

TAGORE'S IDEA OF WORLD LITERATURE¹

A IDEIA DE LITERATURA MUNDIAL DE TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

Though it seems to have re-surfaced in a dramatic way, Rabindranath Tagore's essay remained untranslated till 2001. Though Tagore only comes to world literature in the end, the essay is an important statement of Tagore's view of the purpose of human life and the role art in its fruition; indeed, we might consider the essay to be a concise formulation of Tagore's aesthetic philosophy itself. What Tagore meant by world literature was the essential unity of human experience and therefore of human creativity.

KEYWORDS

Tagore's criticism and non-fiction, world literature, comparative literature in India

1 THE RELEVANCE OF TAGORE'S LITERARY CRITICISM

Rabindranath Tagore, India's greatest literary genius of the present epoch, made a tremendous impact on the world as both artist and thinker. He functioned in these two distinct modes of human expression in complex and overlapping ways. His message and philosophy, on the one hand, can be deduced from his creative work, the vast corpus of poems, songs, plays, stories, novels, paintings and other compositions that he produced over a span of more than seventy years of prodigious and prolific activity. On the other hand, he also expressed his ideas directly, in non-fictional writings, some which, like *The Religion of Man* or *Sadhana*, may be classified as philosophical and reflective. However, Tagore was also a major critic, producing a vast corpus of writings on art, literature, creativity, and their relationship to life. In Bangla alone, he wrote more than a 100 essays in criticism; if we add to these his reflections on the arts, literature, and poetry scattered in his other writings as well as in English, the corpus is considerably vaster.² In this essay, I would like to consider these writings, which are not

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² TAGORE. *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, p. 1.

as yet fully discussed or appreciated, but which have recently begun to attract the attention of scholars.

To offer one example, let us look at a lecture that Tagore delivered in 1907 at the newly established *Jatiya Shiksha Parishad* (National Council of Education). This body had been formed in the previous year with the specific aim of offering an alternative to the colonial system of education. Many famous patriots lent their support to this initiative including Sri Aurobindo who in 1906 became the first Principal of the National College formed under its auspices. Tagore's topic was "Comparative Literature." Interestingly, he spoke very little directly relating to his topic. But at the end of the talk, he made a startling declaration: "The topic that I have been entrusted to discuss has been titled 'Comparative Literature' by you in English. In Bangla I shall call it 'World Literature' [*Visva Sahitya*]."³

However, what Tagore meant by *visva sahitya* was neither comparative literature nor world literature as we understand it. Rather, he was presenting, yet again, his own unique formulation of not just the philosophy but the glory of literature:

Walking through a neighbourhood you notice how busy everybody is: the grocer tending his shop, the blacksmith hammering on his anvil, the labourer carrying his load, the merchant balancing his accounts—what may at first be invisible, you may perceive with your heart—on both sides of the road, in every home, in bazaar and shop, in lane and by-lane, how the torrent of *rasa* [relish] floods through a myriad streams and tributaries, overrunning so much shabbiness, wretchedness, and poverty. The nectar of the universal soul of man is apportioned out among all men through the Ramayan-Mahabharat, tales and fables, kirtans and panchalis; Ram-Lakshman appear to prop up the most insignificant actions of the pettiest of men; the merciful breeze of Panchavati blows in the darkest home; man's heart-creations and self-expressions enclasp the penury and stringency of the workplace of labouring man with arms bejewelled with bracelets of beauty and beneficence. For once we need to see literature as embracing all of humanity. We have to see that in his emotional self man has expanded his practical being so far in manifold and multi-directional ways. The monsoons that bless him are composed of so many rains of songs and showers of poetry, so many Meghdutams, so many Vidyapatis; the pains and joys of his small home have been augmented with the tales of the pains and joys of so many great monarchs of the solar and lunar dynasties! How the humblest man engirds the pains of his daughter with the consummate compassion of Princess Parvati, daughter of the King of the mountains; how in the glory of Kailasha's poverty-stricken Lord, he glorifies the pain of his own poverty! In this way man advances, surpassing himself, intensifying himself, burnishing himself with a halo of brightness as he struggles on. Though sorely straightened by his circumstances, man has created for himself an augmented thought-creation, a second *samsara* [universe] of literary composition that surrounds this worldly *samsara*.

Do not so much as imagine that I will show you the way to such a world literature. Each of us must make his way forward according to his own means and abilities. All I have wanted to say is that just as the world is not merely your plough field, plus my plough

³ All quotations from this text refer to the new translation by Rijula Das and Makarand R. Paranjape, still unpublished; thus, no page numbers are provided. Buddhadev Bose's summary of the same lines in Tagore's text is as follows: "I have been called upon to discuss a subject to which you have given the English name Comparative Literature. Let me call it World Literature in Bengali" (cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 26).

field, plus his plough field, because to know the world that way is only to know it with a yokel-like parochialism, similarly world literature is not merely your writings, plus my writing, plus his writings. We generally see literature in this limited, provincial manner. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnectedness with every man's attempt at self-expression – that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to.

Clearly, here we see the recurrent themes of Tagore's philosophy and humanism: the call to rise above narrow provincialism and parochialism, to try to discover and express the "universal being," not just one's individuality, as the modernists might; above all, to see the interconnectedness of human creative expression. But even more than any of these, Tagore is also asserting the unique function and ability of art to give meaning and dignity to ordinary human life. The world of literature creates a parallel universe which makes the wretchedness of ordinary life bearable. Earlier in the essay, he uses the metaphor of the halo around the burning core of the sun to explain the relationship between art and life, the augmentation that the former brings to what would otherwise be unbearably hot or invisible, human life shod of all its refinements.

The continuing significance of Rabindranath Tagore's life and work has been reinforced in interesting ways during these global sesquicentennial anniversary celebrations. Not only has the occasion resulted in a flurry of activities around the world, but also occasioned dozens of interesting reminiscences and reflections. One such was reportedly eminent post-colonialist-feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's informal talk at her alma mater, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata.⁴ She recalls how she, along with her best college friend, sang Tagore's songs on numerous occasions, during her coming of age years. There was a song for every occasion and function, chosen from a list of popular numbers, birthdays, celebration of festivals, partings, deaths, and farewells. Reading *Shesher Kobita*, singing Rabindra Sangeet, was thus a way a whole generation grew up, a pattern which, with a few variations continues even today. Summing up this sort of influence, Spivak observes, "This is my Tagore, giving soul-shape to middle class women."⁵

Spivak goes on to speak of Tagore's value to literary critics like herself, which is to reemphasize the value of the arts and humanities in a world that is increasingly driven by profit. It is Tagore who best articulates the "surplus value" theory of art, where the real function of art is beyond any immediate material gain: "The world is in bad shape with the loss of emphasis on the humanities. This message of Tagore—that what goes across is not immediately profitable—is a hard lesson to learn in the face of the material ambition that at once drives and destroys our lives."⁶ In making this point, Spivak refers in passing to "Visva Sahitya," ("World Literature"), a celebrated essay, which I shall refer to in greater detail. Spivak observes that Tagore in this essay "theorizes the imaginative creative bond that travels across national boundaries as *bajey khoroch* –

⁴ SPIVAK. Tribute to the Poet from a Middle Class Girl.

⁵ SPIVAK. Tribute to the Poet from a Middle Class Girl.

⁶ SPIVAK. Tribute to the Poet from a Middle Class Girl.

wasteful spending. A powerful metaphor for what in the imagination goes above beyond beneath and short of mere rational choice.”⁷

It is interesting how this very essay which we are discussing today is brought to our attention by Spivak.

2 TAGORE AND WORLD LITERATURE

Though it seems to have re-surfaced in such a dramatic way, the essay that I have been referring to remained untranslated till recently. In 2001 it appeared in Tagore’s *Selected Writings on Literature and Language* edited by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri. This late translation is surprising because though Tagore only comes to world literature in the end, the essay is a very important statement of Tagore’s view of man, the purpose of human life, and the role of art in its fruition; indeed, we might consider the essay to be a concise formulation of Tagore’s aesthetic philosophy itself.⁸ What Tagore meant by world literature was the essential unity of human experience and therefore of human creativity. But more than that it signified to him the ever evolving, never complete, edifice of the best and most authentic expression of human creativity, fashioned by so many hands, spread in so many parts of the world, but still part of the one narrative of the human race. He also believed that we reveal ourselves in literature more profoundly than in mundane activities of self-interest and self-preservation. Moreover, it is only by giving ourselves to others that we can know or express ourselves. Such self-giving is effortless and joyous because in it lies the realization of our own nature. Everywhere, the universe revels in such joyous self-giving which exceeds any functional requirement or necessity. It is this plenitude or surplus that is beautiful and joyous; the artist in his self-giving is thus a part of a fundamental tendency of nature itself. We may call this the surplus value of art theory that Tagore believed in and which he enunciates so eloquently in this essay. Returning to the notion of world literature, Tagore contends that it is only in connecting with “everyone else in the broadest way” can we free ourselves: “man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal.”

This speech of Tagore’s was published early in 1907, as “Visva-Sahitya” or world literature, in a collection of essays called *Sahitya*. Literary scholars like Buddhadev Bose were quick to seize on the importance of Tagore’s pronouncements as the basis for

⁷ SPIVAK. Tribute to the Poet from a Middle Class Girl.

⁸ Given its importance, we have tried to offer a new translation of the essay. In our translation, we have, for most part, retained the more accurate rendering of Tagore’s words, which Swapan Chakravorty (DAS; CHAUDHURI. p. 138-150) has often rendered into more idiomatic English paraphrase. Similarly, we have tried to retain Tagore’s somewhat complicated syntax, rather than simplifying his sentences into “plain” English. We have also avoided gender neutral alterations, translating *manush* as “man” rather than “human” mostly because such usage was characteristic of Tagore’s times. Tagore almost certainly included the woman in his notion of man, though in specifically speaking of woman in one section of his essay, he acknowledges that much of the other references referred to masculine roles and occupations; at the level of abstraction, then, “man” may be understood as human, but in its practical application, Tagore was quite aware of its gendered implications.

a programme in comparative literary studies. No surprise that this speech has been quoted both on the website of the first Comparative Literature department in India at Jadavpur University, which was founded by Bose, and by a few other comparatists like the late Sisir Kumar Das. However, what is equally important to note is that they quote selectively from the essay, confining themselves to the last part. The whole essay has much wider ramifications and is of great significance in its own right. This, none of the previous scholars has effectively admitted to or pointed out. They have glossed over the entire body of the speech to fix only upon its conclusion in which Tagore finally arrives at the topic he has been asked to speak on, which is “Comparative literature.”

To understand the value and context of Tagore’s comments we will, however, have to go back over a hundred years earlier to account for how such ideas of world literature may have actually originated in India, then left Indian shores, and once again returned to India in a complex pattern and history of circulation. To start exploring this journey at a key moment, let us turn to another great literary figure, of stature comparable to Tagore’s, Wolfgang von Goethe.⁹ It is with him that the concept of world literature or *Weltliteratur* is usually associated. The expression itself has had a charmed life. It is what Fritz Strich calls, a “magical term” which at once “brings to mind a feeling of liberation, of such gain in space and scope.”¹⁰ The term itself was coined in 1827,¹¹ though Goethe had been thinking along these lines earlier and continued to do so later. Moreover, as Strich clarifies, “at no point did Goethe himself unequivocally state what he wished to be understood by world literature.”¹²

Almost fifty years before Goethe’s comments on world literature, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal and a patron of classical Indian studies, wrote an introduction to Charles Wilkins’ first translation of the *Bhagawad Gita* into English in 1785. This was an epochal act, the first translation into English of one of India’s most famous texts. Interestingly, Hastings’ Preface has been seen by Sisir Kumar Das as a plea for comparative literature: “I should not fear to place, in opposition to the best French version of the most admired passages of Iliad or Odyssey, or the 1st and 6th books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the Mahabharata.”¹³ This statement, which has eluded the notice of most comparatists or world literature specialists, nevertheless, attracted the attention of the students of College of Fort William, in Calcutta, which had been set up to train British civil servants for their work in India. Das points out how several of these students not only went on to become notable Orientalists, but also posed questions “relating to the problems of inter-literary relationship of divergent literary cultures.”¹⁴ European tastes and ideas of canonicity were not challenged by the discovery of these Eastern texts, but were also

⁹ Indeed Albert Schweitzer called Tagore “the Goethe of India.” KRIPALANI. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, p. 295.

¹⁰ STRICH. *Goethe and World Literature*, p. 3.

¹¹ STRICH. *Goethe and World Literature*, p. 160.

¹² STRICH. *Goethe and World Literature*, p. 5.

¹³ Cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 22.

¹⁴ DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 23.

inspired by the new possibilities that they posed. As H. H. Wilson, a well-known British scholar and Orientalist, said in 1806 about the same playwright that Goethe came to admire later:

the work of Kaleedas [sic] unfolded now for the first time to such distant generations as our own displays of this uniformity in the characters and genius of our race which seems to write at once the most remote of regions of time and space, and which always gratifies the human mind to discern through the superficial varieties in which some slight difference of external or even intellectual fashions may even disguise it. In Kaleedas we find poetical design, a poetical description of Nature in all her forms, moral and material, poetical imagery, poetical inventions, just and natural feeling, with all the finer and keener sensibilities of the human heart. In these great and immutable features we recognize in Kaleedas, the fellow and kinsman of the great masters of ancient and modern Poetry.¹⁵

The terms that Wilson uses to praise Kalidas are reminiscent of those Dr. Johnson employed to extol Britain's national bard, Shakespeare. In both what is found is a universality, both in feelings and values, and an accurate reflection of nature. Das calls this "one of the most significant pronouncements on the universality of letters defending the study of literature as a manifestation of the unifying spirit of human creativity."¹⁶ We must remember that such statements by colonial administrators and scholars appeared long before Goethe's idea of the possibility of world literature or the French literary historian Abel-François Villemain coined the term "Literature Comparée," which Matthew Arnold later adapted into English as "comparative literature."¹⁷

Not only did British Orientalists play a leading role in such early comparatism, Indian scholars and writers too seized the opportunity to read and respond to European literary models. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, an ambitious young man who dreamed of achieving fame as an English poet, failed to do so but achieved greater renown as the first Bangla modern poet. He wrote a new version of the epic *Ramayan* where, like Milton, he made the *rakshashas* or the demons, the heroes. He also introduced blank verse into Bengali. An even greater writer and the creator of modern Bangla fiction, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, himself a proto-nationalist, actually argued that imitation of foreign models was desirable if it spurred new literary forms and modes of creativity. For his contemporary, educated Bangla readers, he wanted a wider literary universe, consisting of both Indian and Western texts, which could be read in comparison and conjunction.¹⁸

4 SIGNIFICANCE OF *VISVA-SAHITYA*

It is time to return to Tagore's speech *Visva-Sahitya* (World Literature). Even in print, it retains the protean fluidity and plasticity of an oral presentation. Tagore's main

¹⁵ Cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 22-23.

¹⁶ DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 23.

¹⁷ DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 23.

¹⁸ DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 25.

concern is the relationship between the inner and the outer worlds, between our individual psyche and the circumambient planetary ecumene. In the first part of the essay, Tagore propounds three ways in which we relate to our world—he calls these the connection of the intellect, the connection of need, and the connection of joy. The first, when more fully explained, turns out to be similar to how the scientist relates to the material world in his attempts to understand it. The intellect, according to Tagore, realizes itself in understanding and discovering the laws and mysteries of nature. In doing so it realizes itself. The second connection is that of need. When we need others, when self-interest motivates our connection with the world, we do know and understand ourselves and others more and more; yet, Tagore, says, a barrier remains. Self-interest is not the highest way of relating to others. Finally, there is the connection of joy. In joy, there are no questions or doubts. If in giving of ourselves we experience joy, then there is neither hesitation nor questioning. In fact, in such self-giving, we may even squander away our self-interest. Our miserliness in one form of relationship is happily abandoned for a reckless squandering. What is important to understand, however, is that in Tagore's view, without some form of self-giving and relating to others, we cannot realize ourselves. On our own, we remain restricted and unfulfilled. In fact, the sole purpose of our talents is to know others and give ourselves to them; without that we cannot reach the truth of our being, of our human condition.

Tagore thus adopts a radical relationality in both his ethical and aesthetic positions. The arguably solipsistic Vedantic attitude of *atmanyevatmanatustah*¹⁹ or of the self being content in and of itself seems to be eschewed totally by Tagore, who not only accepts the reality, even if contingent of the phenomenal world, but considers it absolutely essential for one's own completion. Tagore's duality, however, is not absolute; neither the world nor the self can find their purpose without one another, let alone exist independently of one another. In this essay Tagore declares that by keeping aloof to oneself, we restrict and stunt ourselves; great souls are those who can "disseminate" their souls among the masses, thereby filling their own souls to the brim in doing the work of others. Tagore considers knowing oneself through and among others as the *dharma* or categorical imperative of our times.

However, in such self-knowing and self-giving, we encounter many impediments and obstructions. Selfishness and pride are chief among these. They prevent us from opening ourselves and offering ourselves to others. They prevent the generous and free intercourse of the human spirit. But, in a masterly stroke, Tagore argues that the greater the difficulties and the struggle to overcome them, greater the burnishing of the soul. He says that we read the biographies of great men precisely to find in their efforts to overcome their difficulties a counterpart of our own essential nature striving to manifest itself more fully in the world by overcoming the obstacles that we face.

After touching, once again, on the relation of the intellect to the world, Tagore now focuses in the rest of his essay on office and home, work and creativity, self-interest and joy, utility and beauty, as the two main contrasting ways of relating to the world.

¹⁹ *Bhagavad Gita* II.54.

The former is calculating and transactional, the latter is guileless and giving; while the one is miserly, the other liberal; the one is curtailed by need, the other arises out of liberty. Through a series of examples and analogies, Tagore shows how the relationship of joy with the world is an outcome of the soul's deep need to express itself in all its plenitude and fullness. To do so, even at the risk of squandering all its riches, it seizes upon whatever external resources it can marshal to fully manifest itself:

Our heart-goddess's [hriday-Lakshmi's] pride is hurt when she cannot send back an offering equal to what she receives from the world. To manifest the pride of her reciprocal hospitality she creates her tray of offerings using many ingredients, many languages, voices, brushes, and stones. In so doing, if any of her needs be served well and good, but often, even at the cost of her own needs, she is eager to express herself. She wants to announce herself even if the price is bankruptcy. The division of expression in man's nature is his main sector of incautious spending— it is here that the accountant of the intellect laments.

Here Tagore introduces the ancient aesthetic principle of *rasa* or juice, flavour, or relish. For a heart seeking to express itself, the world is full of relish; such relish is also transmitted into its own creative self-giving that takes the form of literature or art. Thus do we, even at the risk of all practical values, participate in the joyous sacrifice [*ananda-yajna*] of life. Our heart's deepest urge can only be realized in its meeting the outside world in an act of self-giving through which it finds its self-expression and fulfilment.

Tagore now develops his unique theory of the surplus value that proves that the world is both beautiful and joyous, a fit object of aesthetic perception and enjoyment:

Beauty in the world is a manifestation of such largesse. The flower, we see, is in no hurry to become the seed; it transcends its need and blooms beautifully; the clouds do not rush off after raining, they languorously and needlessly catch our eyes with their colours; the trees do not stick-like spread their arms outwards as beggars for light and shower, but green thickets of leaves fill the horizon with their bounty; the sea, we notice, is not an immense office that transports water to the atmosphere in the form of clouds but intimidates by its fathomlessness; and the mountain not only feeds water to the rivers of the earth but like Rudra deep in yoga, stills the fears of those who cross the skies— then we find the *hriday-dharma* [the heart-purpose] of the world. Then the ever-wizened intellect asks, why this careless expenditure in needless efforts? The ever-young heart answers, just because it pleases me; I see no other reason.

The universe exists of its own sweet will, as the self-expression of some cosmic force, call it the Creator, who wishes for his own enjoyment and pleasure to manifest himself in his myriad majesty so as to realize and apprehend himself more fully. That is why the universe is born of and expresses its own *ananda* or the fundamental joy of self-expression and self-recognition.

At this point, Tagore makes his non-dualistic move after allowing for not just the separation and then coupling of the self and the world, but also of the diversity of individual and phenomenal reality. He asserts:

The heart knows: there is one heart that expresses itself every moment in the universe. Why else would there be so much beauty, music, gestures, signs, and signals, so much

decoration across creation? The heart is not taken in by the miserliness of business: that is why to entice it need has been so elaborately hidden from the earth, the water, and the skies in so many needless arrangements. If the world was not flavourful [*rasamay*] we would have been small, insulted beings. Our hearts would say, I am not invited to the world's sacrifice [*yajna*]. But the whole world, surpassing its various duties, has brimmed over with joy and is telling the heart, in so many different way, I want you: in laughter I want you, in tears I want you, in fear I want you, in assurance I want you, in anger I want you, in peace I want you.

From feeling small and left out, suddenly the earth becomes our home, our mother, our lover; none is to be left out or disqualified, but all are invited to the feast of life. Through the sublime act of self-giving in which the heart, overcoming all impediments, finds its joyous self-expression in the world, realizing itself in the process of relating to others through a spendthrift and uncalculating relish, all alienation is abolished. The microcosm and the macrocosm are harmonised, their oneness re-established; beauty and bliss reign over all the worlds.

Tagore now comes more specifically to literature, explaining its non-utilitarian value:

That is why there is no bar on man's self-expression in literature. Self-interest is far from it. Here, pain pours a cloud of tears upon our hearts, but it does not interfere with our household duties [*samsara*]; fear sways our heart but does not harm our bodies; happiness fills our hearts with the touch of mirth but does not awaken our greed. In this way man has woven alongside his household of necessities a need-free habitation of literature. There he is able to experience his own nature through various *rasas* without harming himself in any practical sense; here he can discover expression unhampered by obstacles. There is no obligation here, only happiness. There are no guards here, only the emperor himself.

Literature is a manifestation of man's affluence, his exceeding the straitened circumstances of his planetary existence, the surpluses of his heart that he wants to share with the others, his own return for the riches that he has encountered and enjoyed in the world.

Literature, he adds, has a further function: it selects, it concentrates, it unifies what is scattered and piecemeal in the real world. In its concentration of value, it takes the human being to the sublime more directly than the ordinary world does. Taking a dig at "modern literature," Tagore declares that not all ages, however, are capable of such magnificence and munificence: "In that hour of crisis the distorted mirror magnifies the small and in the literature of such a time man augments his pettiness, floods his own shortcomings with audacious light. Then craftiness takes the place of art, pride substitutes glory and Tennyson is replaced by Kipling."

Here we see how this essay of Tagore belongs to the high idealism that preceded the two world wars. Later, there would be a much more sombre and anguished reflection of the degradation of the human spirit. Tagore would not only digest modern literature, but reinvent himself. In the dark days just before World War II, he would, in fact, question the very capacity of words to make sense, seeking refuge instead in a sort of visual language or *chitrelekha*. In the last poems of *Kranti* dated Christmas 1937, he would invoke the rising of the *chitrabhanu*, the sun of images, to combat the civilizational

crisis that he saw all around himself, where words themselves had turned into meaningless propaganda.²⁰ But *Visva-Sahitya* shows us an earlier, more idealistic Tagore, still secure in his belief in the joyous possibilities of art.

Tagore now comes not just to the end of his speech but to its actual purpose, to speak of world literature. He tells us that literature is not an expression of specific individuals or even of particular nations. Instead, it is the articulation of the “universal man” [*visva manav*]. This universal man is more like the essence of human nature as found in all ages and all peoples of the world, the deepest, profoundest, most lasting truth of the human condition:

to see literature through the mirror of nation, time, and persons is to diminish it and not see it fully. If we understand that in literature the universal man [*visva-manav*] expresses himself, then we might discern what to expect in literature. Where the author has is nothing but the pretext of literary composition, his writing has failed. Where the author has experienced in his own being the being of all men, where his writing expresses the pain of every man, there his work has found its place in literature.

This truth, somehow, is also tied up with the most intense human suffering. The great creative artist somehow can feel in himself the travail of the whole race and express it as none others can.

Tagore gives us the astonishingly telling image of the mansion of world literature: Thus must we view literature as a temple that universal man [*visva manav*] has built; writers have come from all times and all nations to work as labourers in this project. The plan of the building is not in front of us, but whatever is wrong is immediately broken down; every labourer has to use his natural competence to integrate his own composition into the whole and thereby complete the invisible plan. In this is expressed his power and the reason why no one pays him a pittance like an ordinary labourer but respects him like a maestro.²¹

²⁰ I owe this insight to Shri Samik Bandyopadhyay, who is now working on the 1450 paintings of Tagore from this period which have never been seen because they were locked up in the vaults of Visva-Bharati, the university that Tagore founded. These paintings show Tagore’s strenuous efforts to liberate himself not only from the tyranny of words but to step out, as he himself desired, of the *khyatiprangan*, to liberate himself the arena of fame in which he found himself trapped.

²¹ Bose’s translation of the same passage reads as follows:

Now is the time to say the actual thing—that is, we diminish literature by containing it within the constraints of time, nation and individual. If we understand that literature is universal man’s attempt to express himself, then alone can we discern what we ought to within literature. Where the writer has been seen as mediator, there his writing has been limited. Where he has felt the emotions of all mankind, expressed the whole extent of human pain, there his work has attained its place in literature. Then, we must see literature thus—a builder of global standards is engaged upon constructing this temple: writers from many countries and many periods are workers engaged upon this construction site. None of us have the entire plan of the building before us, it is true, but the portions that do not cohere with it are broken and rebuilt again and again; each worker has to work according to his contribution, becomes part of that invisible plan, and it is in this that his genius is expressed—which is why he is not paid the meagre wages of a labourer, but earns the respect of the expert. (<http://www.complitju.org/World%20Literature/WorldLiterature.html>)

The house of world literature is nothing less than a temple of creativity for Tagore. This temple is being constantly built by myriad hands, but it is never finished. It ever remains a work in progress. *Mahakala*, or Great Time, the great winnower, filters out what is slight, ephemeral, or inconsequential; only that which is lasting, precious, and meaningful is allowed to remain: “man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal, to realize himself in the many.” The great writer “tries to see not the individual but the deeper intention in the striving soul’s constant endeavour to transcend his personal history. He does not return after seeing the pilgrims— he looks for the deity that all the pilgrims have congregated to see.”²²

Tagore thus argues that just as the world is not “the sum of patches of land belonging to different people” literature too is not the “mere total works composed by different hands.”²³ He wanted readers to free themselves from “rusticity” and “narrow provincialism,” to try to see the totality of human creativity in a holistic manner: “we must strive to see the work of each other as a whole, that whole as a part of man’s universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature. Now is the time to do so.” This powerful appeal is a typical expression of Tagore’s spirit of universalism and integrated understanding of all human beings as part of one indivisible and interconnected unit. For Tagore, what was meant by world literature “is the way in which the soul of man expresses its joy through the written word and the forms which he chooses to give to his eternal being.”²⁴

Clearly, Tagore’s idea of world literature is not the same as what those who practice the discipline of Comparative Literature uphold. Tagore’s holism is not so much concerned with comparisons, but with the essence of human experience and expression, which he considers both universal and unified, despite all the local variations. For him, we must learn to accept and embrace humankind as a whole, regardless of differences of race, culture, region, and nation. We can do this only by broadening our spirit, learning about each other without the artificial divisions of power and the inequalities imposed by economics, imperialism, or race. World literature for Tagore is a liberation from narrow-mindedness and prejudice, the entering of humanity into a new cosmopolitan spirit, which he thought was the demand of the times. Of course, these remarks were made before the two great wars, which considerably shook the poet’s faith in human nature or

²² Bose’s translation of this passage is as follows:

If we want to understand man as revealed in action, his motivation and his aims, then we must pursue his intentions through the whole of history. To take isolated instances, such as the reign of Akbar or Queen Elizabeth, to merely satisfy curiosity. He who knows the Akbar and Elizabeth are only pretexts or occasions; the man, throughout the world of history is incessantly at work to fulfill his deepest purposes, and to unite himself with the All – it is he, I, say, who will strive to see in history not the local and the individual, but the eternal and universal man. His pilgrimage will not end in observing other pilgrims, or he will behold the god whom all pilgrims are seeking. (Cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 27.)

Interestingly, just over a hundred years later, Salman Rushdie writes *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), a novel that links Elizabeth and Akbar in a sort of fictional attempt to unify their then separate worlds.

²³ Cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 27.

²⁴ Cited in DAS. *Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective*, p. 27.

universal values. First Japan's militarism and later Nazi Germany's anti-humanism made Tagore worry incessantly about the future of the human race. He also tried to reinvent himself, his creative impulse, as well as language itself to cope with the new challenges posed to him by such cataclysmic world events.



RESUMO

O ensaio de Rabindranath Tagore, "Visva Sahitya," foi traduzido pela primeira vez apenas em 2011 e atualmente sua relevância vem sendo reconhecida cada vez mais. Embora Tagore só aborde a literatura mundial ao final do texto, o ensaio constitui uma apresentação importante da visão de Tagore sobre o propósito da vida humana e o papel da arte em sua fruição; de fato, poderíamos considerar este ensaio uma formulação concisa da própria filosofia estética de Tagore. O que este autor entendia como literatura mundial era a unidade essencial da experiência humana e, portanto, da criatividade.

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Escrita ensaística de Tagore, literatura mundial, Literatura Comparada na Índia

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