**Tagore, Rabindranath (1861-1940)**

Aarthi Vadde (Literature)

Siva Kumar (Visual Arts)

Literary Contributions:

Rabindranath Tagore is India’s preeminent writer and the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He is best known for his poetry collection *Gitanjali : Song Offerings*, which he self-translated into English from Bengali. Tagore introduced new verse forms into Bengali poetry, and revolutionized literary prose by using colloquial Bengali (*calit bhasa*) in his novels and short stories. Previously, Bengali literature had been written in refined Bengali (*sadhu bhasa)*, which drew on Sanskritic vocabulary and archaic grammatical forms. Tagore was a strong advocate of caste reform in colonial India, a critic of nationalisms worldwide, and the founder of an international university called Visva-Bharati whose motto was *Yatra visvam bhavatieka nidam* (“Where the whole world meets in one nest”).

Rabindranath Tagore was born May 7, 1861 to Debendranath and his wife Sarada Devi. The surname Tagore is an Anglicization of “Thakur” which means lord in Bengali. His father was an influential member of the Brahmo Samaj, a religious society dedicated to reforming Hinduism. Brahmoism’s tenets of caste and marriage reform can be seen in the development of Tagore’s short stories and novels from *Chokher Bali* [*Grain of Sand*]in 1903 to Char Adhyay [*Four Chapters*] in 1934.

Tagore published his first book of poems, *Kabi Kahini*, ( tale of a poet ) in 1878. In the same year, he left for England to study at University College London though he did not finish his schooling. He first received significant attention as a writer for his 1882 poetry collection *Sandhya Sangeet* ( Evening Songs), which was praised by leading Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Tagore wrote prolifically and in a variety of genres, producing countless poems, over two thousand songs, ninety short stories, novels, plays, and translations from Bengali to English and English to Bengali. His written works comprise thirty-two volumes in Bengali. He began painting in his 60s. His visual art shows the influence of both primitivism and folk art traditions.

Tagore achieved international celebrity with the publication of the collection *Gitanjali* in 1913 with an introduction by W.B. Yeats. Prior to that, Ezra Pound had published Tagore’s first English-language poem in *Poetry* Magazine. Six poems from *Gitanjali* also appeared in *Poetry* in December of 1912. Tagore translated these poems and the rest of *Gitanjali* from Bengali verse into English prose-poems. He would later import the prose-poem style back into the Bengali language in the collection *Lipika* (1922), innovating a new form for Bengali poetry*.* In 1914, his short story *Strir Patra* [“The Wife’s Letter] broke new ground by using vernacular, spoken Bengali (*calit bhasa*) as the main prose style. Previously, prose literature has been written in formal, Sanskritized Bengali (*sadhu bhasa)*. Tagore would continue to use this style in his novels.

His most highly regarded novels in English are *Gora* (1910) and *The Home and the World* (1916)*,* the latter self-translated in collaboration with his nephew Surendranath. Tagore wrote both novels after cutting ties with the Indian nationalist movement, and they respond critically to the nativism and ethnocentrism he saw flourishing within certain factions. *Gora* features a protagonist who is a devoted Hindu nationalist. He advocates the evacuation of English influence from an independent India; however, these beliefs are brought into crisis when Gora discovers that he is of foreign origins, the son of an Irish soldier. *The Home and the World* aligns domestic strife with political agitation. It features a married woman who betrays her husband and is drawn into the nationalist movement by a charismatic but corrupt leader.

From 1916 onwards Tagore lectured internationally on a range of topics. The collection *Nationalism*, published in 1916, offers a strong critique of the ideology as it took shape across Europe, Japan, and India. The collections *Personality* and *Creative Unity* contain essays on aesthetics, poetics, education, and women’s rights. His last lecture, published in 1941, was *The Crisis of Civilization.* It contained Tagore’s reactions to the rising tide of World War II and a condemnation of British imperialism for betraying the ideals of Western civilization.

In 1919, Tagore drew controversy in Europe and praise in India for returning his knighthood to Britain in the wake of the Amritsar Massacre in which British officers opened fire on unarmed Indian protesters. However, he matched his critique of imperialism with a rejection of Indian nationalism, and this made him a polarizing figure in India during the 1920s-30s.

Visual Art Contributions:

Tagore was a multifaceted early bloomer in literature, music and theatre; he began to paint only when he was sixty-seven but worked at an intense pace, largely with coloured inks and watercolours on paper, to produce around 2500 paintings over the next thirteen years of his life. With no formal training in art, his paintings evolved from doodled corrections in his literary manuscripts. As a painter he combines his sense of linear rhythm cultivated as a writer and musician with an expressive use of colour. His early paintings represent animated images of fantastic animals, mask like faces, landscapes and dramatic scenes that hover between the geometric and the organic, and between the imaginary and the experiential. These imply a close familiarity with oriental, primitive and modern art. While his techniques and subject matter remained largely constant the images became more organic, representational and controlled over the years. Intense and imaginative, animated and vivid they have been aligned with Expressionism and Surrealism since they were first exhibited in Paris in 1930. Within the Indian context this makes him an early bridge-builder between Indian and Western modernisms and an exemplar of innovation and artistic freedom.

Better known as the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in literature, Rabindranath Tagore’s contribution to modern Indian art is three fold. Deeply interested in painting even before he began to paint, his early engagement with Indian art was in the form of an observant and passionate interlocutor. This led him in turn to enunciate his ideas on art and aesthetics. And finally break onto the Indian art scene as a modernist painter with a style that was radically different from that of his nationalist and pan-Asianist modernist contemporaries.

His transformation from a catalyst in reshaping colonial art practice in India to a modernist artist came about through an exposure to different traditions of world art. During his extensive travels he became familiar with the Eastern traditions of non-realist representational art, the ‘primitive’ traditions spread across the world, and Western modern art influenced by these. His familiarity with the theoretical articulations of Kandinsky and the eclectic practice of Nandalal Bose appears to have helped him internalize their linguistic rationale and connect it with his innate sense of rhythmic expression and eventually to find himself as an artist. His lack of formal training and sudden emergence as an artist led some of his early critics to see his paintings as an expression of the unconscious. Without denying an initial role of the unconscious others see in them an evolution towards conscious expression aided by perceptual experience and his understanding of other arts. Rabindranath while acknowledging that his paintings unlike his writings did not begin with a premeditated subject matter held that purely unconscious creations are idiosyncratic and non-communicative. A consummate craftsman in other arts he knew that even what begins in the subliminal has to pass through the smithy of shared language to become accessible and meaningful.

Tagore died on August 7, 1941 in Calcutta at the age of 81. Beyond his immense artistic output, he is best remembered for authoring India’s and Bangladesh’s national anthems and for the founding of the university Visva-Bharati in his native Bengal.

**Key Biographies of Rabindranath Tagore**

Dutta, Krishna and Andrew Robinson. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*

Kripalani, Krishna. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*

**Key Anthologies of Tagore’s Writing**

Alam, Fakrul, Radha Chakravarty and Amit Chaudhuri (eds). *The Essential Tagore*

Radice, William (trans.) *Selected Short Stories* and *Selected Poems*

Chaudhuri, Sukanta (ed.) *The Oxford Tagore Translations Box Set*. Four volumes

Das, Sisir Kumar (ed). *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore.*  Three volumes

Dutta, Krishna and Andrew Robinson. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*

**Chronology of Major Works available in English (Selected)**

Poetry

*GITANJALI* (SONG OFFERINGS, 1912)

*THE GARDENER*  (1913)

*THE CRESCENT-MOON* (1913)

*FRUIT GATHERING* (1916)

*LIPIKA* (1919)

Novels

*CHOKHER BALI* (1903) trans. *GRAIN OF SAND*

*GORA* (1910) trans. *GORA*

*CHATURANGA* (1916) trans. *QUARTET*

*GHARE-BAIRE* (1916)trans. *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

*SESHER KAVITA* (1929) trans. *FAREWELL MY FRIEND*

*JOGAJOG* (1929) trans. *RELATIONSHIPS*

CHAR ADHYAY (1934) trans. *FOUR CHAPTERS*

Short Stories

*THE HUNGRY STONES AND OTHER STORIES* (1916)

*MASHI AND OTHER SHORT STORIES* (1918)

Drama

*CHITRA* (1913)

*THE KING OF THE DARK CHAMBER* (1914)

*THE POST OFFICE* (1914)

*RED OLEANDERS* (1924)

Autobiography

*MY REMINSCENCES* (1917)

*MY BOYHOOD DAYS* (1940)

Essays and Lectures

*NATIONALISM* (1917)

*PERSONALITY* (1917)

*CREATIVE UNITY* (1922)

*THE RELIGION OF MAN* (1931)

*CRISIS IN CIVILIZATION* (1941)

Letters

*GLIMPSES OF BENGAL* (1921)

*LETTERS FROM ABROAD* (1921)

Further Reading:

Neogy, P. (ed.), (1961) *Rabindranath Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Archer,W. G. (1959) *India and Modern Art*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Subramanyan, K. G. (1986) “Tagore: The poet painter” in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Celebration of His Life and Work*, Ray Monk and Andew Robinson eds., London: Rabindranath Tagore Festival Committee and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

Robinson, A. (1989) *The Art of Rabindranath Tagore*, Calcutta: Rupa.

Siva Kumar, R. (ed.), (2011) *The Last Harvest: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ahmadabad: Mapin.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (ed.), (2011) *Rabindra Chiravali: Paintings of Rabindranath*, 4 vols., Kolkata : Pratikshan ; Ministry of Culture Government of India; and Visva-Bharati.