

Tagore and Decolonization

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This paper revisits Tagore during the turbulent period of India's struggle for freedom since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and how he demonstrated discursive strategies of decolonization while living under an offshore dominion. It is a brief attempt to underline the interface between Tagore's obvious emergence as a prolific writer and his active participation in the nationalist politics of India since the late 1880s. By reinterpreting Tagore's overtly political writings, public lectures replete with distinct nationalist themes, and by emphatically recognizing his idea of self-empowerment through indigenous economic enterprises, this study seeks to establish Tagore not just as an important nationalist figure of the time, but also a radical decolonizer, who was consciously producing a great body of literature to compliment his political vision and the contemporary nationalist movements.

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The principal objective of this paper is to revisit Tagore in the context of the turbulent period of India's struggle for freedom during late 19th and early 20th centuries, and how Tagore demonstrated discursive strategies of decolonization while living under an offshore dominion. Attempts will be made to underline the interface between Tagore's obvious emergence as a prolific writer and his active participation in the nationalist politics of India since the late 1880s. It is well recorded in literary history that during this time Tagore was producing all those overtly political writings, delivering public lectures replete with distinct nationalist themes, and as also was advocating for self-empowerment by growing indigenous economic enterprises, went on to establish *swadeshi bhandars* (nationalist shops). Even his apparently innocuous poetry or the 'pure' literary outputs during this time used to carry immense political significance and were consistently contributing to the contemporary nationalist discourse. This study, by locating and referring to some of Tagore's poems, short stories and essays written during the period between 1890 to 1905, seeks to interpret Tagore as a radical decolonizer, who was consciously producing a great body of literature to compliment his political vision and the contemporary nationalist movements.

However, before reading Tagore as a writer/thinker of decolonization it may be quite pertinent to have a relook at the theoretical suppositions of the concept, 'decolonization'. While locating the roots of the term, Todd Shepard (2006) informs us that the word was first used by a French journalist, Henri Fonfrede in reference to Algeria as early as 1836, but it had disappeared from circulation by 1850s. To trace its resurfacing in the first half of the 20th century or more specifically

during the interwar period, he quotes a very important passage from the French historian, Charles-Robert Ageron's entry "Decolonization" in *Encyclopedea Universalis*, Corpus 7(Paris, 2004):-

Invoked as a neutral way to describe the pullback of imperial powers, the designation *Entokolonisierung* was used in Germany after 1930, notably by [Moritz] Julius Bonn. After emigrating to Britain, Bonn translated it into English as "*Dekolonization*". This scholar even predicted in his book *Crumbling of Empire* that very soon we would witness not only the crumbling of British Empire but that of all colonial empires. After 1918, numerous German intellectuals [like Bonn] believed in the "decline of the West", to quote the supposedly prophetic title of Oswald Spengler's book; others ruminated on "the rising tide of color against white world supremacy" (by the American scholar Lothrop Stoddard); still others on "Islam's awakening," Asianism, and even Pan-Africanism". (As quoted in Shepard:2006, 5)

We are aware as to how the term 'decolonization' was given an entirely new dimension by another Algerian radical decolonizer, Frantz Fanon, in his epoch making book, *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. Conceptualized in the backdrop of the Algerian liberation struggles, in which he himself was an active crusader, he defines decolonization as a process of liberation always involving violence. In the chapter called, "Concerning Violence", he argues:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor a natural shock, or a friendly understanding. ... Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies....

In decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation. If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: "The last shall be first and the first last." Decolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence. ... The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. (Fanon: 1963, 17-18)

NgugiwaThing'o, too, in his highly perceptive work, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1980) rakes up the ideological positions of linguistic/cultural colonialism, and a need by the indigenous intelligentsia, to produce a conscious counter ideology based on the native language and culture.

However, the term 'decolonization' was first widely recognized as a serious theoretical precept in exposing the cultural politics of imperialism by Edward Said in his 1993 book where, while dealing with resistance and opposition in the colonies he dedicates a chapter on the famous Irish poet/nationalist, W.B. Yeats - "Yeats and Decolonization". According to Said, Yeats though writing in the tradition of the English writers and in their language, presents a fascinating aspect of decolonization:

Despite Yeats's obvious, and I would say, settled presence in Ireland, in British culture and literature, and in European modernism, he does present another fascinating aspect: that of indisputably great *national* poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations and the restorative vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power. (Said:1993, 295)

By meticulously analyzing some of the best poetic works of Yeats, Said argues that the colonial language holds no bar for him when it comes to constructing a distinct Irish national identity, as Yeats's poetic oeuvre was essentially engaged with exclusive Irish themes. Unlike other major writers of decolonization such as Tagore, Senghor, Césaire, Neruda or Fanon, who did not have to think of modernizing English poetry Yeats, according to Said, at times even envisioned birth of violence in shaking the chains of the colonial edifices, and thus in the final analysis essentially remained a poet of decolonization.

Five years later, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin published a very important compendium on postcolonial studies as *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, and in the entry of 'decolonization' they write:

Decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: 1998, 63)

While earmarking various aspects of decolonization the three critics lay importance on the issue of revival and revaluing of the local cultures and languages by the indigenous intellectuals, one extreme form of which is an attempt to recover pre-colonial cultures in a pristine form. According to them, the advocates of this version of decolonization reject the liberal project of embracing 'transnational' identity endorsed by a group of non-European writers in English, who are disillusioned at the functioning of the contemporary postcolonial state.

Margaret Kohn and Keally Mcbride in a relatively recent study, *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations*, says, "Decolonization, the dream of self-rule, is the most recent incarnation of the long-standing project to achieve political freedom and deserves a prominent place in the discipline of political theory". (Kohn and Mcbride: 2011,13)

Kohn and Mcbride recognize 'decolonization' as a contemporary theoretical invention to study the world wide phenomena of anti colonial movements for achieving political freedom in the colonies, which according to them, began in the first half of the 20th century. Keeping this purpose in mind they strongly recommend inclusion of the term in the current political theories. In an anxious way they wish to read 'decolonization' largely in the light of postcolonial political theories and caution us about the foundational problems of such studies, mainly the origin of the term which, according to them, quite paradoxically takes shape from the term 'colonization' itself.

Nonetheless, the book is of huge significance in the context of decolonization in India reflected elaborately in the concluding chapter, "Gandhi and the Critique of Western Civilization". Focusing primarily on his *Hind Swaraj*, Kohn and Mcbride mention two principal characteristics of decolonization in Gandhi; the first being demystification, shows that the West is not superior in absolute terms, it is superior only in terms of the criteria that it sets for itself. 'Reversal' or 'reverse orientalism' on the other hand, though different, compliment the process of demystification first, by stressing on the recovery of pre-colonial ideas and practices that had been denigrated and undermined by the colonizers, and thereby, by valorizing those indigenous ideas and practices for using them as

resources of resistance and anti-colonial struggles (Kohn and Mcbride: 2011). For Kohn and Mcbride Gandhi's anti-colonial sentiment was founded on the principles of Indian civilization committed to truth, morality and spirituality against the depraved capitalist value system of the colonizers. In a quite brisk manner though, they have also put Tagore in the same bracket as he too regarded imaginative, spiritual and communal East superior than the active, acquisitive and individualist West (Kohn and Mcbride: 2011, 144).

However, it may be noted that the first major recognition of Tagore as a poet of decolonization in a Western academia is accorded only lately by Lin Cary Mehta (2015) through her seminal publication, *Poetry and Politics of Decolonization: Yeats, Tagore, Senghor, Cesaire, and Neruda*. By extending Said's arguments of paradox in Yeats for his settled presence in English modernist tradition and simultaneously in Irish nationalist discourse, Mehta contends:

"The possibility of a colonial poet's achieving international stature came out of shift that stemmed from the breakdown of European domination and the move toward independence in the colonies. The result, both in Europe and in the colonies, was a profound turn toward self-criticism within the European system, which rendered simple domination impossible and provoked an artistic response to which we have given the name Modernism."(Mehta:2015, 1)

In other words, according to Mehta the European modernist trends in these five cult poets in their respective countries can also be said to be born directly or indirectly out of the imperialist presence, and hence, they continue to carry two different poetic selves- a European/colonial modernist and a nationalist; all of them are bound by an invisible thread of cultural anxiety in a colonial situation.

However, Mehta's "two poets" theory holds some valid ground considering the colonial language adopted by these poets. But so far as Tagore is concerned his "English career" begins to bloom much later at the age of 50 or to be more precise after the publication of English *Gitanjali* in 1912(Chakraborty: 1998). Therefore, Tagore that I have sought to analyze, here, is distinctly different from the other four poets of decolonization in Mehta's book. As we shall see, Tagore with his public speech of 1893, *Ingrej o Bharatbasi* ("English and the Indians") started to reveal a growing sense of urgency in critically examining, rejecting and at times dismantling all the tropes of imperialism and thus, presenting an exclusive nationalist self-a position he would be replicating even in his poems of imagination or in the fictional writings. Tagore during this time was not only consciously avoiding producing his writings in colonial/English language but was averse to the idea of reproducing them in translations (Chakraborty: 1998). This makes Tagore a pioneer in advancing the theoretical base for anti colonial resistances or as my studies will contend, the first real thinker of decolonization.

I wish to state, here, that I have taken up the idea of decolonization to be quite distinct from the series of movement often termed as 'postcolonial'. To me 'decolonization' fundamentally denotes an essential and emphatic denial of colonization despite its settled presence in the subject nation. The fundamental parameters, traits and subtle nuances embedded in the very process of colonization are rejected in diverse ways by the colonized communities led largely by the indigenous intellectuals. These parameters, both overt and covert, are primarily of three types- economic, political and cultural. The colonizing communities slowly but certainly takes control of the economic systems,

political/administrative machinery and cultural ethos to fully establish the colonial enterprise on the colonized nation. A decolonizing mind sets out to denounce those colonizing structures and reclaims at the same time the pre-colonial systems either through violent means or simply by cogently articulating them in his mother tongue.

I would also like to point out here that the idea of interpreting Tagore as a writer/thinker of decolonization had first struck me way back in 2002, when I had endeavored to analyze two diagonally opposing responses to the famous Shakespearean play, *The Tempest* by two most important nationalist thinkers of the colonial Bengal-Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore (Mandal: 2002). Bankim's uncritical acceptance of Miranda and Prospero, or the play or Shakespeare, typifies the obvious outcome of the deeply entrenched British cultural dominance in colonial India. Indeed, Shakespeare in particular and English literary studies in general functioned as most powerful ideology of conquest for the British imperialism in India (Viswanathan: 1996). But Tagore's rejoinder to Bankimchandra's reading of *The Tempest* in his essay, *Shakuntala* (1902), in such a situation, appears to be a fascinating decolonizing discourse whereby, Tagore's observations (especially on man-nature relationship) can be potentially deduced as attempts to unmask the problematic power relation between the ruler and the ruled. In a vulnerable (colonial) cultural condition, Tagore's undaunted preference for Shakuntala and her cultural norms or Kalidas over Shakespeare makes him a writer who exposes the coded grandeur involved with the most important foundation of English literary studies, Shakespeare. (Mandal:2002)

What Tagore had ventured to do during the turn of the last century was virtually theorized by a plethora of writers/critics through a movement in the independent colonies or in the American academia collectively known as 'post-colonialism'. The movement received its first recognition and theoretical underpinnings with the publication of AiméCésaire's seminal text, *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1950. Tagore, by questioning the uncritical acceptance of the supremacy of the Western cultural values transmitted through not just Shakespeare's plays but other English canonical texts, exposed the cultural politics of British imperialism, which was the fundamental subject matter of the 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said. However, quite unfortunately, we in Bengal or India have shown little or no enthusiasm in responding to Tagore's insightful analysis of *The Tempest*. In fact, it has been a common academic practice with us to *not consider cultural politics of the Empire in introducing Shakespeare or English studies in India until some Western criticism or criticism produced in the colonial language, directs us to ponder over its political implications* (emphasis added). (Mandal:2002)

The fundamental fulcrum of my present paper more or less stems from this articulation of how a conscious and self-righteous intellectual like Tagore, though living under the obvious dominion of English culture and imperialism, keeps on producing a great body of literature in his own language and thus attempts to deny and demystify the fundamental cultural, political and historical edifices of colonization. His is a conscious endeavour to decolonize himself and his motherland through the act of writing during the emergence of the structured nationalist movement in Bengal. The point, that I wish to make is: Tagore was actively participating in the nationalist politics of the time by publishing nationalist journals, delivering public addresses, hitting the streets of Calcutta; but his creative mind

too, was deeply engrossed with the idea of freeing his motherland; in other words his creative self or his poetics was deeply embedded with the politics of the contemporary India. Even the apparently innocuous collections of poems- *Sonar Tar* ('The Golden Boat'), *Chitra, Kahini* ('The Tales'), *Naibedyo* ('The Offerings')-composed during this time would implicitly and explicitly construct a motherland which remained untouched by colonial indignities. Similarly, the collections of his short stories- *Galpo Gucchha*- though politically naïve would present an India which was steeped in the rural agrarian background completely unsullied by the industrial capitalist system. So far his essays are concerned, I have already mentioned a little ago as to how even a literary essay can articulate an obvious anti-colonial sentiment; and if, we consider about 30-35 directly political writings Tagore essentially appears to be taking on the might of the imperialists by constantly laying bare their hollow cultural claims and by privileging the glorious historical, social and cultural traditions of India over the colonizers'.

It is highly pertinent to mention here, that there are very strong strands of argument held by literary/cultural and social historians that, Tagore was drawn into patriotism or nationalist movements only during the partition time in 1905. But the principal contention of my paper is to demolish these arguments, and I base my argument by referring to the public address that Tagore had delivered in 1891, "MantriAbhishek" ('Ablution of Ministers'), where he openly welcomed the stand of the Indian National Congress in supporting the proposed Indian Council Bill. Though later on Tagore deprecated this public lecture and refused to include it in the popular collected works, owing apparently to the soft stand he took towards the British colonial administrators. But by the standard of the early nationalist movements even to ask for Indian members in the Legislative Council was a quite serious business. (Bhattacharya: 2011).

As history unfolds, this 'mellow' 'lukewarm' and 'malleable' emerging colonized intellectual had undergone a radical transformation within a span of two years. And, in his next address in a public meeting of 1893, which was incidentally chaired by the towering national figure, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Tagore delivered, *Ingrej o Bharatbasi* ('English and the Indians') whereby, he went on tearing apart the English in their claim of racial superiority. The boldness, the cogency of the argument and the eloquence with which it was delivered, struck the entire audience including the icon of nationalism on the chair. Thereafter in 1898, came another scathing attack on the policies of the British imperialists delivered in the form of a public lecture, *Kanthorodh* ('The Throttle') where Tagore angrily protested against the new sedition laws and the arrest of the prominent Congress leader, Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In fact, major portion of the collection of essays, *Raja o Praja* ('The Ruler and the Ruled') published later in 1908, were written and published individually between 1893-1902-much before the plan of the Partition was even conceived by Curzon. It must also be mentioned here, Tagore was consciously and actively advocating for self-empowerment of his motherland through reconstruction of India by focusing on rural agrarian folks. *Swadeshi Samaj* ('Nationalist Society') initially, delivered in the form of a lecture in 1904, eloquently voiced for a self-reliant autonomous Indian civil society to be emerging as the principal vanguard of India's narrative against the colonizers'.

After his rendition of the *Bande Mataram* during the historic reception of the National Congress

Party at his home in December 1896, Tagore kept on composing series of patriotic songs to invoke the feeling of *Swadesh* ('My Country') or commitment to the cause of one's motherland. The highly emotive songs received instant popularity and he could quite remarkably connect with the distant and common people by echoing the selfless love and feelings for the motherland. It is true that the immediate trigger behind the massive anti-British movements was the decision taken by Lord Curzon in 1904-05 to divide Bengal on communal line. But overwhelming and large scale participation by the Indians irrespective of class, creed or religion made the movement a pan-Indian one, the effect of which, the mighty colonial administration could never fully overcome.

It is also quite significant to note that during the first few years of the last century Tagore was developing another aspect of his decolonizing mind: attempt to free Indian education systems from the ills of colonial educational policies. Tagore, it is widely known to all of us, did not have any formal education and was, hence, quite distant from the 'poisonous' effects from the Indian system of education introduced through the Indian Education Act of 1835, T.B. Macaulay being the principal architect of it. The highly Anglicized education system of India since then had been producing the desired 'brown sahibs' of Macaulay to smoothen and sustain colonial rule in India. It cannot be denied that the majority of the Indian nationalists were offshoots of the same colonial education system. Against such a precarious background Tagore's project to introduce an indigenous system of education with the Bengali medium school in Santiniketan in 1904, was, without any doubt, the result of his conscious commitment to nationalist politics of the time. Tagore was a vociferous critic of the *University Bill of 1904* targeting at taking more control of the Indian universities and colleges, and attempting to destroy the residual Indian characteristics therein. Incidentally, the nationalist movement in education initiated formally with the establishment of National Council of Education in 1905 was therefore, an open endeavour to establish an alternative and/or anti-colonial education system; Tagore was a founder member of the Council.

The point that I wish to make here, is, even before the commencement of the anti-partition movement and the subsequent nationwide anti-imperialist struggles, Tagore was very much emerging as an active decolonizing figure in his thought and action or both in terms of theory and practice. And yet, when the series of postcolonial movements began to surface immediately after the Second World War, Tagore was not at all considered as an inspiration along with other key figures like as Aime Cesaire or Leopold Senghor. Even during the 1970s and 80s when such movements started to assume a very powerful ideological significance, Tagore remained unrecognized in the field. The first such reference of Tagore was made by Edward Said in *Culture & Imperialism* in 1993, whereby, while dealing with culture of resistance in the ex-colonial countries he drew on Tagore's *Nationalism* tangentially along with other writers of resistance movements like, Cesaire, Senghor, Fanon and others (Said:1993). However, it is somewhat inexplicable that even Said –who was regarded as the most influential cultural critic of colonialism ever since the publication of his epoch making book, *Orientalism in 1978*- did not really consider Tagore as a writer/thinker of decolonization. The issue appears to be more intriguing when one underlines that Said dedicated a whole chapter on Yeats as a poet of decolonization in the Irish independence struggle in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in his 1993 book and yet, quite surprisingly, left out Tagore who, like Yeats,

actively participated during the same time in Indian national movements against the same colonial power. Tagore was largely known and read in the Western academic circles mainly because of his English *Gitanjali* (1912) which secured him the Nobel Prize in 1913. Incidentally, it was Yeats, who gave Tagore the first significant recognition in the private literary circles in London way back in 1912 and thereby, to the Western reading public by writing the famous Introduction to *Gitanjali* before it was nominated for the Nobel in literature. (Chakraborty:1998).

Today, it is not very difficult to gauge as to what aspects of Tagore a la *Gitanjali* were appreciated by the West. The traits of Oriental mysticism, the image of a Sage and the flavours of Eastern spiritualism, were the most attractive features of Tagore to the general reading public as well as the principal literary personalities in the West. Surprisingly, it continued to remain so even in the first decade of the present century with some exceptions notwithstanding to read into Tagore's active political commitments in the heyday of imperialism.

Nevertheless, there has rarely been any attempt to interpret Tagore as writer/thinker/theoretician of anti-imperialism even in this century, when the postcolonial critical school has almost exhausted all its avenues in structuring and restructuring critiques of colonialism. As we have seen, only very recently Lin Cary Mehta took up Tagore as a poet of decolonization along with Yeats, Césaire, Senghor and Neruda by publishing her doctoral dissertation in 2015. But it must be noted here that Mehta's thesis was not entirely dedicated to Tagore, neither did she describe him as a critique of colonialism or a theoretician who, set out to launch a significant political/cultural counter narrative to imperialism by ceaselessly writing back to the Empire especially during the period of 1890 to 1905. The fundamental essence of Mehta's laudable effort lies in her comparative reading of these five very important writers of five different countries which witnessed varied colonial exploitations for centuries. All of them lived and wrote under colonial rules; most of them did not meet each other during their life time, never got together, and yet, found an invisible thread binding all in pursuing their creative oeuvre as poets of decolonization.

II

Let us now turn to some of the poetic gems produced by Tagore in the 1880s and see how poetry becomes, for him, a means of articulation of national identity by denying the colonial indignity. The poems in *Sonar Tori* (1894), which instantly fetched fame and recognition to Tagore, essentially reflect a poetic vision of vibrant, free and independent motherland bustling with the uninterrupted acts of producing 'gold'. While in the first poem in *Sonar Tori* by the same name Tagore's joy of seeing the fruition in the form of abundantly rich crops gets redoubled because of the presence of rural monsoon beauty, in *Vasundhara* he longs to be one with the mother earth and remain protected in her lap like child. He invokes his motherland through his muse and roams freely and incessantly with the swagger of a wild child from one parts of the country to the other; and the unbridled movements of the blank verse too, fittingly compliment Tagore's unfettered imaginative physical journey.

There are innumerable poems in the collections poems-*Chitra* (1896), *Kanika* (1899), *Katha*, *Kahini*, *Kalpana*, *Kshanika* (1900) and *Naibedya* (1901)- which are directly political and uphold Tagore's vision of a strong, active and united India which care little or nothing about the rapacious

colonial misrule. In fact, keeping in mind the theoretical premises of decolonization as set out by Edward Said and as cited above, one can read the poems in these collections as classic examples of rejection of colonial domination through an act of imagination. Steeped in a rural and agrarian backdrop the poems display a landscape which is pristine, pre-capitalist and pre-colonial. By way of glorifying Indian agrarian traditions against the ruthlessness of the colonial capitalism Tagore seeks to reject the principal enterprise of imperialism i.e, capitalism or industrial capitalism, to be more precise. It is now known worldwide that colonization is a direct and most profitable enterprise of capitalism in England in particular and Europe in general. And hence the ostensible rejection of capitalism by Tagore in these poems suggests a rejection of colonialism itself.

Similar sentiments have been echoed in the form of Petrarchan sonnets published as *Naibedyo* especially from sonnet number 47 onwards. Poems such as- “ei durbhagyo desh hote hey mongolmoy/ Dur kori dao tumi sarbo tuchhawa bhoy”(48), “Aghat sanghat majhe danrainu asi”(47) or “Andhokar garte thake andho sarisweep”(49), “ekoda e bhartater kon banatole” (60)- not only emphatically contest the colonial onslaught on his beloved motherland but also at times envision violent resistances against the same. It is almost redundant to mention the strong anti-colonial, nationalist and liberationist sentiment presented in one of the most celebrated poems, “Shatabdeer surjo aji rakto-megh majhe/Asto gelo, hingshar utsobe aji baje” (64) or the widely quoted “Chitwo jetha bhoy shunyo, ucchho jetha shir/Gyan jetha mukto, jetha griher prachir”(72). And who can miss on the resonance of the pan-Indian nationalist fervent in the poems of the warriors in India’s glorious past as narrated in the poems, “Pratinidhi”, “Bandibir”, “Rajbichar”, “Gurugobind” in the collection, *Katha*.

The point, I wish to reiterate is this: Tagore’s dream project of narrating a free, independent and glorious India started much earlier than often described by the historians of Indian nationalist movements, and that he was pointedly engaged with that vision even while composing his lesser known poems of his initial career. Even the poems which are apparently politically innocuous and written in the tradition of romantic songs/lyrics reveal that Tagore was deliberately moving away from metropolitan value system and was articulating a culture rooted in the ‘original’ soil of India. In the final analysis, it can be said that Tagore was drawing on nationalism in the line of the English Romantics who appeared as rebels in their own country by narrating and extending English national identity to the poor and down trodden of the countryside in a rapidly industrial England. For both the Romantics and Tagore the enemy was the same – the giant of capitalism- and yet, for Tagore it brought dual challenge as it gave birth to colonial rule on his motherland. Another remarkable distinction in the romantic nationalism that Tagore ventures to portray here was the use of language- he might have written consciously or unconsciously in the European or English Romantic traditions but he deliberately refused to adopt their language.

Tagore’s short fictional prose pieces popularly known as the short stories, written mostly after he had started touring rural Bengal as a manager of their estates since 1891 were collectively published later as *Galpa-Guchha I (1900) and Galpa-Guchha II (1901)*. In a similar vein with the poems written simultaneously, they too, reveal decolonizing mind of Tagore consciously juxtaposing his preoccupation with the rural/semi-feudal agrarian Indian setup with his disavowal of urban,

industrial and capitalist India. In the process of colonization occupation with land is a fundamental issue; there was always a bitter and violent encounter between the original inhabitants of a territory with offshore colonial nations before the territory was occupied and usurped by the foreign powers. However, under these visible encounters and the subsequent defeat of the native people many of their invisible possessions are also suppressed and gets erased- their cultures, histories and even geographies- to be precise, their very identity possessed before the rapacious onslaught of the colonizers. Edward Said has put the issue with remarkable cogency and lucidity:-

Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to *have* more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and involves untold misery for others. (Said: 1993, 7)

In fact, Said reveals the principal focus of his 1993-book as the ‘actual contests over land and the land’s people’, ‘a kind of geographical enquiry into historical experience’ and goes on to say that,

...the earth is in effect one world, in which empty uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (Said: 1993: p 8)

The short stories of Tagore discussed here are classic examples of what has been so beautifully captured in Said’s book. An invisible and yet very significant struggle by the colonized inhabitants in reclaiming their habitats, their histories and geographies is found in these short stories through an act of narrating their pristine forms, images and ideas. In one such short story, “Shubha”, Tagore portrays a girl named Subha with speech/hearing impairment and her plight throughout her life in an agrarian semi-feudal Bengal. But by virtue of the detailed description of the village, Chandipur and her house which has particularized the very essence of pre-colonial India in mentioning, ‘atchala’ ‘goalghor’ ‘kharerstup’, ‘dhenkishala’ – a kind of reassertion of native local history and landscape which are completely unsullied by the capitalist/colonialist inroads. Similarly, “Athithi”, apparently narrating an encounter between a zaminder, Motilalbabu and a simple village boy, Tarapado, is a nice documentation of pristine Bengali landscape, where one can listen to the distinct sound of rain dropping on the leaves, frogs croaking in the night, foxes barking. And the regular engagement of the villagers with *Panchali*, *kathakatha*, *kirtan* and the *Ramayana* and their melodious renderings by them re-establish the uncorrupted cultures and histories that remained rooted in the consciousness of the people even during the upsurge of colonial cultures.

The issue that I wish to draw here is: though the short stories are rarely dealing with direct political problems of the time they can be read as having serious political implications. More so, if we consider the manner in which Tagore presents a Bengal which was essentially pre-colonial in all its forms and his conscious endeavour to find his people and himself in such a territory - a classic case of decolonization by an act of imagination.

In the concluding part as we turn to the essays written by Tagore in the given period it is needless to reiterate that Tagore is more visibly political in most of these non-fictional prose writings. However, I wish to take up two of the most important political essays, *Ingrej o Bharatbasi* (“English and Indians”) and *Imperialism*- both dealing with his radical decolonial thinking. Let me point out again that the about 120 odd non-fictional prose pieces dealing with varied themes of literature, culture, history, society, politics and religion, can be considered as the most significant part of Tagore’s decolonizing mission. Published collectively first around 1905, the year known for the first major nationalist movement in Bengal and also in India, the essays are a scathing attack on the cultural politics and hypocritical policies of British imperialism. We know that the nationalist movement in Bengal took the shape of a massive mass movement owing to the British policy of dividing Bengal. The principal logic put forward by Lord Curzon, the principal architect of the divisive plan, was administrative convenience in ruling the vast country. However, the Indians led by the nationalists were quick to catch the bluff of the imperialists and understood the poisonous plot to divide Bengal on communal line. Tagore was not just perturbed but was extremely angered by this attempt; he started hitting the streets of Calcutta to take part in the series of protest rallies. At times, as Sumit Sarkar (1973) pointed out, he used to take the lead role in galvanizing the *swadeshi* (nationalist) movements after the declaration of the Partition in September 1905. He composed all the famous patriotic songs – *Banglar mati*, *Banglar jal* or *Amar sonar Bangla* or *Mayer deoa mota kapor*, among others- which instantly caught the imagination of whole of Bengal and a massive ant-British sentiment spread across the country.

However, as it has already been mentioned above Tagore demonstrated first major sign of discontent against the British rule in the public lecture delivered in 1893, “*Ingrej o Bharatbasi*”. Though it came out much later in the collection of essays, *Raja o Praja* (‘Ruler and the Ruled, 1908), the tone and tenor of the lecture, the reasoned argument against the imperial domination soon made Tagore a radical dissenter and an avowed critic of the colonial establishments among the nationalists of the time. What is more significant is the manner in which he takes on the hegemonic epicenters of the imperialism, and exposes its cultural logic, intense racism and the ostensible claim of superiority:

First and foremost crisis arises with the colour of the skin. As the color of the body cannot be removed through washing; the customs of racism is very difficult to overcome from the mind. White Aryans have been treating the Blacks with hatred for thousands of years... The White and the Black split like day and night. As it were the White are always awake like day, active, inventive; and the Black is the night, inactive, indifferent, idle dreamer. In such ‘night’ there may be a depth, sweetness, gentle grace, and fine brotherly feeling. Unfortunately, there is no idle time to the ever occupied white people to discover it and, in fact, they do not have enough value for it either. There is no consequence of making them understand that black cows also provide white milk and there is a deep unity between the different colors. .. The moot point is, the mind of the White people cannot remain indifferent whenever they see the Blacks. (translated) (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol.I:1986, 626)

If we analyze the above passage as translated in plain and simple English, Tagore appears as

a classic demystifier (or shall we say, a deconstructionist) of the secret workings of the racist representations of the native people, that constitute the ideology of imperialism. He extends further the uneven power play of the imperialists in the essay, *Imperialism* written in protest against the blatantly humiliating convocation address in the University of Calcutta delivered by Curzon in February 1904. Through an analogy of the hunter and the hunted expressed in the vernacular Tagore attempts to define imperialism as brutal killing of birds in the name of hunting, and thus dismisses the shades of ideological coloring cleverly put in it by the imperialists. In a quite moving and yet reasoned manner he defines imperialism as the cruel dictatorship of the powerful nation to keep another subordinate and subjugate for ages and attributing an 'ism' to such process, is nothing but a mask to hide the barbarity in it:

There is a glory in uniting a vast country like India. And it would be matter of shame for the proud English people to keep it (India) divided. But the shame is removed through the idea of imperialism. When it is meaningful for India to be one with the British Empire, it must be crushed into pieces and that is called 'humanity'. It is certainly shameful for the civilized English policies not to allow any independent powers consolidate in India. But if you call it 'imperialism' then what is grossly ignoble to humanity appears to be an absolute glory to the policies of the (English) State.

There is no need to elaborate on the impious and barbaric acts behind establishing one's (imperialist) absolute hegemony by disarming the scores of people of a vast country (India) and to make them perpetually distressed and helpless in the world. But to save one's (imperialist) soul from the ignominy of such impiety one needs to take shelter under the great term (imperialism). (translated) (*Rabindra Rachanaboli*, vol.V: 1986, 656-57)

Tagore, as a radical decolonizer consciously sets out to dismantle such ideological constructs by re-inventing India's past glories on the one hand, and to give a clarion call to the people to develop the motherland as socially, culturally, economically independent nation to smoothen political liberation, on the other. Prasantakumar Pal (1990), the famous biographer of Tagore has summed up the significance of this essay exceedingly well, and this may be the perfect end to this discourse on "Tagore and Decolonization":

It is noticeable that such remarkable international thinking was rare among the contemporary politicians or thinkers; they were, then, busy with finding honest means of success in their narrow confines. But they took unusually long time to realize that to make your effort even a temporary success one needed farsightedness. As a result of which, Tagore, thinker could remain quite unknown against the famous visionary poet in him. (translated) (Pal: 1990, 240)

Tagore, by launching a premeditated attack on the ideological edifices of imperialism, by continuously questioning its legal, administrative and political mechanisms, by exposing the fractures in its social, cultural and moral value systems through his public addresses and non-fictional essays, was undoubtedly presenting a comprehensive critique of colonialism and a definite discursive mind of decolonization. And yet, Tagore, the cultural theorist or the decolonizing thinker still remains obscure to the vast contingent of intellectuals dealing with postcolonial histories and/or histories of decolonization.

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