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Diasporic Cosmopolitanism: Rabindranath Tagore and the South Asian Diaspora

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As one of the Indian subcontinent's most canonical writers, Rabindranath Tagore played a pivotal role as a key figure during the region's twentieth century independence movement. Since his death in 1941, he has remained ever-present in the cultural memories of South Asian writers and postcolonial theorists, with evidence of even 'a persisting relationship between South Asian diasporic authors and Tagore' (Lange 2015, 358). References to Tagore in the writings of diasporic communities in the West demonstrate a familiarity and reverence for the poet that no longer even persists within the subcontinent itself to the same extent, with modern-day Indian schoolchildren being largely reluctant to engage with Tagore's texts in literature classes (Dutta and Robinson 2009, xviii). What is it about the postcolonial diasporic condition that allows for Tagore to continue to feature so heavily in the diasporic imagination?

The Indian diaspora in the West is relatively unique in its position amongst other immigrant-descended communities. People of Indian origin living abroad play significant roles in Indian politics, actively participating in and funding campaigns during elections (Deccan Herald 2014). Indian citizens who live abroad for more than 183 days a year qualify as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), of which there are over 30 million (Surana 2022). This status allows for foreign incomes to remain untaxable in India, encouraging Indians to continue to develop as an international community. The result is that India is a truly international country, with its nationals living across the globe. For many diasporic writers, Rabindranath Tagore's anti-nationalist brand of Cosmopolitanism, but with a maintenance of roots in Indian culture, is symbolic of the modern-day situation of the diaspora, and helps express a sense of diasporic Cosmopolitanism in their daily mediations between East and West.

What kinds of relationships do the members of this diasporic community have with both the Indian nation, and the Western countries that they live in? Tagore's presence in South Asian diasporic literature is reflective of the diaspora's intense desire for a sustained familiarity with India and its anticolonial history. There is a temporal and geographic distance between the two, but a

desire for closeness, as demonstrated by the prevailing presence of Tagore in the diasporic imagination.

Tagore's Indian Cosmopolitanism

Tagore's internationalist vision of a cosmopolitan, independent India was at odds with many of his contemporary anticolonialists, who instead looked towards Indian nationalism as a means to combat imperialism. These conflicting approaches are expressed in his 1916 novel titled *The Home and the World*, which is set in the context of Curzon's 1905 partition of Bengal with the purpose of expressing Tagore's proposition for a new international order (Atkinson 1993, 95). This idealised new world order is inextricable from Tagore's fear of certain forms of nationalism as the Indian independence movement begins to take shape. On the last day of the nineteenth century, he writes:

> 'The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred. / The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance' (Tagore 1918, 133).

Tagore's disaffection with the nation-state stems from his recognition that 'the pride that comes with nationhood can only lead to arrogance and to the repression of others' (Atkinson 1993, 98). The title of *The Home and the World* suggests that Tagore is contemplating alternative options for India's role on the world stage, and the ways that East and West could be mediated between in an independent yet international India. The novel aims to convey that 'to deny distinctiveness and individuality is to deny diversity, and to ignore the fundamental nature of the world' (Atkinson 1993, 98). Tagore's denunciation of nationalistic pride is symbolised by the interactions between the novel's characters, some of whom share Tagore's viewpoints, while others represent the antithetical opinion. The novel's female character, Bimala, is sometimes referred to as *Shakti*, which is the ultimate female principle that underpins reality. By being described in this manner, Bimala is representative of 'the beauty, vitality, and the glory of Bengal'. (Atkinson 1993, 96). The personification of Bengal as a woman is reminiscent of depictions of both Bengal and India as a

feminised, ethereal human form, often referred to as *Bharat Mata*. The original pictorial representation of this figure was painted by Tagore's nephew, Abindranath Tagore (Ramaswamy 2010, 16). However, Tagore was wary of the use of such images in the independence movement; *The Home and the World's* nationalistic antagonist declares that 'true patriotism will never be roused in our countrymen unless they can visualise the motherland' (Tagore 1919, 120). Jawaharlal Nehru presents the *Bharat Mata* image as a natural manifestation of anticolonial nationalism, by writing that 'it is curious how one cannot resist the tendency to give an anthropomorphic form to a country...India becomes *Bharat Mata,* Mother India' (Nehru 1959, 431). It is then perhaps this deep-rooted connection between the spread of nationalism and the personified Mother India that explain Tagore's distaste for the image.

Tagore's cosmopolitan outlook is physically embodied by Santiniketan, the school that he established in 1901 based on 'ancient Indian traditions and a vision of the unity of humanity transcending religious and cultural boundaries' (UNESCO, n.d.). UNESCO continues its description of the institution by explaining:

> 'distinct from the prevailing British colonial architectural orientations of the early 20th century and of European modernism, Santiniketan represents approaches toward a pan-Asian modernity, drawing on ancient, medieval and folk traditions from across the region' (UNESCO, n.d.).

This suggests that Tagore's brand of cosmopolitan is unique in its aim to maintain its roots in Bengali and Indian traditions, and that this Indianness is in fact intrinsic to the international nature of his outlook. One of the school's many influential alumni is diasporic scholar Amartya Sen, who was born in the town of Santiniketan itself but has lived in the UK and US for the majority of his life. Sen's family were close associates of Tagore; Sen's name 'Amartya' was suggested to his mother by the poet (NDTV, 2020). Sen's work is heavily influenced by Tagore and the vision of the contemporary world that he was introduced to at Santiniketan, where he discovered that:

> ‘There was something remarkable about the ease with which class room discussions would move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere’ (Sen 2005, 115).

This conclusion from Sen’s time at the school in an article on Tagore shows that Cosmopolitanism was the fundamental idea that he took from his education here, which seems in line with Tagore’s desire for the outcome of his students. Sen notes that in a 1941 lecture, despite his robust denunciations of British imperialism, Tagore recalled what India had gained from ‘discussions centred upon Shakespeare’s drama and Byron’s poetry and above all...the large hearted liberalism of nineteenth century English politics’ (Sen 2001). For Tagore there is a distinction between British imperial rule, which he strongly opposes, and elements of British culture, which he often admires. This favourable view of British art and politics seems at odds with a nationalistic form of anticolonialism, which would attempt to mostly draw inspiration from Indian sources. However, despite this appreciation for the impact of other cultures on India, Tagore retains a firm stance on the importance of remaining rooted in Indian culture too. In a letter to his son-in-law who was studying agriculture in the US, Tagore wrote:

> ‘To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one’s identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room’ (Sen 2001).

As a member of the Indian diaspora in the West, Sen’s interest in Tagore’s brand of Indian cosmopolitan suggests that Sen’s own feelings towards India might be comparable. In a commentary on *The Home and the World,* Sen quotes Nikhil’s words, ‘I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it’ (Sen 2001). Sen concludes by stating that ‘hatred of one group can lead to hatred of others, no matter how far such feeling may be from the minds of large-hearted nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi’ (Sen 2001). Although this statement is imbued with an obvious affection towards Gandhi, Sen evidently prefers the Tagorean anti-nationalist

approach, and so his analysis of *The Home and the World* is a clear example of the diaspora using Tagore's ideas as a tool to bridge the various fragmentations within it, and with other groups. Sen explains that Tagore cites a lack of education as the fundamental barrier to overcoming such divisions, and thus the key cause of India's social and economic hardship:

> 'In my view the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Cast divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions – all centre on this single factor' (Sen 2001).

Sen characterises Santiniketan as, in an attempt to counter this lack of education, a school which emphasises 'self-motivation rather than on discipline, and on fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive existence'. Tagore himself had dropped out of school (largely out of boredom), and so this is the key issue that Santiniketan attempts to rectify (Sen 2001). As a result of this unique focus, the school, from Sen's experience, could not compete with the high academic standard of many of the other schools in Bengal. However, he reiterates that the meeting of various cultures is instead his lasting impression from his time at the institution, which is corroborated by the words of Satyajit Ray, a fellow alumnus of the school:

> 'Santiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am' (Ray 1991).

It is undoubtable that Tagore would be very satisfied with this conclusion.

Another of the diaspora's acclaimed scholars, Sugata Bose, who has worked in the US since the 1980s, focuses on the idea of Asian universalism in an article on Tagore. Bose characterises him as 'one of the most creative exponents of an Asia-sense in the early twentieth century', suggesting that it is by no means simply India and Western Europe that Tagore draws inspiration from, but also other parts of Asia (Bose n.d., 1). Bose describes Tagore's cosmopolitan aspirations as 'universalism with a difference', in other words an embodiment of the idea that in Asia and Africa, 'the colonised were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to

the shaping of a global future' (Bose, n.d., 2). By engaging in Cosmopolitanism, Tagore and other Asian universalists are able to counter the idea that Cosmopolitanism is a uniquely Western phenomenon, and thus rejects the European claim of having a monopoly on universalist ideals. As in Sen's writing, Bose is clear that Tagore's internationalism is not at odds with his affection for India and desires for independence; he writes that Tagore 'loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists' (Bose n.d., 3). It is evident that both Sen and Bose, two of the South Asian diaspora's most prominent figures, are great admirers of Tagore's brand of Cosmopolitanism: the desire to maintain strong Indian roots while denouncing Indian nationalism and also looking outwards towards other countries and continents for possible inspiration.

Nirad Chaudhuri, however, has a more complicated relationship with Tagore. Another diasporic figure, having been born in Bengal but later settling in Oxford, Chaudhuri's last public appearance was his speeches at "The Nehru Centre Tagore-Yeats Annual Lecture" in London. The most striking point in his comments on Tagore during this lecture is the idea that Tagore was in fact *not* a Cosmopolitan. He speaks of the imposition on Tagore:

> 'of the appellation '*Visva-Manav*', meaning that he was cosmopolitan, that is, he belongs to the whole world, not to a particular country. There could not be a greater mistake. He was no cosmopolitan and was never easy in the company of Europeans' (Chaudhuri 2001, 157).

Chaudhuri argues that every relationship that Tagore formed with Europeans became a 'wrecked encounter', and that his '*Visva-Manav'* image is in fact a misunderstanding of the Italian Renaissance *Homo Universale* (Universal Man) – 'an all-sided man (a man interested in all sides or aspects of human life)...That was the expression of his identity' (Chaudhuri 2001, 157-8). Despite the fact that Chaudhuri uses this description as an argument against Tagore's Cosmopolitanism, it seems more probable that this was the reason for it; the fact that Tagore was 'a man interested in all sides or aspects of human life' suggests that this interest would extend to human lives outside of India, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the human condition; the two interpretations of

Visva-Manav do not seem incompatible. Chaudhuri also agrees with Yeats's criticism of Tagore's English, and believes that his 'English never became authentic, natural English, that is to say, English as spoken and written by those who were English-speaking by birth' (Chaudhuri 2001, 159). However, he also acknowledges that Tagore's deep interest in the concept of live stemmed from the European tradition, evolving from the Romantic poets. This is indicative of a form of cosmopolitan behaviour, although Chaudhuri disagrees as 'at the same time, it was combined with the old Hindu bodily love. He could not dissociate his romanticism from the carnality of the ancient love' (Chaudhuri 2001, 159). However, this meeting of the ancient Indian with the European is the basis of Tagore's Cosmopolitanism, which does not reject the Indian, but instead merges it with the outside world.

Tagore's International Audience

Tagore's cosmopolitan ideas in *The Home and the World* were translated into English soon after the book's Indian publication by another of Tagore's nephews, Surendranath Tagore, with his uncle's approval. This implies that Tagore aimed for the book to reach a wider audience than just his Indian one, which is consolidated by the fact the text is interjected by explanatory notes on words and phrases that might not otherwise be understood by a non-Indian audience. 'Vermilion mark', for instance, is defined as 'the mark of Hindu wifehood and the symbol of all devotion that it implies', while 'the *sari*' is described as 'the dress of the Hindu woman' (Tagore 1919, 1). Such notes are a frequent occurrence within the novel, mostly always in reference to an aspect of Indian, Hindu or Bengali culture, and thus making 'home' more accessible to the 'world'. As the first non-European to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, it follows that Tagore's writing must be made readable to his non-Indian following. The novel continues to be read by an international audience, with University College London's School of European Languages, Culture and Society opening their book club with a discussion of *The Home and the World*. At face value, the choice of an Indian

writer seems unusual for a department whose focus is on Europe, which is acknowledged by the club. This is justified by the fact that 'the story could be described as rather European in its style and there are various reasons to acknowledge the Romantic influences in it' (Magathova 2020). Tagore's internationalist attitude is therefore also visible in the style and form of his writing, alongside in the actual content of his words. The book club summarises Tagore's philosophy as encouraging 'a healthy relationship with one's nation, neither denying one's culture nor following it blindly' (Magathova 2020). This is the brand of Cosmopolitan that seems to resonate so deeply with so many diasporic writers. Tagore's ideas on nationhood and nationalism are not unique to the Indian experience, as they can be applied to other countries in both East and West (aided by the fact that he so often engages with ideas from other cultures), which further demonstrates Tagore's desire to be read by an international audience.

The sesquicentennial anniversary of Tagore's birth saw the organisation of the International Tagore Conference; 'the conference's aim was a reappraisal of Rabindranath Tagore in the light of new insights gained through the multitude of events during 2011, the sesquicentennial anniversary year of his birth, and with a focus on Continental Europe' (International Tagore Conference 2012, 107). The subject of the conference was thus concentrated on Tagore's role as mediator between India and the rest of the world, particularly Europe. The conference's keynote address explains that this international outlook was distinctive from previous centuries of the Indian poetic imagination, which had remained solely focused on *Jambudvipa*, the term used to refer to the subcontinent in ancient Indian sources. Tagore therefore created a new paradigm for Indian poetry, and as an avid traveller, was able to integrate 'the whole new outside world', just as he hoped an independent India would also achieve politically (International Tagore Conference 2012, 107). The majority of the scholars speaking at the conference were from Continental Europe, from Germany, Spain, Scandinavia, or Eastern Europe, demonstrating his continued presence even in parts of Europe that do not have any close historical ties with India. The relationship between German scholarship and

Tagore is mutual, as Tagore studied the German language in order to be able to read Goethe, Schiller and Heine in the original. The modern European view of Tagore has developed from the view of his European contemporaries, as although many of these contemporaries were admirers of his writing (famously, W.B. Yeats), they still position Tagore as a one-dimensional Oriental writer. In a 1935 letter, Yeats wrote:

> 'Damn Tagore...because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian can know English' (Wade 1954, 834-5).

This suggests that Yeats is only comfortable when Tagore remains confined to an Indian space, and that his desire to reach a wider audience ruins the authenticity of his Indian poetry. 'The real Tagore', in contrast, 'the Bengali Rabindranath of a thousand interests and commitments, refused to wear the 'Oriental' straitjacket the British have fashioned for him' (Jelnikar 2008, 1009). Languages and language barriers are a recurring theme in notes from the conference, with one speaker focusing on the problems and effects of translating Tagore's Bengali into other Indian languages, English, and other European languages. (International Tagore Conference 2012, 107). These possible issues of translation are heightened by the fact that the Bengali and Western discourses on Tagore have rarely ever been in communication with each other, despite both being rich in quantity. This lack of interaction seems at odds with Tagore's own deep-rooted relationship with both Bengal and the Western world, as he himself was a bridge between these two intellectual spheres.

Diasporic Reverence for Tagore

Literature from the South Asian diaspora is littered with references to Tagore – there are many 'examples of striking familiarity among diasporic subcontinental authors with Tagore's work' – and many diasporic writers also engage more directly with critical analyses of his writing. (Lange 2015, 358). Anita Desai, born in India to an Indian father and German mother, has lived in India, Britain and the US. She wrote an introduction to a 1985 edition of *The Home and the World* as a

staunch defence in response to the novel's critics – most famously, George Lukacs, who denounced it as 'a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind' (Desai 1985, 12). To counter such viewpoints, Desai praises Tagore's 'flashes of light and colour' and the novel's 'touches of tenderness and childishness' (Desai 1985, 7). As a writer herself, Desai's main focus in her commentary on the novel is on the literary style and imagery that is deployed by Tagore. The overriding viewpoint from the diaspora seems to idealise Tagore as a godlike figure, often immune to harsh criticism (Lange 2015, 365). His iconic status 'does not elicit the kind of acerbic iconoclastic fervour from critics as in Arundhati Roy's attack as that other pillar of the Indian heritage, Mahatma Gandhi' (Lange 2015, 358). Why is this the case with Tagore? There seems to be something in his writing that is more conducive to a nostalgic, rose-tinted perspective. Scholars have found that the greater the distance from Bengali culture, the more positive the associations with his writing (Lange 2015, 359). Salman Rushdie was surprised to learn of Tagore's international popularity upon a visit to Sandanist Nicaragua, during which Nicaraguans would refer to 'Tagoré' (Lange 2015, 360). Why does Tagore so often seem to be held in higher regard internationally, both with the South Asian diaspora and others, than in India itself? Perhaps it is the fact that there is a greater distance between the diaspora and the India of Tagore's era that ensures a sustained popularity of the writer amongst members of the diaspora.

A common theme in diasporic references to Tagore is an association of his writing with older family members; Nirad Chaudhuri's familiarity with the writer began with an adolescent reading of 'all novels by Tagore' in his uncle's library (Chaudhuri 2001, 300), while Desai claims, "reading Tagore, I recreated my father's world" (Desai 2011). This is suggestive of the temporal distance between the diasporic figure and India, which is also heightened by the geographic distance created by living outside of South Asia. Despite the fact that these distances are mostly insurmountable, due to the fact that Tagore's India no longer exists in its same form, there is a still desire for closeness, which is achieved through reading Tagore's writing. This link to the historical

past invokes a sense of nostalgia, which is heightened by the fact that the temporal distance between Tagore's India and the modern-day diaspora can never be overcome. The fact that this distance is insurmountable makes it all the more desired. Vikram Seth, educated in India, Britain and the US, is best known for his 1993 novel *A Suitable Boy*, which makes numerous references to Tagore. A key passage that does so is a strong indication of a generational divide in Bengali views on Tagore:

> ''But Amit has a special gift,' broke in Mrs Chatterji. 'Aren't you proud of him?'
>
> 'He can practise his special gifts in his spare time,' said her husband.
>
> 'Is that what they said to Rabindranath Tagore?' asked Amit.
>
> 'I'm sure you'll admit there's a difference between you and Tagore,' said his father, looking at his eldest son in surprise.'
>
> 'I'll admit there's a difference, Baba,' said Amit. 'But what's the relevance of the difference to the point I'm making?'
>
> But at the mention of Tagore, Mrs Chatterji had entered a mode of righteous reverence.
>
> 'Amit, Amit,' she cried, 'how can you think of Gurudeb like that?'' (Seth 1993, 480).

The conversation continues with Mrs Chatterji being horrified and almost hysterical at this comparison between Tagore and her son, as she holds Tagore with a godlike reverence, while her children are prompted to criticise Tagore and the Bengali cultural idolisation of him. Through this scene, Seth depicts a generational divide on perceptions of Tagore, with the older Chatterjis unable to accept that Tagore's writing is in any way comparable to the work of any other person (even their own son), while their children do not fully understand the intense hold that Tagore has over their parents and the rest of Bengal. Some of the novel's other older characters, however, are less reverent; an earlier chapter depicts a lesson delivered by a famed musician, Ustad Majeed Khan. One of his students, a 'cheerful but shy middle-aged Bengali woman' states that her husband would prefer her to learn songs by Tagore, and not the classical music that Khan usually taught. Khan responds, 'Hmmh!...So I expect he'll be asking you to sing a '*gojol*' next.' The narrator adds 'That the sickly-sweet so-called music of Rabindranth Tagore's songs should be more attractive to any man's ears than the beauty of classical *khyaal* clearly marked such a man as a buffoon' (Seth 1990,

348). Seth thus acknowledges that there is a varied reaction to Tagore within Bengal, but it is inarguable that the poet's presence is felt all the way through the gargantuan novel, which in itself is demonstrative of the significant impact of the poet on other forms of Bengali art.

In a reflection on the rapidly-changing world, Seth's narrator states:

> 'Less than ten years ago Hitler had England by the throat, Japan had bombed Pearl Harbour, Gandhi was fasting in jail while Churchill was inquiring impatiently why he was not yet dead, and Tagore had just died' (Seth 1993, 546).

To the modern-day reader and the non-Bengali, Tagore's death is a surprising addition to this list of historic events, and does not seem to be as significant to the world as the others mentioned. Seth thus uses this list to emphasis the substantial influence of Tagore on Bengali culture, and the reverence with which he is viewed. At other moments, the novel contains multiple short references to characters humming a Tagore tune in their heads (Seth 1993, 452, 976, 1237, 1503), and the novel's first mention of Tagore is when the character Pran recalls lines of Tagore while in a difficult meeting with the head of his university's English department, which 'came into his head in Tagore's own English translation':

> 'Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
> into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
> Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening
> thought and action–
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.' (Seth 1993, 89).

These Tagore lines prompt Pran to remember his home, with:

> 'the Ganges flowing close by the house. (When he thought in English, it was the Ganges, rather than Ganga, to him.) He followed it first downstream to Patna and Calcutta, then upstream past Banaras till it divided at Allahabad; there he chose the Yamuna and followed it to Delhi. Are things as closed-minded in the capital? he asked himself. As mad, as mean, as silly, as rigid? How will I be able to live in Brahmpur all my life?' (Seth 1993, 89).

Pran's ability to recall these lines of verse indicate a strong familiarity with Tagore's writing, and his consequent thoughts demonstrate the emotive effect of Tagore's poetry on his psyche. The fact that Pran is recalling both Tagore and the Ganges in English, rather than his native Hindi or Tagore's original Bengali, seems to be emphasised by Seth in this passage. Perhaps this signifies a sense of Tagorean Cosmopolitanism; Pran is attempting to discover a world outside of Brahmpur, depicted by his imagined journey along the Ganges, and English is a unifying language, not just for India but for people across the globe.

Similarly, Sunetra Gupta's debut novel, *Memories of Rain*, incorporates her own translations of Tagore's poetry into its prose. Gupta is a British citizen, and her website describes her as 'an accomplished translator of the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore' (Gupta 1993). The introduction to a page of some of these translations states that 'Gupta's father was an accomplished performer of the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. The great Bengali poet's work was sung in Sunetra's household every day' (Gupta 1993). Here, as with other diasporic writers, Tagore provides links for Gupta to her family and childhood in India. Despite the overwhelming presence of Tagore's work in *Memories of Rain*, the poet is only mentioned by name a handful of times. This suggests that Tagore is so well integrated in the fabric of the text that an explicit reference to him is not always necessary for his presence to be felt. This seamless integration of Tagore echoes the extent to which Bengali culture as a whole is so inextricable from the man, as Gupta describes the book as 'an examination of the dependence of Bengali culture on the towering figure of the poet Rabindranath Tagore' (Gupta n.d.). One of the few instances of a direct mention of Tagore's name makes this reverence concrete:

> 'he, whom she had thought, for the greater part of her childhood, to be one of the gods, if only for the curious coincidence by which Tagore, or Thakur as is its unbastardised form, means Lord in Bengali, the Lord Krishna, Krishna Thakur, and Rabindranath Tagore, perched upon a soft cloud, heavenly poet, floating his verse upon windstream, to fall as rich rain upon earth, and when she had discovered, in shame and disbelief, that he has only been a man, had died, like all men, only eighteen years before her birth, she recognised then that a mortal

> may command more reverence than the gods themselves, and it was then that she swore to him, perhaps in the words that he had given her,
>
> if the doors to my heart should someday close upon you
>
> break them down and enter my soul
>
> remember you are my only king, do not turn away' (Gupta 199, 137).

Despite interrupting Gupta's prose, these lines of Tagore's verse do not feel disruptive to the flow of the text; instead, the prose and the poetry feel like one. This is partly achieved by the frequent use of commas in this passage, which ensures that the prose is read in the same way as a poem with frequent line breaks. In addition to the structure of her writing echoing Tagore, the content of Gupta's words also mimics his literary style. She uses metaphors associated with religion and nature to convey her reverence, which is reminiscent of the imagery used in Tagore's romanticised lyrics. Gupta thus writes of Tagore as Tagore writes of God.

As a depiction of an interracial and intercultural relationship, *Memories of Rain* is often regarded as a 'multicultural' novel. However, Gupta disagrees, and writes that:

> '*Memories of Rain* was labelled as experimental and multicultural…the latter irritated me…Spiritual advancement does not magically and automatically emerge from the meeting of two cultures... If anything multiculturalism ghettoises people and stops them from building a culture. Pasting elements of people's ancestral culture onto them, simply reinforces the idea that *British* culture, the culture of the country where they were born doesn't actually belong to them...This said, *Memories of Rain* is very clearly for me a celebration of my culture, and is recklessly adorned with my own personal translations of a number of Tagore songs that are central to my sensibilities' (Gupta n.d.).

Gupta's disdain for multiculturalism stems from a reluctance to acknowledge otherness, as this causes the diasporic figure to be seen as an outsider. At face value, this seems to be at odds with Tagorean Cosmopolitanism, with its desire to seek the outside world while retaining roots in Indianness. However, Gupta's concluding statement, and also the strong presence of Tagore in her novel, demonstrates that she does maintain some roots in her ancestral culture. Gupta's

Cosmopolitanism, then, differs from Tagore's meeting of East and West, and instead focuses on a celebration of Tagore and Bengali culture in isolation from the culture of Britain.

Gupta's disdainful explanation of multiculturalism, as a reminder that for the diasporic figure that 'the culture of the country where they were born doesn't actually belong to them', recognises that grasping at an Indian identity from overseas defines the diasporic figure as 'the other', distinct from the culture of the real home, which in this case is Britain. This view of India from the outside can often result in an Orientalist simplification being an aspect of the South Asian diaspora's relationship with the Indian subcontinent. The combination of temporal and geographic distance ensures that much of the attachment felt towards India by the diaspora can only be fetishistic, as only certain images can be captured. For members of the diaspora in South Africa, India is considered to be the site of authenticity: the 'motherland'. This generates shame associated with not being Indian enough, and so the current attachment to India attempts to resolve the fact that authenticity and purity has always been in question. This attachment can be described as fetishistic 'because these things are discontinuous with everyday life and are ambivalent – objects of desire and disavowal at the same time; the diaspora desires Indianness, but at the same time, does not want to seem too Indian (Hansen 2012, 201-2). This attachment to India is often a result of the actual situation faced by the diaspora in the host land. Nasta describes the racial tensions that she experienced while growing up mixed race in Britain in the 1960s, with the amalgamation of both Indian and British identities. She used an Orientalisation of the self as a form of escapism: was she 'the busman's daughter or an oriental princess'? (Nasta 2002, xi). The Orientalised version of herself became a more romantic ideal in comparison to the realities of her working class immigrant life. For the middle class diaspora in South Africa, cultural 'authenticity' plays an important role in the performance of respectability in society, but is also romanticised on a more individual level as it is by Nasta in Britain. South African tour operators organise trips to India for Hindus, and so one of the key ways that a relationship with India is maintained is through roots tourism and religious

pilgrimage. ‘The encounter with India becomes an encounter with themselves and their romantic imaginings of an exotic and ‘oriental’ India’ (Hansen 2012, 203). This Oriental, imagined India is at odds with perceptions of the real India, and an encounter with the real India demonstrates ‘how inauthentic their own embodied sense of Indianness’ is.

There is also a sense of correlating aspects of the real India with negativity, and so encounters with India always remain very much within the Orientalist framework. The imagined India is authentic and beautiful, while the real India is associated with a lack of modern amenities. (Hansen 2012, 207). There is an emphasis on the cleanliness of the West which is considered antithetical to the real India – one of Hansen’s diasporic interlocutors states that ‘you can say many things about the white man, but he knows how to run a place. You can see how Bombay must have been beautiful in the past, in colonial times’. In contrast, the imagined, spiritual India is associated with purity (Hansen 2012, 208). Bollywood also often speaks to ‘the desire to inhabit the white gaze’, and the fantasy of ‘an India devoid of squalor, dirt, and chaos’ (Hansen 2012, 219). These diasporic reactions to India seem markedly similar to imperialist viewpoints, and so seem to be a continuation of this colonial legacy. These kinds of perceptions of India by the diaspora demonstrate the chasm that is often present between India and its diaspora, created by the fact that the presence of India for the diaspora is so often imagined. Yusuf Dadoo, inspired by the nationalist movement of the 30s and 40s, called India ‘a resting place of the imagination’ (Hansen 2012, 200). Salman Rushdie coined the idea of ‘imaginary homelands’, in reference to ‘a preoccupation with ‘Indias’ and ‘Englands’ of the mind. (Nasta 2002, 9). The diasporic community is thus created through a blend of perceptions of the imaginary homeland while physically being situated in the host land. The supposed contrasts between homeland and host land are often not as extreme as they are perceived to be; Tamil women living in America, for example, often speak of the personal freedom that they experience there in a very similar way to women in Bangalore and Mumbai (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014, 173-4). As the old homeland is rapidly developing, its changeable nature is at

odds with the static place that is imagined by the diaspora. How can a relationship with India be retained in this context? It seems as though for the diaspora, this is often a relationship with the India of the past, rather than of today.

Diasporic references to Tagore often acknowledge the Orientalisation of an Indian identity, particularly with regard to the perception of Tagore by Europeans; writing of Tagore's declining popularity abroad, Sen states:

> 'in Europe and America, the excitement that Tagore's writings created in the early years of the twentieth century has largely vanished...already by 1937, Graham Greene was able to say: 'As for Rabindranath Tagore, I cannot believe that anyone but Mr Yeats can still take his poems very seriously'' (Sen n.d.).

Here, Sen suggests that the Indian air of mysticism that played such a significant role in selling the poet to the West is also part of the reason for this decline in popularity, as people began to associate this mysticism as impossible to take 'very seriously'. Sen writes that the figure of Tagore as a mystic is a Tagore created in the minds of Europeans, which is in line with the ideas of European thinkers on India as a whole, with philosophers such as Hegel viewing India as 'the source of superior wisdom' (Sen n.d.). Schopenhauer went as far as to argue that the New Testament 'must somehow be of Indian origin: this is attested by its completely Indian ethics, which transforms morals into asceticism, its pessimism, and its avatar...in the person of Christ'. Ultimately, the realities of Indian culture did not live up to the 'unfounded expectations of these philosophers' (Sen n.d.). These disappointed reactions are parallel to the disappointment for writers such as Yeats whose projected idealisations of Tagore did not always correlate with reality. Seth also acknowledges the European Orientalisation of the poet in a passage of *A Suitable Boy* which depicts a conversation between Amit and one of the novel's non-Indian characters, Bernardo Lopez. Lopez asks, 'What is all this about 'being' and birds and boats and the river of life – that we find in Indian poetry, the great Tagore unexcluded?' (Seth 1993, 484). Amit does not have the chance to respond to this question, and so there is no presence of an Indian voice in this discussion. This fetishisation of Indian poetry, as a source of nature and the essential human condition, is a clear example of a

disaporic writer acknowledging the European Orientalisation of Tagore. It is understandable that some readers of Tagore fall victim to an Orientalist framing, and diasporic writers are often drawn to similar ideas. Many of the Tagore poems that Bose selects to translate into English depict the act of viewing India from the outside, many of which were written by Tagore during his travels overseas. One example is the opening verse of "*Sagarika*" (Sea Maiden), written in Bali:

> 'Having bathed in the sea with your west tresses
> you sat on the rocky beach.
> Your loose yellow robe
> drew a forbidding line around you on the earth.
> On your uncovered breasts and unadorned body
> the morning sun painted a gentle golden hue.
> With a *makara*-crested crown on my forehead
> bow and arrow in hand
> I appeared royally adorned
> And said, "I have come from another land"' (Bose n.d. 13).

This romanticised, mythical description of not just the sea maiden, but also of the speaker himself, who has 'come from another land', seems akin to Romantic Orientalist depictions of Eastern characters. The association of Tagore's speaker with *Makara*, a sea-creature from Indian mythology, suggests that the foreign land that the speaker has come from could be India, which creates a sense of mysticism associated with Indianness. Another of Bose's translations feature "Siam", written by Tagore in October 1927:

> 'Today I will bear witness
> to India's glory
> that transcended its own boundaries
> I will pay it homage
> outside India at your door' (Bose n.d., 15-6).

This verse suggests that in order to gain a sense of India's greatness, it is useful to experience a perception of the country from the outside, i.e. elsewhere in Asia, which demonstrates the cosmopolitan nature of 'India's glory' according to Tagore.

The overall conclusion that is drawn from references to Tagore in diasporic literature is a depiction of the poet as a godlike figure, to be revered as symbolic of past generations living in India, but also of a forward-looking internationalism, which resonates with such a global diaspora. Even critical comments on Tagore can be interpreted as expressions of reverence, such as Chaudhuri's recounting of the Bengali reaction to Tagore's 1913 Nobel Prize in the sequel to *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, during which 'there was a rush to grovel at his feet and take a share of his glory, and a crowd of about five hundred Bengalis of all classes descended on Santiniketan to offer him felicitations' (Chaudhuri 1988). Chaudhuri characterises Tagore's response to this crowd as 'a terrible mistake' by having 'a go at them in order to settle his old scores' with his critics. He quotes Tagore as addressing the crowd by asking:

> 'how can I shamelessly appropriate to myself the honour of which you are making a present to me as representative of the general public of the whole country? This day of mine will not last forever. The ebb tide will set in again. Then all the squalor of the muddy bottom will be exposed in bank after bank' (Chaudhuri 1988).

Chaudhuri claims that while there was a truth to Tagore's words, Tagore:

> 'should have risen above his own grievances, not to speak of the low and scurrilous abuse by people who were the most worthless set of Bengalis morally...It should be pointed out that Tagore was a wealthy landowner, and there was no social compulsion on him to come to terms with others in order to maintain his worldly position...But the injured child with memories of unfair treatment that he remained all his life, got the better of him' (Chaudhuri 1988).

Despite there being some sense of derision in his tone, with reference to Tagore being a 'wealthy landowner' with memories of being 'the injured child', this recalling of events ultimately suggests that Chaudhuri expects a more dignified response from Tagore than he would of another person, due

to his ‘wordly position’. This reaction from Chaudhuri thus solidifies Tagore’s godlike status in the diaspora.

Tagore as a Framework

In addition to diasporic writers making reverent references to Tagore in their work, many use his ideas and theories in a more practical style: to lay the foundations for their own intellectual frameworks. Indian-born but having spent most of her life in American and British universities, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in an article on her efforts to teach children in rural Bengal, cites a 1932 Tagore poem, in Bengali and English, that was written on the *Pratichi Education Report*. Tagore’s own English translation of the poem, which was written in Baghdad, is as follows:

> ‘The night has ended.
> Put out the light of the lamp of thine own narrow corner smudged with smoke.
> The great morning which is for all appears in the East.
> Let its light reveal us to each otherness
> Who walk on the same path of pilgrimage’ (Spivak 2002, 18).

Spivak also provides her own direct translation, closer to Tagore’s original Bengali: ‘The universe’s light burns in the eastern sky on this blessed day / Let those who’ll walk together recognise each other’ (Spivak 2002, 18). Tagore’s Bengali seems to be more active than his English version; this suggests that his message to Bengali readers, through his Bengali writing, sometimes differs from the message that he intends to be read by the outside world, communicated in English, which is demonstrative of Tagore’s difficulties of translation. Spivak comments on this poem by writing that:

> ‘these lines resonate with what might be the mission statement of the moral entrepreneurship of the international civil society today, which, however laudable, is put together not by democratic procedure, but largely by self-selection and networking’ (Spivak 2002, 18).

Spivak’s view on ‘the moral entrepreneurship of the international civil society’, then, relates to the direct, active roles played by certain participants in global society, and so the active nature of the

original Bengali is more demonstrative of the message that she discerns. This highlights how an English and Bengali reading of the same lines of Tagore poetry can sometimes lead to a different sense of meaning being discovered.

Later in the article, Spivak provides further examples of her English translations of Tagore to elaborate on her efforts to educate 'subaltern' children in Bengal. She calls on humanities scholars to deconstruct the existing structure of teacher training in the region by using other 'interested humanities professionals from the highest ranks to train ground-level teachers', directly addressing her fellow scholars in Tagore's words: 'those whom you have deprived of human rights, whom you have kept standing face-to-face and yet not taken in your arms' (Spivak 2002, 29). Spivak notes that she finds it striking to read Tagore's use of the phrase 'human rights' so early in the twentieth century (Spivak 2002, 19). Alongside her fellow humanities professionals, Spivak also includes some fellow members of the diaspora as a core part of the group that is depriving the subaltern of human rights, as she asks, 'Should the NRI have no role but to help place the state in metropolitan economic bondage?' (Spivak 2002, 29). Her embodiment of Tagore's voice in her thoughts on the subject, through these direct quotations of his poetry, indicates the poet's usefulness in expressing Spivak's desire for action on the issue of education. Chaudhuri provides another example of a diasporic writer co-opting Tagore's voice, borrowing from the poem "Mother Bengal", which reads, 'Your seven crore children, O' bewitched mother / you have kept alive as Bengalis, not human beings' (Bhattacharjee 2017). Tagore's accusation that nationalism is detrimental to the human condition is mimicked in a Chaudhuri article which asks the question, "Should I be a Bengali or a human being?" (Bhattacharjee 2017).

Gita Mehta, who mostly divided her time between Delhi, New York and London, makes multiple reference to Tagore to consolidate her analysis of Indian society in *Snakes and Ladders*, her 1998 social commentary on modern India. In a description of India's disharmony, she quotes Tagore's address of the divided country:

> ‘Alas my cheerless country, dressed in worn-out rags, loaded with decrepit wisdom. You pride yourself on having seen through the fraud of creation. Sitting idly in your corner, all you do is sharpen the edge of your metaphysical mumbo-jumbo’ (Mehta 1998, 276).

While she acknowledges that Tagore’s words are ‘a bit harsh’, Mehta fundamentally agrees with him, and adds that even today ‘India is a vast landscape of raucous disharmony, and more than ancient sages to explain the nature of eternal unity, today India requires wise men to explain out current disharmonies’ (Mehta 1998, 276-7). By linking modern India’s issues to a period prior to Partition via reference to Tagore, Mehta emphasises the gravity of the situation, as it is inarguable that India was disharmonious during Tagore’s time. As a well-respected figure, the inclusion of Tagore’s anti-nationalist sentiments make the idea of cosmopolitan harmony less offensive to the Indian or diasporic reader. Quotations from Tagore, and anecdotes of his actions are present throughout the text, and are varied in their subject matter; at one point Mehta quotes Tagore on the importance of trees for Indian thinkers (Mehta 1998, 252), while she opens Chapter 34 with a narration of the events that led to Tagore writing the poem that would later become independent India’s national anthem: ‘Tagore was asked to write a poem honouring George V on his coronation as King Emperor of India. The irritated poet composed instead a hymn in praise of God’ (Mehta 1998, 283). On her feelings towards India as a member of the diaspora, Mehta emotively writes that ‘Tagore called it a geography made sacred by devotion. I can’t say what it is, only that when I am away it pulls at me, and I long for the land shaped by longing’ (Mehta 1998, 285). Tagore’s constant presence through the book indicates that his writing lays the groundwork for some of Mehta’s thinking.

Tagore in Translation

In addition to the previously mentioned temporal and geographical distance between Tagore and the diaspora, a further layer of distance is created for many readers outside of Bengal by the issues associated with translation, particularly with translations of poetry, where it is near-

impossible to exactly retain the sense of the work. Bengali-speaking members of the diaspora have aimed to rectify this, such as in the 2011 special issue of *Wasafiri*, a quarterly British language literary magazine which describes its focus as 'international contemporary writing'. This particular issue was titled "Britain and India: Cross-Cultural Encounters", and aimed to cast 'a retrospective glance towards South Asian writers of yesterday' for its diasporic British audience (Wasafiri 2012). A contemporary British-Bengali writer, Bidisha, was inspired by Iqbal Singh's statement that 'those who read [Tagore] in English are at a distinct disadvantage...[for] English is the least capable of reproducing his inspiration' (Wasafiri 2012). In response, Bidisha offers her own translations of poems from Tagore's 1931 collection, *Gitobitan*, with less of a focus on direct word-for-word translations and an attempt to better recreate his poetic style. Her translations come from the section of the collection titled "*Shodesh*", or "Homeland", which mostly contains patriotic songs referring to India and Bengal. One of the poem's that Bidisha chooses to translate is what she refers to as "If there be no answer":

> 'If there be no answer, continue alone.
>
> At the crossroads, on the high path, should they leave you,
>
> On the dense road, at the tough pass, should they flee,
>
> Should they turn their faces and offer no words,
>
> Then read in secret the inward story
>
> And walk the thorny road, on your bloodied feet.
>
> If there should be no lantern light, nor hearth, nor flame,
>
> Then do what others cannot:
>
> Go to the storm
>
> Pluck out a rib
>
> Light it with thunder
>
> And burn alone.' (Wasafiri 2012)

A more literal translation from the Bengali titles the poem as "If they answer not", and is as follows:

> 'If they answer not to thy call walk alone

If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
open thy mind and speak out alone.
If they turn away, and desert you when crossing the wilderness,
O thou of evil luck,
trample the thorns under thy tread,
and along the blood-lined track travel alone.
If they do not hold up the light
when the night is troubled with storm,
O thou of evil luck,
with the thunder flame of pain ignite thine own heart
and let it burn alone.' (TagoreWeb)

Bidisha's reworking of the translation inserts her own diasporic voice into Tagore's words. Although the overall meaning of both translations is relatively similar, the words used are noticeably different, which has a significant effect on the sense of the poem. Bidisha's omission of the repeated line, 'O thou of evil luck' is one obvious contrast, perhaps suggesting that the effect of these English words do not convey what is intended by the original Bengali. This also seems to be the case with the literal line 'open thy mind and speak alone', which Bidisha instead translates as 'then read in secret the inward story'. Bidisha's version helps to accurately convey the sense of the message, which the literal translation is unable to achieve. Her translations of Tagore's work indicate a relationship that many members of the diaspora would be unable to experience, but that is made more accessible through her work. Although this poem was written in the specific context of the independence movement, the ambiguity of its message ensures that it can be applied to countless other forms of struggles. This sense of universalism that is created seems to be a deliberate choice on Tagore's part, and helps explain why diasporic writers such as Bidisha are able to continue to be in such close conversation with his writing. Tagore is a recurring topic in *Wasafiri*,

such as with the inclusion of *The Home and the World* in a list of suggestions of books to add to the British English Literature school curriculum (Wasafiri 2017).

Alongside often needing a translation of language, a diasporic reading of Tagore also sometimes requires a translation from one cultural context to another, which is a result of both the temporal and geographic the distance between Tagore and the diaspora. An instance of this is performances by British-Bengali theatre companies such as *Moksha,* which 'aims to inspire audiences and change lives by nurturing excellence in Tagore music, dance, teachings and philosophy'. One such performance was of the story of "Chitrangada – The Warrior Princess", described as 'a novel approach to a Tagore dance drama also uses martial arts to tell a classic Bengali story using a contemporary setting' (Tower Hamlets Council, 2017). The work of *Moksha* indicates that members of the Bengali community in London view Tagore's 'teachings and philosophy' as concepts that are worth maintaining, and that can even 'change lives', despite the fact that they are living in such a vastly different geographic and temporal context to that which Tagore was writing in. This, alongside Bidisha's translation, seems less directly nostalgic than Desai's engagement with Tagore, as there is less of a backwards look towards the past, and instead an attempt to translate Tagore's ideas into the modern-day Western context. The need for some kind of translation is indicative of the fact that in the process of engaging with Tagore, the diaspora are engaging with the other, which is symbolic of the otherness associated with India when living outside of the subcontinent. The need to confront the other is a theme that also runs through Tagore's own writing, as in *Gitanjali* he writes, 'Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou has brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger' (Tagore 1913, 58). Tagore's travels exposed him to a diverse variety of cultures, many of which he formed close connections with. The South Asian diaspora's dispersal across such a large proportion of the globe continues in that Tagorean cosmopolitan tradition, and so it seems natural that his writings have found resonance in today's diaspora.

Despite the clear evidence of Tagore's popularity within the diaspora, and organisations such as the UCL book club and International Tagore Conference being evidence of some continued European interest in Tagore, other scholarly work suggests that his international influence outside of the diaspora has waned:

> 'Although the Indian subcontinent entered the sphere of modern World Literature through Tagore, this has become a fact of history now. Today Tagore is no longer a vibrant, dynamic element of World Literature, he no longer influences the intellectual horizon of a large readership and inspires writers outside Bengal for just this one reason: we do not have enough genuine, congenial translations' (Kampchen 2010, 112).

This view from Germany suggests that Tagore's ideas no longer hold any sway over intellectual discourse in Europe, and instead it is the inaccessibility of Tagore's Bengali and the need for translation that make him attractive to modern-day German scholars. Kampchen describes German versions of Tagore poems as 'doubly watered-down'; they are 'first watered-down by Tagore himself through his English prose texts and then again by adopting them for the German' (Kamchen 2012, 113). The fact that this lack of ability to understand the original Bengali is what attracts Kampchen to Tagore is indicative of an Orientalisation of Tagore akin to Yeats's; the lack of translation creates a distance between Tagore and his German readers that imbues his poetry with a sense of mystery and mysticism.

While non-Bengali readers require a translation of Tagore in order to be able to engage with his poetry, diasporic writers such as Bose, Gupta and Spivak are able to use their own translations of Tagore's poems as a tool to include in their articles and novels. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian writer who has spent time living in Britain, is another acclaimed translator of Tagore's poetry, described as a 'Tagore specialist and writer of international stature' (Fakrul and Chakravarty 2014). Despite this, and in stark contrast to other diasporic translators, the poet's presence is not particularly discernible in any of Ghosh's own writing (Lange 2015, 361). This seems surprising due to his association with Tagore, particularly in comparison to the other diasporic novelists that have been considered. For

Ghosh, as with Bidisha's reworked translations, his method of engaging with Tagore is through translation alone.

The nature of the Indian diaspora, with its vast numbers, lends itself well to a cosmopolitan outlook. Government policies such as the creation and encouragement of NRI status have ensured that while cosmopolitan, much of the diaspora is able to retain its roots in their Indian culture and heritage. Tagore's brand of Cosmopolitanism, which involves maintaining 'a healthy relationship with one's nation, neither denying one's culture nor following it blindly', thus now seems more relevant than ever with India's growing diaspora. This philosophy of Tagore's is discernible in a varied selection of diasporic writings, many of which make direct reference to the poet. It is partly through Tagore, then, that members of the South Asian diaspora are able to retain a connection to their ancestral origins, while also looking outwards for inspiration from the other countries that they find themselves in.

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