

The Aesthetics of Rupture in Assimilation of the East-West and the Year 1922: A Reading of Tagore's *Creative Unity*

Shweta Sur

Abstract

Merging with a new country's language and cultural codes requires attending the complex phenomenon of assimilation. With the advent of human mobility and the transnational migration, assimilation has crept in to the modern scene. The history of the confluence of East and West can be traced back to the start of colonization and the resultant relationship has often been bitter-sweet, which has given rise to the globalization and the opportunity of assimilation for the nations. The year 1922 has been earmarked as the epitome of literary modernism, reflected through the works not only from the West but from all over the globe. Focusing on the Indian subcontinent, the year 1922 has been evident of Indian Renaissance. With the invasion of the Western ethos, India had become the testing ground for the assimilation of the East West epistemology. The world by then had understood Rabindranath Tagore's literary genius as he had become the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize in literature in the year 1913. At surface level, Tagore's non-fictional work, *Creative Unity* (1922) is a collection of essays where he covers various topics, including the creative process, the nation, Woman and home, the confluence of the East and West. But, at the deeper level, one can read the underlying aesthetics of rupture in assimilation, the failure of the East and West confluence. Homi K Bhabha in 1994 had introduced the cultural hybridity, mimicry and had better described 'ambivalence' as the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and colonized. In 2011, keeping in mind the postcolonial methodologies, Michael Collins, had discussed the reasons behind such 'ruptures' in assimilation had critiqued hybridity. Thus, the paper attempts to acknowledge the already available postcolonial strains in the *Creative Unity* and with the year 1922 as the backdrop examines the rupture in assimilation and the failure of the East West confluence.

Keywords: Rupture, Assimilation, The year 1922, Postcolonialism, East-West Confluence

Introduction

Since time immemorial, India has been witnessing complex histories of migration. The advent of the Europeans migrating to India in batches concretizes the fact that India was a major trading destination for many European countries in the Ancient and Medieval Era. Apart from the British, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Danes had also followed up to get emplaced in India. The successful entry of the East India Company into the Indian land, first for the trade and later for preaching religion, had led them the opportunity to seep into the political, cultural and religious loopholes of then divided India, confirming their longer stay. The Europeans immigrants were expected to acquire the new customs of the host land through contact and communication, while introducing and infusing some of their own cultural traits to the Indian society. But, as the Europeans were gradually evolving with time in India, particularly the British who had gained immense power to control such a huge country, was in no mood for absolute cultural assimilation. Assimilation is an expected process in the part the minority immigrants when they enter a host country which involves integration at the social, cultural and political level with the larger dominant culture and society. Probably the British had developed the colonizer's psychology and their controlling nature over their Indian subjects which had prevented them from the intermingling with the Indian culture. Colin R. Alexander's *Administering Colonialism and War: The Political Life of Andrew Clow of Indian Civil Service* informs the readers with the psychology of the central character - Sir Andrew Clow who was a civil servant in India, had become the Minister for Communications during the late 1930s and early 1940s and the Governor of Assam in 1942. From the letters of Clow to his friend, the trauma of the colonizer's psychology is well reflected. Clow who gradually had distanced himself from the Indians and intermingling with their culture, remains as a specimen of rupture in the assimilation of the East-West confluence.

The year 1922 had gone through a lot of happenings all over the globe which also includes the becoming of British Empire as one of the strongest colonial forces, covering up over a quarter of the world with their regime. The year 1922 is earmarked in the history for several important events including Irish Free State established under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, Egyptian Independence from the British, the two key World War II leaders came to power: Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini and one of the world's oldest empires, the Ottoman Empire, was abolished in the year 1922.

From India the echoes of political upheavals could be heard in the year 1922 resulting from the continuous strife against the British Government. The famous Non-cooperation movement, which was an unsuccessful attempt was led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1920 saw its halt in 1922 due to Chauri Chaura incident.

Although the year 1922 was going through the trauma of World War I but still it had the ambition for the radical experiments of modernism which forms the distinctive character of the year. Michael Levenson states in his article, '1922: The Annus Mirabilis of Literary Modernism' that,

The year 1922 has been known as the annus mirabilis ("miracle year") of Anglo-American literary modernism, chiefly because of the near-simultaneous publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. (Levenson)

Christine Poggi, responding to the upheaval in the history of visual arts in Europe, opines that the year 1922 “marks a threshold whose decisive character would only come into focus retrospectively” (Poggi 104). Further she adds that, “It was a year of turmoil and transition that witnessed efforts to reaffirm both historical and avant-garde artistic traditions after the destruction caused by World War I and two October revolutions (Moscow and Rome), as well as efforts to declare the wholesale bankruptcy of bourgeois culture” (Poggi 104).

Gabrielle McIntire in her article, “Uncanny Semblables and Serendipitous Publications: T.S Eliot’s *The Criterion*, and *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*” finds the whole spirit of modernism being summed up in Thomas Stearns Eliot’s British literary magazine, *The Criterion* which was published in 1922. In her view, *The Criterion* had assumed that “transnational pastiche of writers was writing under shared aesthetic aspirations to reinvent previous beliefs about literary form, style, aesthetics, and content” (McIntire 21).

Quite a significant year for high modernism, 1922 is famous for the publication of some literary masterpieces: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Thomas Stearns Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*, Margery Williams’ *The Velveteen Rabbit*, David Herbert Lawrence’s *England My England*, Bertolt Brecht’s *Baal*, Richmal Cromton’s *Just William*, Hugh Lofting’s *The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle*, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Luigi Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, Albert Einstein’s *The Meaning of Relativity*. Apart from the European literary developments, India too embraced many thought provoking modernist texts either in regional or in English language. Rabindranath’s *Creative Unity* is a compilation of essays which originally were lectures that the author gave in 1922. This collection of essays includes, “The Poet’s Religion”, “The Creative Ideal”, “The Religion of the Forest”, “An Indian Folk Religion”, “East and West”, “The Modern Age”, “The Spirit of Freedom”, “The Nation”, “Woman and Home” and “An Eastern University”. The validity of Tagore’s ideas today exists through these essays not only because of the lucidity of expression but also for the remarkable elegance and purity of the essays.

1922 and the East-West Confluence

Walt Whitman was hopeful for the assimilation of the East and the West and his “Passage to India” which appeared in 1870 can be posited as a metaphor to expect the larger possibilities of materialistic and aesthetic advancement resulting out of the assimilation. But the historical evidences do not approve of the desired results out of the process. Instead, one is able to see the cracked picture of the East West confluence and also can sense the strains of the already available post-coloniality and related dynamics in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Creative Unity* (1922).

J. E van Lohuizen and De Leeuw finds the meeting of East and West on the purpose of trade and commerce which gradually developed into Europe’s colonial expedition of the East. To them,

The first centuries after the beginning of the Christian era witnessed an unheard-of trade boom... Thus a trade grew up in a great many Oriental luxuries such as silk, spices, pearls and ivory. Most of the spices were Indian products but some

commodities came from further away, for instance from the islands of South East Asia, and silk was brought from China along the Central Asian silk routes. (6-7)

Quite eager to assimilate, Collins in comparison to the other Indian communities finds the “dominant figures in Bengali intellectual and cultural life such as Rammohun Roy and Rabindranath’s father, Debendranath Tagore” (Collins 13) who had initiated “both to assess and to come to terms with the relationship between colonizer and the colonized, West and the East” (Collins 13). It was then the Indian Renaissance phase which had started to witness the possibility of the assimilation of the East and West.

The Aesthetics of Rupture in Assimilation

Totally the results of assimilation of two or more cultures, it is foremost important to understand the process. Assimilation is the phenomenon in which a marginal community when comes into contact with the larger community, the marginal section is expected to resemble or assume the majority group’s values, behaviors, and beliefs fully or partially. To properly assess the term ‘assimilation’, Henri Bunle goes on first to “clarify the word” (Bunle 6) by referring to “the best French dictionaries (which) define it as meaning “the act of making alike” (Bunle 6). In order to be ‘alike’ there must be acceptance, tolerance and understanding of the two cultures for each other. Giovanni Facchini, Eleonora Patacchini, Max F. Steinhardt comes to an agreed definition for assimilation, which ensures that,

Assimilation is mostly a one-way, absorptive, process, whereas integration also reflects the extent to which receiving societies are willing to engage with immigrants, accept them, and provide them with equal rights and opportunities to express their behaviours and preferences along with the native born. (Facchini, et. al. 619)

The structured study of the patterns of assimilation has defined that assimilation and acculturation were never an easy process. The newer/minor group of people who may have migrated to the host land, out of the power equation, observes the larger communities’ way of living, lifestyle, cultural and linguistic exchanges to camouflage into the main stream. What holds people back from assimilating sometimes is probably their stereotyping nature of the other cultures and the fixed notions that are difficult to break. In *Creative Unity*, Tagore speaks,

When a stranger from the West travels in the Eastern world he takes the facts that displease him and readily makes use of them for his rigid conclusions, fixed upon the unchallengeable authority of his personal experience. (Tagore 71-72)

According to Collins, “The construction of ‘Knowledge’ by the European colonizer about the so-called ‘Orient’ had functioned as a form of power and control” (Collins 4) which reciprocates Edward Said’s claim of the “consumption and acceptance of that knowledge led to a form of hegemony—complete domination, accepted and internalized by the dominated—not only of the physical body of geographical space of the colonized, but crucially, of their minds also” (Collins 4). The complex cultural, linguistic, socio-political and geographical patch-work of the East has been always a difficult matter to deal with. Whatever the West sees and comprehends about the East are merely broken pieces of the whole and the misunderstood impression of the East that the West takes along with it, becomes a discourse. As the rigid conclusions are difficult to dissolve, hence, assimilation of the two cultures remains due.



One more reason behind the failure of the East-West assimilation is reasoned by J. E van Lohuizen and De Leeuw who had agreed that “the West played a politically aggressive part, culminating in its colonial empires” (Lohuizen and Leeuw 9) and perhaps this had allowed the West to develop the colonizer’s psychology of being superior over the colonized, building in them a hesitant nature to assimilate culturally with the subjugated parts in the East.

The colonial period in Asia is often said to differ completely from any other period of temporary subjugation anywhere in Asia because this time the occupiers—the West Europeans—did not assimilate culturally with the occupied, as was the case with previous conquerors. (Lohuizen and Leeuw 7)

J. E van Lohuizen and De Leeuw’s views find true reflection in Tagore’s *Creative Unity*, especially when Tagore says,

The West comes to us, not with the imagination and sympathy that create and unite, but with a shock of passion—passion for power and wealth. The passion is a mere force, which has in it the principle of separation, of conflict. (Tagore 75)

By citing the successful assimilation of the Mughals and Hindus in India, Tagore says that, “In Indian history, the meeting of the Mussulman and the Hindu produced Akbar, the object of whose dream was the unification of hearts and ideals” (Tagore 79). But he is completely disgusted with the “carnivorous pride in their (British) snarling rows of teeth” (Tagore 79-80) that has been “raising thorny hedges of exclusion and offering human sacrifices to national self-seeking” (Tagore 79-80). Instead of Tagore’s expected “creative unity” of the East and the West, the West’s colonial expeditions actually “has intensified the mutual feelings of envy among Western races themselves” (Tagore 79-80).

Responding to the rupture of assimilation of the East West and particularly citing the example of British and Indian equation, Collins says that “with the rise of anti-colonial nationalism amongst the Indian intelligentsia as an increasingly oppressive British response” (Collins 16) it had restricted the possibility “for interaction between colonizer and colonized, Britons and Indians, was rapidly diminishing” (Collins 16).

Giving a plot twist, Bunle expects assimilation and acculturation not only from the marginal community but also from the natives too, suggesting a two-way process. In his “The Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants”, Bunle points out that,

Natives of the receiving country are directly interested in the immediate assimilation of newcomers whether they welcome and favour it or fear and oppose it. This attitude will be conditioned not only by sentimental, moral and religious considerations but also by the powerful impact of material issues, such as increased activity, improvement in living conditions, wage questions, unemployment, etc. (Bunle 6)

Referring to the condition of India, as it was under the colonial rule of British Empire until the year 1947, the natives (here Indians) though was the majority but was unable to resist the imposed colonial orders. Out of force, the natives were expected to drop their vernacular languages, adhere to the British ways of life, including British language (referring to Lord Macaulay’s Minute on Education of 1835). The enforced assimilation of the East and West had shattered the possibilities of the creation of Tagore’s utopian world of intellect and humanity. Taking cue from Tagore’s writings, Collins says,

The great failure of the British in India, Tagore felt, was to misunderstand and thus fail to learn from, Indian culture. In this sense, British rule in India was a failure of imagination and intellect as much as anything else; and in this respect it degraded the British, just as it degraded India. (Collins 13)

Visualizing upon the dilapidated structures of assimilation, in “Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration”, Richard Alba and Victor Nee comments,

Assimilation has been criticized over the decades, both from outside by those who reject it as a valid approach and by others who, operating within its conceptual frame, point out gaps or identify features that seem idiosyncratic to the experiences of some groups. (Alba and Nee 833)

Besides, they have also accepted that “Assimilation theory has been subject to intensive critique for decades” (Alba and Nee 826) yet there is no other concrete theoretical framework which has been successful in providing the social scientists to have a deep understanding of the nexus of two or more cultures and communities along with the opportunity to consider the “cumulative findings concerning the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants” (Alba and Nee 826).

The initial strains of post colonialism started to develop even before India was independent from the British Colonization. The views of Bunle if applied to the Indian context, it further leads to Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of hybridity. When it is about Indian subcontinent, British had “ruled” over it as its colony. Their supremacy and their forceful... had made the natives (here Indians) accept the Western thought process, language, culture and lifestyle, hence after independence, the country is left as a colonial detritus, and its people are seen adopting “ambivalent” ways (Bhabha).

Bunle considers successful assimilation by a migrant “only when he speaks the language of his new country by preference, has adopted its customs, and when his general conduct and way of life become those of his new compatriots and his original outlook gives way to that of his new surroundings” (Bunle 6). But Tagore in his *Creative Unity* maintains that “The West comes to us (here the Indians), not with the imagination and sympathy that create and unite, but with a shock of passion—passion for power and wealth” (Tagore 75). Instead of learning Indian languages, British led government in India on 2nd February 1835 had approved Thomas Babington Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Indian Education’ which determined to introduce English education to the Indian natives.

According to Henri Bunle,

When we speak of an assimilated person, we refer to someone who has become part of the receiving community and who resembles its inhabitants, as closely as can be, in certain essential points. (Bunle 6)

But, the idea of assimilation and acculturation falls apart when it comes to the case of Indians and British because regarding this, Tagore finds that “the West has not sent out his humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine” (Tagore 83). Moreover, when Tagore introspects upon the whole process of the grand meeting and the confluence of the East and the West, he finds,

Something of the same sense of oppression in a different degree, the same desolation in a different aspect, is produced in my mind when I realise the effect

of the West upon Eastern life—the West which, in its relation to us, is all plan and purpose incarnate, without any superfluous humanity. (Tagore 74)

Tagore's Utopian Creative Unity

Rabindranath Tagore had to produce a metaphor of 'creative unity' to assert his theory of the existence of the two culturally, politically and geographically differed giants—East and the West. But eventually he had realized that his utopian dream to see the East-West confluence, exhibiting an optimistic energy in a global level, was as vague as a cloud. To him, the master-slave dichotomy had to be perished from the psychological, economical and socio-cultural systems for the successful assimilation. On a poetical note, Tagore records his long-lost dream, of the assimilation of the two greatest cultures, East and the West, in his *Creative Unity*,

Earnestly I ask the poet of the Western world to realize and sing to you with all the great power of music which he has, that the East and the West are ever in search of each other, and they must meet not merely in the fulness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the swords, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety. (Tagore 84)

Tagore was confident that the East had actually developed a creative mission and therefore was heading towards assimilating with the West. Devoid of any materialistic gain, shaking hands with the West, the East sought for a 'creative unity' of its kind,

Yes, the East did once meet the West profoundly in the growth of her life. Such union became possible, because the East came to the West with the ideal that is creative, and not with the passion that destroys moral bonds. (Tagore 85)

J. E van Lohuizen and de Leeuw reasons the purpose of assimilation of the East and the West as the "East and West seem to complement each other admirably; the West by its highly developed intellectual knowledge of matter, the East by its extremely wide and deep knowledge of man. In this way collaboration of the two cultures could provide a better world for a better man" (Lohuizen and Leeuw 11).

A visionary indeed, Tagore was so positive about the assimilation of the East and the West that even upon his achievement of Nobel Prize, Tagore had opined, that undoubtedly it was the "recognition of individual merit" (Tagore 79) but "it was the acknowledgement of the East as a collaborator with the Western continents, in contributing its riches to the common stock of civilization, which had the chief significance for the present age" (Tagore 79).

Tagore was the product of his time who was interested in navigating within social and intellectual structures to enquire the impact of British colonialism on Indian political, socio-cultural and economical space. Tagore had in his vision long back that the action of resisting colonialism is not to imitate non-cooperative movement against the British but to initiate an intellectual aura, a new religion of knowledge system.

According to Collins, "There was no doubt that Tagore felt he had a particular contribution to make" (Collins 19) and that contribution was none other than transforming the colonial equation into assimilation. Further, when Tagore saw "the time was right for a new chapter of world history to unfold in which the East and the West would meet at the level of culture and ideas; that this would have profound implications for the power dynamics between them; and hence the nature of the colonial relationship would be



transformed” (Collins 19). Collins found out that even though “Tagore very much shared Andrews’ vision of friendship being East and West”, the West did not take Tagore’s views seriously. Probably because Tagore had hailed from one of the colonies of British regime, India, therefore he was treated as “an outsider to the cultural world of the metropole” (Collins 18) although he had “high social status in India” (Collins 18).

Conclusion

Avant garde in every sense, the year 1922 has been ear marked in the pages of history not only for coming up with the high point of literary modernism but also for exhibiting major socio-political upheavals which had metamorphosed human minds in truest sense. Rabindranath Tagore’s *Creative Unity* is a literary evidence of the change in the thought process of the human minds of that time. For the Indian natives, it had been an eon to remain as colonized subjects and controlled by the British. Intellectuals like Rammohun Roy, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, The Dutts, Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore were the products of Indian Renaissance who were eager for reformation of the society by subverting the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. In his poem, ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, as Shelley had introduced his readers his wish for a new religion among the human beings i.e. the religion of intellectual beauty, Tagore too was also hopeful for a productive assimilation of the East and the West (Indians and the British) which would definitely yield a strong flow of intellect, cultural and materialistic prosperity. The utopian metaphor of ‘Creative Unity’ was the brain child of Tagore, born out of the expected assimilation of the East and the West. However, things didn’t turn up as Rabindranath Tagore had thought as there was nothing “creative” in the “unity” of the East and the West. Critiquing the non-negotiable nature of the British Imperialism, Tagore’s *Creative Unity* carries strains of postcolonial ideas, where he had tried to show the Empire, their real faces along with their colonizer’s mindset which had been the root cause of the rupture in assimilation of the East West.

Works Cited

- Alba Richard, and Victor Nee. “Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration”, *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 1997. pp. 826-874. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2547416>
- Alexander, Colin. “Colonialism in India was traumatic – including for some of the British officials who ruled the Raj.” *The Conversation*, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/colonialism-in-india-was-traumatic-including-for-some-of-the-british-officials-who-ruled-the-raj-77068>
- Bunle, Henri. “The Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants”, *Population Studies*, Vol. 3, 1950, pp. 5-11.
- Collins, Michael. *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World*. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2012.
- Facchini Giovanni, et al. “Migration, Friendship Ties and Cultural Assimilation.” *Scand. J. of Economics*, Vol 117, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 619-645. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43673715>



- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. OUP, 1999. Print.
- Glazer, Nathan. "Is Assimilation Dead?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 530, 1993, pp. 122-136.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1047681>
- Levenson, Michael. "1922: The Annus Mirabilis of Literary Modernism." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2018.
(<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-60>)
- Lohuizen, J.E. van, and de Leeuw. "The Meeting between East and West". *East and West*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1956, pp. 5-11.
- Poggi, Christine. "Circa 1922: Art, Technology, and the Activated Beholder." *1922 Literature, Culture, Politics*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabate, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 104-128.
- McIntire, Gabrielle. "Uncanny Semblances and Serendipitous Publications: T.S. Eliot's the Criterion, and The Waste Land and James Joyce's Ulysses." *1922 Literature, Culture, Politics*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabate, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 15-28.
- Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore. *Creative Unity*. Notion Press, 2019. Print.

