 Watch reading
37 Leisurely
38 Private room
39 One, for Juan
40 Big truck



Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUOTE

TDDVXO JUTO XVRXYV RZZVA. EALPM
OUVLA HLYMCUTMVC. OTMV OUVLA
YRNV.

1-4

JTYYG YTHK

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

If you asked me for my new year resolution, it would be to find out who I am.

- Cyril Cusack

টাকা'র
বিভিন্ন লোকেশনে
প্রতিযোগিতামূলক দামে
দীর্ঘ মেয়াদী কিন্তিতে
চলমান প্রকল্পে
অ্যাপার্টমেন্ট বিক্রয় চলছে...



SHELTECH

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QUOTE
We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.
Mother Teresa