

On Tagore

Reading the Poet Today



Amit Chaudhuri

PETER LANG

RABINDRANATH TAGORE is widely regarded as a romantic poet, speaking of beauty and truth; as a transcendentalist; a believer in the absolute; a propagandist for universal man; and as a national icon. But, as Amit Chaudhuri shows in these remarkable and widely admired essays about the poet and his milieu, his secret concern was really with life, play, and contingency, with the momentary as much as it was with the eternal. It is this strain of unacknowledged modernism, as well as a revolutionary life-affirming vision, that gives his work, Chaudhuri argues, its immense power.

Acute, challenging, and path-breaking, Amit Chaudhuri's collection will become a classic reading of Rabindranath Tagore and the way he is perceived today.

On Tagore was awarded the Rabindra Puraskar, the West Bengal government's highest literary honour, in 2012 in recognition of the 'significance, in the English language, of its critical analysis of Tagore's works'.

Praise for Amit Chaudhuri's writings on Tagore

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'Few have written as well on Tagore's aesthetic as Amit Chaudhuri... in *On Tagore*.' – PANKAJ MISHRA, in *From the Ruins of Empire*

Praise for Amit Chaudhuri's criticism

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AMIT CHAUDHURI is the author of five highly acclaimed novels, of which *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, and *A New World* won, between them, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Betty Trask Prize, the Encore Prize, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction, and the Government of India's Sahitya Akademi Award; his latest novel is *The Immortals*. He is also a poet, an acclaimed musician, and a highly regarded critic, the author of *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* and *Clearing a Space*. He has edited the *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia. Amit Chaudhuri lives in Calcutta and Norwich.



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Acknowledgements and Prefatory Note

These essays were written in a period covering over twelve years, the earliest of them being ‘The Flute of Modernity’, first published in the *New Republic* in 1998, and the latest ‘An Anniversary Begins’, published in the *Guardian* in 2011. Between these two pieces appeared ‘A Pact with Nature’, in the *London Review of Books* in 2006; “‘Nothing but a Poet’”, in the *Hindustan Times* in 2010; and ‘Poetry as Polemic’, which was published in 2011 as the foreword to Harvard University Press and Visva-Bharati’s *Essential Tagore*. Some of these essays originally appeared with different titles. Two of the pieces here, ‘The Flute of Modernity’ and ‘A Pact with Nature’, were also included in my collection of

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critical essays *Clearing a Space* (Permanent Black and Peter Lang, 2008). ‘The Flute of Modernity’, in a slightly different version, was delivered as the first Tagore lecture at the Royal Society of Literature in 2008. As I write this, these essays, or extracts from them, are to be broadcast on the Radio 3 slot on the BBC, ‘The Essay’, in early 2012. To all the publishers, publications, and venues I’ve mentioned, I’m grateful.

For a while now, some readers who have encountered these essays in one or more of the locations mentioned above have been asking me, for whatever reason, to put all my writings on Tagore into one small volume. The 150th birth anniversary seemed like a good moment to do so—it’s an occasion I’ve regarded with ambivalence, but the anniversary year (7 May 2011–7 May 2012) is probably as good a time as any to present this short book to the world. I’m grateful to Chiki Sarkar for responding to the idea with alacrity.

Acknowledgements and Prefatory Note

My reasons for writing about Tagore are both personal and writerly. Writers don't admire or think about other writers because they're famous or national icons, but because of affinities and concerns that excite and provoke them—or because, simply, one writer can't escape another. That time in my life, in my late teens and early twenties, when I grew serious about literature, was when I most resisted and then jettisoned Tagore, and had almost nothing to do with him intellectually. And yet I maintained a kind of relationship with him through his songs, by singing them, and by listening to them interpreted by mainly two artists, Subinoy Roy and my mother, Bijoya Chaudhuri. Both these singers had an equanimity and classicism of style that allowed Tagore to come to me divorced from his usual context—celebrity; the English *Gitanjali*; fervent worship; the generally sentimental and oppressive rendition of the Tagore song itself—as a writer and composer

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of subtlety. Here was a poet who was a seeker after delight ('Whom do I go looking for today in forest / after forest, impelled by this scent-filled breeze?'¹) and who also wished to take words dangerously close to the condition of melody—not music, but melody itself ('Those who say things about you by saying / things, make fences out of saying . . . / Those who abandon the words to just play the tune / Have their listeners attending from far and near'²). These songs and lines are quoted at random from Subinoy Roy's recorded repertoire. Roy's detachment of style (a kind of sung equivalent of Flaubert's notion of writing) sounded to me like a serene but unshakeable advocacy of Tagore's aesthetic, and it brought to me a poet different from the one who was surrounded, in his life and posthumously, by such a furore,

¹ '*Aaji ei gandhabidhura samirane*', from *Gitanjali* (my translation)

² '*Jara katha diye tomar katha bale*', from *Gitibithika* (my translation)

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such an excess of emotion, and by those who constantly ‘say things . . . by saying things’. I then had to make sense of who this Tagore was, what had kept him from view, and why these attributes and qualities—subtlety, melodiousness, silence, equanimity—might be important—generally, but also (there’s no use denying this particular preoccupation) to the sort of writer I’d set out to be.

The Anniversary Begins

The celebrations for the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary began in early May 2011, leading up to the actual birthday, 7 May, and they promise to continue till around the same time next year. The event passed without serious comment in Britain, but was noted by two writers I particularly admire, Ian Jack (writing, in this instance, in the *Guardian*), and J.C., in his notebook in the *TLS*. They enquired, pertinently, whether Tagore was worth making a fuss about. In fact, J.C. wanted to know: 'Who reads Rabindranath Tagore now?' Any man dressed in a loose robe-like garment, and whose poetry, at least in English translation, comprises lines like the

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one Jack quotes ('Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark'), is up, in Britain, for a laugh. Jack reminds us of Philip Larkin's opinion, expressed vividly in a letter: 'An Indian has written to ask what I think of Rabindrum Tagore. Feel like sending him a telegram: "Fuck all. Larkin."' This could be Larkin the epistolary racist. Or it could be Larkin the poet who deployed expletives to arraign the polite, the poet who, in a poem called 'Sunny Prestatyn', records with satisfaction how the original poster ('Come to Sunny Prestatyn') is gradually defaced by one 'Titch Thomas' with a drawing of a 'tuberous cock and balls'. One can feel some of the liberating electricity Larkin feels in placing 'fuck all' in close proximity to 'Tagore'. He and to a certain extent Ian Jack (who's remarkably equable in his piece) are of a generation that had Tagore, as Karl Miller once told me, 'shoved down our throats'. As an early-twentieth-century elixir, like Cod

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Liver Oil or Waterbury's Compound, Tagore was always destined to date, and even the irritation he caused to be forgotten.

So it's encouraging to discover that at least the irritation hasn't vanished entirely. At the same time, I feel a surge of empathy for Ian Jack and J.C., and all who can't read Tagore in Bengali, who must endure the most popular English translations (which are still Tagore's own), and take on trust there's something out there worth celebrating. Ian Jack points out there's very little in Tagore's own translations worth quoting from. At first glance, this seems absolutely true. For, although Tagore has had some good translators (like Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Sunetra Gupta, Sukanta Chaudhuri and William Radice), it seems his own translations have not only permanently superseded their work, but also any regard for his own originals, just as, for a while, Ben Kingsley's Gandhi eclipsed Gandhi in the popular imagination. Tagore's English version

of the *Gitanjali*, for which he got the Nobel Prize in 1913, is what Mother Teresa once was to Calcutta, the Royal Family to England, and Ben Kingsley to Gandhi: a tantalizing mirage that obstructs the view of what's behind it. And the Tagorean abstraction (not just from the *Gitanjali*, but from a variety of 'translations' he did) is remarkably handy, and will not go away: 'Rest belongs to the work as the eyelids to the eyes.' Plucked out of the air thus, they're ludicrous. And one can't think *how* the original would be better.

But poetry that possesses a high degree of abstraction is particularly hard to translate (especially, some would add, to a language attuned to empiricism, like English). For instance, what do we make of these? 'Ah and around this / centre: the rose of Onlooking / blooms and unblossoms'; 'With nothing of language but / A beating in the sky / From so precious a place yet / Future verse will rise'; 'O my rapt verse, my call, mock me