

**‘A thousand twangling instruments...hum about mine ears’: *Golden Boat* and
Tagore’s poetics of decolonization**

Manojit Mandal

Professor

Department of English

Jadavpur University, Kolkata-700032, India

Orcid ID: 0000-0001-9196-0952

Abstract

First non-European to secure the Nobel Prize, Rabindranath Tagore was known in the Western academic circles mainly because of his English *Gitanjali* (1912) which fetched him the coveted accord in 1913. Even the postcolonial historiography has not really recognized Tagore as a thinker or active crusader of decolonization in the Asian subcontinent although he was actively involved in the anti-colonial struggles in his youth, ceaselessly juxtaposing his poetics with nationalist politics of India. This paper focuses on poems from an early collection, *Sonar Tari (Golden Boat, 1891)* composed when he was emerging as the most prolific writer venturing successfully in all the genres and, how by producing a great body of literature he was consciously seeking to re-establish national identity, and was consistently presenting a counter narrative to the British Raj. The paper draws on Edward Said’s articulation on Foucault that pure poetry or literature though apparently innocuous may, quite contrary to our conventional wisdom, reproduce latent political discourses, that there is nothing really called ‘pure knowledge’ in the domain of human utterances. By redrawing on the conspicuous connection between an act of writing and production of ideology, the paper foregrounds the manifest negotiation between Tagore’s poetic oeuvre and decolonizing project.

Keywords: *Decolonisation, Political Discourse, Tagore, Historiography, Nationalism*



© This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) International License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

First non-European to secure the Nobel Prize, Rabindranath Tagore started to be known and read in the Western academic circles mainly because of his English *Gitanjali* (1912) which fetched him the most coveted accord in 1913. In fact, it was one of the most influential European poets of the time W.B. Yeats, who personally gave Tagore the first significant recognition in the close literary circles of London way back in 1912 following with his famous Introduction to *Gitanjali* before it was nominated for the Nobel in literature. And it is not very difficult to gauge as to what aspects of Tagore a la *Gitanjali* struck a chord with the West: the traits of Oriental mysticism, the image of a Sage and the flavours of Eastern spiritualism, appeared to be the most attractive features of Tagore to the general reading public as well as the principal literary personalities of the time. Quite curiously, the same saga continued unhindered even in the first decade of the present century some exceptions not withstanding to read into Tagore's engaging political activities during the heyday of British imperialism in India. It is also noteworthy that at times, Tagore has been sought after because of his apocalyptic lectures on Nationalism delivered in USA in 1916, replete with his vociferous critique of modern nations causing the devastating World War I, as also his scathing reproval of the cult of nationalism in his own country. Some real Tagore enthusiasts like Michael Collins (2012) though have been engaged with insightful inquiries into Tagore and read him as one of the leading political intellectuals occupied with his own idea of reconstructing India as a nation. Collins by devoting an entire chapter on the Tagore-Gandhi symbiosis, which began in early 2015 and continued uninterruptedly till the end of Tagore's life, has quite appropriately recognized him alongside M.K.Gandhi, arguably the most important political leader of the 20th century India. In addition, very recently Lin Cary Mehta by publishing her doctoral dissertation undertaken in Columbia University, USA, has traced sentiments of decolonization in Tagore's poetics, and placed him along with other greats like Yeats, Césaire, Senghor and Neruda who had to undergo identical struggles under colonial misrule in their respective countries.

Both Collins and Mehta despite their remarkable readings of Tagore, appear to be somewhat anachronistic and have lay seminal emphasis to his post-*Gitanjali* period, when the fierce nationalist in Tagore actively participating in India's political affairs and consequently leading the anti-Partition movement from 1903 to 1905, was fast transforming himself into a pliable accommodative internationalist (Mandal, *Nationalism* 58). In other words, the radical phase of Tagore as an undisputed crusader of anti-colonial movements was first diminishing when he

started translating his Bengali poems (original *Gitanjali* included) into English, subsequently publishing them as *Song Offerings* in September 1912 with that precious prelude by Yeats, and thus was heralded an 'English' Tagore in world literature (Chakraborty 3). In fact, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (2011) has astutely argued that Tagore was highly active in his public life between 1891 to 1910 (when he was between his 30s and 40s) which was incidentally the most prolific period of his literary productions, the *anus mirabilis* of the great writer, whereby, he could successfully venture into all the literary genres- poetry, novels, short stories, essays and public lectures and plays and emerged as the most popular writer of the time. Let us also remember that as a precocious boy growing up in an extremely cultured and politically conscious family, Tagore could understand the deep-seated anxiety of native identity formation in a colonial situation quite early. The issue was fascinatingly recounted by Tagore himself through his letters, *Europe-prabashirPatro*-(‘Letters from a Sojourner in Europe’) as early as in 1878. However, it is quite startling that despite Tagore's obvious and explicit participation in active politics of the time, almost playing the lead role for nearly a decade in the beginning of the last century postcolonial historiography has completely excluded him from their erudite narration of history of resistance culture and decolonization in an ex-colonial nation like India. It is a common fact of history that Tagore's active commitment to India's politics culminated in his unanimous nomination for the head of the Bengal Provincial unit of the Indian National Congress in 1908; a responsibility he performed quite promisingly by uniting the two opposing factions, the Moderates and the Extremists, in the Congress. Even after his compelling withdrawal from active politics after 1910 owing to his disgruntlement with the functioning of the Congress and especially, the violent means adopted by the revolutionaries of Bengal, Tagore continued with his dream of liberating India.

This paper is a brief attempt to demonstrate how Tagore was consciously collocating his poetics with his nationalist politics early in his life and, how by producing a great body of literature he sought to re-establish his national identity during the initial days of anti-imperialist movement in India. Focusing primarily on one of his first poetic gems, *Sonar Tari*(‘Golden Boat’ 1891), the paper goes on to show how even aesthetic utterances or ‘pure’ poetry can silently generate discourse on nationalism or love for one’s motherland reeling under an offshore domination and thus produces a formidable counter ideology to the British Raj. While doing so, I shall be drawing on Edward Said’s amazing articulation on Foucault in the introductory chapter of his epoch-

making book, that pure poetry or literature though apparently innocuous may, quite contrary to our conventional wisdom, reproduce latent political discourses, and that the idea of ‘pure knowledge’ in the domain of human creativity is a gross misnomer (Said 17). In the final analysis, by redrawing on the conspicuous connection between an act of writing and production of ideology, the paper attempts to underline the subtle but obvious interface between Tagore’s act imaginative musing and his discursive decolonizing project (Mandal, *Decolonization* 27).

But before moving further into the poetic renditions by Tagore let us draw ourselves to an intriguing question: what might have mimetic art signified in a colonial situation? How did it benefit a colonized creative to write back to his imperial masters whose invention mimesis had been? In effect what I wish do here is to trace an underlying connection between two absolutely dissimilar human experiences- representative or imaginative art and an act of decolonization, and the context herein, is quite stimulatingly ripe to rehearse Caliban’s dream wishes in Shakespeare’s most celebrated play *The Tempest*, and how in dreams he desires to escape the failing world around him under tyrannical rule of Prospero:

... This isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweets airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought, would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again. (Shakespeare 3.2; 135-143)

Were not the colonized writers also feeling such amazing angst to wish away the colonial indignities by dreaming and/ or imagining of a glorious world through their ‘thousand twangling instruments’ or poetic meditations? Yeats, Tagore, Senghor, Césaire, and Neruda – the indisputable intellectual giants under the offshore colonial domination had witnessed similar anxiety in their creative career and yet, all of them continued to produce outstanding literature in a highly complex cultural situation in different parts of the world (Mehta 8). However, unlike Mehta, I shall try to focus more on the clearly discernible difference in Tagore vis-a-vis the other four writers: Tagore’s consciously irreproachable endeavor to uninterruptedly write in his native language or rather, his deliberate refusal to employ the colonial language when he was actively engaged in the nationalist politics of the time, certainly putting him above the rest in producing

poetry of decolonization (Mandal, *Decolonization* 30). I shall argue that Tagore was emphatically denying the prevalent cultural norms while producing some of his best poetry and lyrics during the period of intense anti-colonial resistances, and thereby, was making a radical critique of the larger imperial system itself. In other words, his poetic muse or imaginative power functions as potent weapons or 'twangling instruments' to take on the colonial apparatus in all its pervasive forms.

How is, then, poetic imagination should be considered a magical power that Tagore employed to produce a propitious poetry of decolonization? Answers may lie in the most celebrated theory of poetry or imagination so passionately invented by S.T Coleridge about a century before Tagore. However, it would be a blunt redundant exercise to detail how Coleridge set out to attribute the most unique (and powerful) meaning to the concept of poetic imitation or *mimesis*, at a time when poetry itself was reeling under the demonic spell of industrial capitalism in the whole of Europe. Briefly put, Coleridge towards the end of the chapter XIII of his famous *Biographia Literaria* (1817) while ruminating on philosophy of poetry, turns impromptu towards defining imagination and makes the proverbially eternal statement:

The primary IMAGINATION is the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and a repetition on the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the **kind** of its agency, and differing only in **degree**, and in the **mode** of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially **vital**, even as all objects (**as** objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Duncan Wu 525)

Coleridge never returns to elaborate on the distinction made between the primary and secondary imagination; only towards the end of the next chapter (XIV) he tangentially refers to the term 'imagination' (now, in singular) while defining poetry and the role of a poet. And in complete contradistinction to the Romantic ideology of liberating poetry from shrewd elitism, Coleridge quite pompously vests the 'esemplastic power' or imagination only to select geniuses in society:

'What is poetry?' --is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?--that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit

of unity that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power first put in action by the will and understanding..... reveals “itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant” qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (Duncan Wu 524)

A vast stretch of critical attention has been untiringly paid to illustrate Coleridge’s theory of imagination and the role of poetry since its inception especially in the context of Romantic literature studies across the world. And the most readily available explanation is actually what Coleridge himself has underlined: imagination is considered as a power that reconciles opposites in society; to give antithetical, discordant elements orderly synthesis. Endowed with this power a poet comes across as a genius and poetry an empowered medium to achieve the fits. It is widely known that Coleridge had ventured to formulate these theories primarily because of his irreconcilable personal discord with his old friend, philosopher and mentor, another genius, William Wordsworth whose highly principled democratic idea of a poet—a poet is a man speaking to men in their language— Coleridge sought to refute. In fact, though fraught with severe fallacies, especially in considering the language of the day-to-day conversation as the language of poetry, Wordsworth’s poetic theory as enumerated in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1801) could be, if at all, more applicable to the poetry of Tagore in contention of the instant study. Again in the same period though younger to both Coleridge and Wordsworth, but an equally gifted talent, P. B. Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* (1840), embarks upon defending poetry and poets by emphatically declaring that poets are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” and poetry is his means for effecting rhapsodic social and political changes. Nevertheless, in the end, it is the Coleridgean theory of poetry or art which gained an unchallenged supremacy throughout the 19th century largely owing to the powerful current of the conservatism in the Victorian England.

But the obvious and the most baffling point to ponder over: was Tagore following the conventional Coleridgean notion of imagination, mimesis or art, which was so powerfully

institutionalized by another influential English intellectual in the second half of the 19th century namely, Matthew Arnold? And if yes, was he really conscious of what he was doing especially in the most productive period of his creativity as in the instant case? Indeed, it is extremely difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion to this riddling hypothesis. Nonetheless, innumerable scholars (like Krishna Kriplani, Bikash Chakraborty and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya) of great repute in the field of Tagore in the last few decades have argued (and quite persuasively so) that Tagore was essentially a romantic writer writing in the tradition of the European writers or the English Romantics in mind. Towards the end of the last century, the most influential of them all, Edward Said (1993) readily compares Tagore with another similarly placed great, W.B. Yeats who, owing largely to his Anglo-Irish ascendancy had been following the late English Romantic sensibility though living under the dominion of English colonialism. Curiously, this very powerful trend of Tagore scholarship has been undoubtedly given serious and decisive credence to by Tagore's own repeated utterances in *Jibonsmriti* ('Reminiscences') published later that he thought like a 'romantic' with deep affinities especially with the English Romantic writers.

Well, the purpose of this paper is certainly not to dare the highly informed tradition of Tagore scholars who have been holding a tremendous sway on Tagore studies for so long across the globe. Nevertheless, I think, a caveat is needed to be added to it: in the first significant period of his creative bid that is, from 1886-88, the exact timing of composing *Manoshi* (Tagore's first remarkable poetry) to 1908 (the middle of serializing of *Gora*, Tagore's most expansive and controversial novel), there are hardly any consistent statements from the man himself to conclude convincingly that Tagore was consciously, if at all, following the English Romantic tradition in composing the poems in contention. In fact, a number of literary, social or political lectures/essays including his oft-referred juvenile venture-*Europe-prabashirPatro*-('Letters from a Sojourner in Europe') produced before the period reveals that Tagore was quite evidently critical of the famous English writers especially, of their studied indifference to the blatant subjugation of India effected by their colonial compatriots:

English poets are shedding tears for the plight of the people in Greece, Italy, Hungary and Poland. We are not entitled to such tears; no other English poet except the great Edwin Arnold has expressed his concern for India on any occasion. Rather, I heard that some of the great poets of France have composed a poem by following the Indian context. This has revealed unparallel ill feeling of English (towards Indians). (translated) (*Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. I 629)

The breathtakingly insightful passage is extracted from one of his famous public addresses, *Ingrej of Bharatbasi*, ('English and Indians' 1893) delivered in presence of towering nationalist of the time, Bankimchandra Chattapadhyay where, Tagore revealed a whetted mind not just against English poetry but the poets themselves. And it was directed against both the Romantic and Victorian poets notwithstanding exceptions like Edwin Arnold, who quite sardonically, was not accorded any real recognition by his countrymen for his wonderful odes to India's glorious past. In one of his major public lectures in 1890, *Mantri Abhishek* ('Coronation of Ministers'), which was incidentally delivered to welcome the apparent 'generosity' of the British for the proposed Indian Councils Bill 1890, Tagore, had been quite contemptuous of the widening gap between lofty ideals of English writers and the actual practices in the English civilization:

On the one hand, in English literature we get to see the high standard of English character, whereas in reality we do not find the same in English men. As such, our mistrust on the European civilization is gradually becoming intrinsic. In our minds, our educated people had a bit of skepticism of the famous civilization of 19th century England. All seems pathetically empty. Out of fear all have thought of taking shelter in the fortress of our ancient rituals. There is no kindness and genuineness in English civilization. translated
(*Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. XV132)

Similarly, while recounting his young days in *Jibon Smriti*, Tagore expressed his little or no interest for English language and literature on the one hand, and his unbridled passion for classical Sanskrit and contemporary Bengali literatures especially of Kalidas, Vidyasagar, Dinabandhu Mitra and of course, Bankimchandra, on the other. He reminisced with great fun and enthusiasm how he used to score highest marks in Bengali. He did study English poets mostly Shakespeare, Milton and Byron for his regular English lessons but did not relate any sense of filial feeling for them:

Glancing back at the period, of which I speak, it strikes me that we had gained more of **stimulation** than of **nourishment** out of English Literature. Our literary giants then were Shakespeare, Milton and Byron; and the quality in their work which stirred us most was strength of passion. In the life of Englishmen passionate outbursts are kept severely in check, for which very reason, perhaps, they so dominate their literature, making its characteristic to be the working out of **extravagantly vehement feelings** to an inevitable conflagration. At least this **uncontrolled excitement** was what we

learnt to look on as the quintessence of English literature. (emphasis added) (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol.IX 451-52)

The passage extracted from the English version of *Jibon-Smriti, Reminiscences* published by Macmillan & Co. in 1917, underlines two important aspects of Tagore's early encounter with English literature:- firstly, in his young days Tagore had to study Shakespeare, Milton and Byron and not the other major English Romantics as such; secondly (and more significantly) what really struck him was only the 'uncontrolled excitement,' 'extravagantly vehement feelings' of their literature which appeared to him more as 'stimulation' rather than 'nourishment'. In other words, it is only the high sounding ideals of these writers which Tagore came to know as the essence of their literature, and it had failed to nourish or leave any lasting imprint on the impressionable mind. Now, contrast this with Tagore's natural appeal for Dinabandhu Mitra, an early nationalist known for his iconic play *Neel Darpan* ('Indigo Mirror'):

During my boyhood Bengali literature was meager in volume, and I used to think, I ought to have finished all of them, good or bad, that there were available. Literature for the young had not yet evolved in any real sense then — but it certainly did me no harm. In our childhood we read every book we could lay our hands on, whether we understood it not, went on working within us. That is how the world itself reacts on the child's consciousness. The child makes it his own whatever he understands, while that which is beyond, leads it on a step forward.

When Dinabandhu Mitra's famous satires came out, were not suitable for my age. On an occasion one of our kin was reading a book of him, but no impelling of mine could induce her to lend it to me. She used to keep it under lock and key. And, its inaccessibility made me desire it all the more and I threw out the challenge (to myself) that I would have to read it. (translated by *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol.IX 478)

Finally, Tagore did; but not before he had to play a lot of pranks with this relative of his. The point I wish to draw here: Tagore used to feel an instinctive and/or filial urge and love for literature of any kind written in Bengali, and would let his mind to be not just 'stimulated' but 'nourished' with concomitant filiation for the writers—a fact which would have certainly influenced the thought process of the poet while conceiving those great early poems. The point is:

Tagore was variedly exposed to contemporary Bengali literature quite early and used to relish them with unalloyed love and admiration; he did like some English writers albeit any passion and was always against copying or reproducing them in Bengali; or in extension against making them parts of Bengali day to day consciousness, which incidentally had already become a trend among the most indigenous intelligentsia and rising bourgeoisie. Pertinent to point that Tagore was merciless against *The Tempest* in particular and Shakespeare in general, and had proudly privileged *Shakuntala* and

Kalidas over them. In his essay, *Shakuntala* written in 1902 primarily to study Kalidas's play vis-a-vis *The Tempest*, he put to rest the long standing comparison (and controversy) ostensibly generated by some English educated Bengali intellectuals, who worshipped Shakespeare over Kalidas. Tagore dismissed him outright as an inferior writer as Shakespeare could not produce a single play to match the emblematic essence of *Shakuntala* by Kalidas. (Mandal, *Tempest* 32)

The point is:

It cannot be considered a mere coincidence that the poems in *Sonar Tari* were conceived after he became intensely engaged with the writings of Kalidas while staying at idyllic countryside of Shelaidaha (now an iconic small town in Bangladesh) in early 1891. As he writes to his niece, Indiradebi from there: Kalidas's *slokas* have taught him how beauty gives birth to a 'pure mysterious limitless desire' (translated) in one's mind and how in the shore of his mind the poems in *Sonar Tari* came about. (Pal 200)

We shall return to this telling letter in detail. No doubt, the poems in this collection essentially reflect the vision of a vibrant, free and independent motherland bustling with the unceasing acts of producing 'gold.' The poems may not be manifestly political but definitely bear Tagore's latent meditations on his nationalistic zeal and uphold his unshakable vision of a strong self-reliant India in an amazing fruition, which cares little or nothing about the rapacious colonial domination outside. The beautiful musings are results of Tagore's close proximity with the pristine natural surroundings inextricably interfacing with the poor, illiterate and rustic inhabitants who were struggling to meet both ends in those parts of the undivided Bengal. Though he was sent there as their feudal governor he was so remarkably quick to understand the plight of these hapless Indians and wasted no time in extending his sensitive arms, love and care for them with genuine touches of empathy.

In fact, this was the time Tagore underwent a remarkable change in his life resulting in a deep sense of radicalism against the brutal colonial oppression; it was precipitated mainly by his frequent visits to the poverty-stricken country sides of Bengal after his new responsibility in 1891 to look after the Tagore estates. The issue will be clearer further if one carefully considers the stark contrast between the abovementioned public addresses- *Mantri Abhishek* (1890) and *Ingrej o Bharatbasi* (1893) - delivered within a gap of barely three years. As has been pointed out briefly already that if the former was a soft appraisal of the British move to allow Indians in the administration, the latter was an unsparing derision of all the institutions of the same government. He put the blame squarely on the deliberate indifference of the colonial government and its ruthless

machinery for causing the untold misery to the hapless peasants and labourers. The following cryptic passage from the public address of 1893 is symptomatic of not just his pent-up anger against the British but reflection of his deep feeling and concern for the rural poor so poetically depicted in *Sonar Tari*: “Today I would like to say, I will embrace even the poorest and shabbiest farmer of India as my brother. And I do not care about that glowing shahib (English), who is disgracing me (and my country) with his tom toms” (translated by Rabindra Rachanabali, vol.V 636).

Navigating deep into the collection we come across Tagore’s profound engagement with local geography, folklores and bare rudimentary expressions of life quintessentially captured in the poems -such as, *Baishnob Kobita* (“Vaishnava Poem”), *Parash-pathar* (“The Magic-stone”), *Dui Pakhi* (“Twin Birds”), *Deul* (“The Temple”), *Nadipathe* (“A Journey on the River”) or, *Bharabhador* (“Fulsome River”). The poems either bear a narrative to emphatically deny the anxiety of colonial/cultural imprints on the people and/or cite a landscape reclaiming unsullied pre-colonial territories and thus, generating a fascinating discourse of decolonization through an act of writing. And, going by the theoretical enumerations of decolonization as pointed out by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (especially while citing Yeats) these poems in *Sonar Tari* appear to be classic examples of how the poet glosses over the narrative of colonization by his power of imagination. Colonization being an obvious offshoot of capitalism, the rural habitation becomes an embodiment of the poet’s realization which is essentially pre-capitalist and hence, by extension pre-colonial. In a way, by glorifying Indian agrarian economic activities against the capitalist ventures Tagore refuses to acknowledge one of the principal enterprises of capitalism i.e., imperialism. Running parallel to this consciousness of the poet is his preference for the local over the global and thus, making an implicit but definitive critique of international imperial domination.

Tagore’s love for his motherland is further revealed in his conscious preoccupation with the process of mythmaking in the poems dealing with local legends and traditional themes- *Bimbabati*, *Rajar Chhele o Rajar Meye* (“The Prince and the Princess”) or *Nidrita* (“The Woman Asleep”). Are not they, an attempt by Tagore to retell and in effect, to revisit the unaffected local past to escape the inglorious present? Any apparent similarity between *Bimbabati* and the popular English Cinderella lore ought to be dismissed because of the difference in their motif, and especially in the original name ‘*Bimbabati*’ given by Tagore (Pal 202). They show how Tagore was deliberately

moving away from the metropolitan (colonial) value system and was pushing for the articulation of a culture which was rooted in the untainted local soil of India.

To return to the unresolved question of the Romantic influence on Tagore: was he, then, drawing on his nationalism in tune with the English Romantics who, too, appeared as roaring rebels in their own country owing to their strong critique of capitalism and attempt to extend English nationality to the agrarian poor in fast growing industrial England? It is undeniable that there are innumerable similarities between the Romantics and Tagore in these poems. In fact, one widely known poem, *Niruddesh Jatra* (“A Purposeless Journey”) in the collection may even appear to be inspired by Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. And yet, as it has been argued above that there are little or no evidence to suggest that Tagore was consciously following the English Romantic tradition especially during this period of his career. The matter can be simplified further by elaborating on the letter by Tagore to Indira Debi from Shelaidaha where, he claims that he was then flicking through two English books, *Elements of Politics* and *Problems of the Future*— both written by a strong utilitarian and moral philosopher of the Victorian period, Henry Sidgwick; quite interestingly, neither deals with the English Romantics. Further, Tagore states in the letter that *he had nothing worth reading except the Vaishonb poems in that place, and that is why, he had to fall back on those two books* (emphasis added, original letter quoted in Pal 202). In other words, Tagore’s flip through these two (only) English books might have been caused by compulsion to kill occasional boredom. Moreover, considering the long agonized history of his motherland under British repression, Tagore did not have to look up to the same colonial literatures for poetic inspiration especially in this period; more than enough ingredients, forms and diction were readily available in the rich repository of his own country to spark off his mimetic ventures. Though at one level, for both the Romantics and Tagore the enemy was obviously the same – the unimpeded giant of capitalism, for Tagore the challenge was excruciatingly redoubled as it gave birth to colonial rule and the resultant predicament for his countrymen. Another fine distinction in the romantic nationalism-if one calls Tagore’s so-was the application of language, his own mother tongue, Bengali or the *bhasha* of his own people; English Romantic tradition or not, Tagore was irrefutably refusing to adopt their language.

Reverting to the poems in *Sonar Tari* the title poem describes the poet-speaker’s limitless joy of seeing the fruition in the form of abundant ‘golden’ crops. In the bewitching backdrop of

rural monsoon, Tagore celebrates unceasing acts of producing golden paddy by the tireless serfs caring little or nothing about the world usurped by the foreign forces. It is this India- free, effervescent and complete in itself, Tagore dreams of through his powerful poetic creations. Likewise, *Bahsundhara* ('Mother Earth') he longs to be one with the mother earth and remain sheltered in her lap like a child. By invoking his motherland as a goddess he desires to undertake an unfettered smooth journey with the swagger of a wild child across the liberated land with the ceaseless movements of the blank verse fittingly commending the boundless journey:

Oh my earthly Mother!
I roll on your earthly extremities
I seek to make you endless in the elements
Like the pleasures of Spring; tearing
This sternum, breaking the hard stony
Narrow walls, mine own gloomy
Dark bridewell, jarring, murmuring,
Shaking, breaking, sparking, strewing
Trembling, startling, in luster delighted
Resonating through the endless universe
From poles to the edges, from the north to the south
In the east and the west, to the last blade of grass
Wake up to life in leaves and creepers
Blossoming into deep desire of life
A field of golden tipped crops
Move in the wind; fresh flowers
Secretly I pull again in the golden lines
Drops of life, fertile as the honey dewy
Stretching all along the Indus
Life pulsates on each bank of hers
The music of eternity; rejoicing notes
So do I expand the wave of words
In directions all; in the snowy glaciers
In the panorama of arcane mountains
Into the beguiling colours of the untrodden universe
In silence, in the solitude. (Translated by Rabindra Rachanabali, vol. II, 99-100)

In *Daridra* ('Poor Mother'), Tagore becomes overwhelmingly sentimental about his penury-ridden motherland and yet, expresses his deep devotion for her all the more because she is suffering thus under the shackles:

A penurious Mother so I love her more
Oh! Mother Earth, more I yearn for your care —

A pain smirch'd face bearing sad smile
Shoots my senses with deep pain

**

Heaven's lost but have fancy of heaven
And hence, a pain-sodden face of yours,
Mother! All your beauty lay in tears. (Translated by *RabindraRachanabali* vol. II,
109)

Should we, now, not hold that Tagore's contemplative utterances in *Sonar Tari* stem from his unreserved warmth and tenderness for these poor and downtrodden and in deep appreciation of their untrammled ways of life hidden to the outside world? And reversely, the same can be said to be sternly refusing to recognize the domineering presence of the 'tomtom sahibs' ('boastful Englishmen') or the arrogant colonizers whose oppressive rule had been aggravating the misery of these peasants for over 100 years then. In other words, the poetic pearls make an unyielding but implicit political affirmation that despite the long presence of exploitative colonial machinery the people depicted therein, are heroes for Tagore; they keep on doing their daily chores, go on sustaining on the bare minimum without being hindered by the ways of the bigger colonial India. In effect, Tagore by beautifully gliding his poetic imagination in a feudal countryside presents an outstanding discourse on the local-global binary, which is commonly central to the discursive paradigm of imperialism. Imperialism is a global phenomenon- controlling the territories of distant foreign nation/s from another metropolitan centre, and thus also controlling the land, economy and culture of the inhabitants of the other nation by the powerful global metropolis situated far away (Said 7-8). Tagore herein, by consciously preferring the local over the global effectively makes an attempt to alter the dominant discourse of imperialism and at the same time by rejecting the devouring enterprise of capitalism, generates a fascinating discourse of decolonization by an act of imagination.

I would like to conclude with the reassertion that Tagore's dream project of narrating a free, independent and distinct India started much earlier than often been tediously detailed by renowned historians of Indian nationalist movements. His was a profound vision of a nationalist India even while engaged in conceiving of his lesser known poetry of his early phase. In other words, his poetics was elegantly intertwined with the politics of the time; his idea of India was deeply coalesced into his fine sense of aesthetics. In the hay days of the anti-Partition movements (1903-1907), that ultimately went on to assume an intense pan-India anti-imperialist struggles, in Bengal

the similar murmurs continued with him composing and/or singing the best of his patriotic songs on the one hand, and playing the leading role in the nationalist politics in Bengal, on the other (Sarkar). And yet, there has rarely been any structured critical venture to interpret Tagore as a writer/thinker of decolonization even in this century, when we begin to witness gradual fall of the postcolonial critical schools and emergence of 'decolonization' as more positive theoretical tool in restructuring meaningful critiques of colonialism (Boehmer). It is my strong belief that this humble attempt will set the undisputedly greatest mind of South Asia rolling in a fresh new direction and provoke further engaging explorations in the field.

Works Cited

- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *Rabindranath Tagore: An interpretation*. Penguin Viking, 2011.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Postcolonialism". *Literary Theory & Criticism* edited by Patricia Waugh. OUP, 2006, pp 340-361.
- Chakraborty, Bikash. *Poets to A Poet, 1912 to 1940*. Visva-Bharati, 1998. pp 3-58.
- Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria*, (1817) Chapters XIII & XIV. *Romanticism: An Anthology* edited by Duncan Wu. Blackwell Publishers' Inc, 1994.
- Collins, Michael. *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore's writings on history, politics and society*, Routledge, 2012.
- Mandal, Manojit. "Shakespeare's Play or the Manifesto of A Deformed Slave: Contesting *The Tempest* from (Post)- Colonized Perspective", *Re-presenting Shakespeare* edited by Sarbani Chowdhuri. Kalyani UP, 2002, pp 32-40.
- . "Tagore's Idea of Nationalism & Contemporary India". *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, vol. 25, no.4, January-April 2017, pp 57-62.
- . "Tagore and Decolonization". *Vidysagar University Journal of History*, Vidysagar U, vol. VII, 2018-19, pp 23-35.
- Mehta, Linn Carry *Poetry and Politics of Decolonization*. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2015.
- Pal, Prasanta Kumar. *Rabijibani* (Biography of Tagore). Vol. IV Ananda Publishers Ltd, 1988.
- . *Rabijibani* (Biography of Tagore), Vol.V, Ananda Publishers Ltd, 1990.
- Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Tagore) vol.I. Visva-Bharati, 1986.
- Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Tagore) Vol. II. Visva-Bharati, 1989.
- Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Tagore) vol.V. Visva-Bharati, 1986.
- Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Tagore) Vol. IX. Visva-Bharati, 1989.
- Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Tagore) vol.XV. Visva-Bharati, 1992.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1978.
- . *Culture and Imperialism*. Verso, 1993
- Sarkar, Sumit. *The Swedeshi Movements in Bengal, 1993-1907*. Permanent Black, 2011.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. The Arden Shakespeare edited by Virginia M. Vaughan & Alden T. Vaughan. Bristol, 1999.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Jibon-smriti* ('My Reminiscences'). Visva-Bharati, 1959

The author is deeply indebted to his Ph.D. supervisee Rajarshi Roy for his assistance in translating the quoted poems of Rabindranath Tagore.