The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore edited by Mohammad A. Quayum (Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011)

The hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore in 2011 has witnessed a proliferation of critical commentaries, performances, and readings based on the life and works of the grand minstrel of the twentieth-century Bengal Renaissance. The aura of mystical distance that surrounds Tagore and his thoughts has given rise to two polarities of scholarship over the past century: (a) Those who celebrate Tagore as primarily a ‘Bengali’ philosopher-poet, and (b) Those who view Tagore as removed from the realities of everyday life – an eclectic philosopher-poet who has little or no say in the nationalist struggles of South-Asia or the global awakenings (‘realities’ if crudely put) of the twentieth century. The necessity of creatively understanding these two critical-theoretical positions has been the core of the commentaries that have been emerging over the past few years. Tagore researchers in the present times are concerned with the need to observe him as a visionary theoretician who could perceive the demands and crisis of a globalised world in his poetry, plays, and letters.

The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore, edited by Professor Mohammad A. Quayum, makes an attempt to present Tagore through a deep philosophical humanism, as a ‘thinker and poet’ whose appeal goes beyond being an elitist ‘Bengali’ bard and whose cosmopolitanism is inherently woven into his regional sentiments. This volume is a high point in the efforts that are being put into generating a dialogic platform on Rabindranath’s life and works.

Having read Tagore through different phases of academic life from school to the universities, we get immune to understanding him only through the close-reading of his select plays and texts. However, this volume of essays opens up perspectives that situate Tagore in historical-philosophical contexts, while exploring the boundaries of interdisciplinary studies. The Poet and His World hosts thirteen fine commentaries on the writings and life of Tagore. The contributors to this volume, like Mohammad Quayum, Uma Dasgupta, Sukanta Chaudhury, William Radice, Abhijit Sen, Bharti Ray, Ananda Lal, Narsingha Sil, Martin Kampchen, and Lalita Pandit Hogan are established experts in Tagore studies. This volume is significant because of its earnest attempt to rethink Tagore along the lines of the present century – through the kaleidoscope of not only Bengal’s or India’s cultural-historical contexts, but also through the issues that are pertinent to the entire South-Asia. In the ‘Introduction’ to the volume, Professor Quayum highlights the significance of each contribution and gives an insight into the content of the thirteen articles, discussing new trajectories emerging in the field of Tagore studies. His statement at the inception of the book that ‘creativity and criticism are symbiotic; they ought to develop synchronically and reciprocally, to find their mutual fullness and balance’ (1) sets the rhythm of the entire book and promises to create a discourse that goes beyond ‘criticism’.

The two essays by Quayum in the volume, ‘A Herald of Religious Unity: Rabindranath Tagore’s Literary Representation of Muslims’ and ‘Empire and Nation: Political Ideas in Rabindranath Tagore’s Travel Writings’, hit the sensitive bulls-eye of communal integrity, the East-West Bengal divide, and the political grammar involved in nation building. It would be ideal to read both essays as supplements to each other rather than exclusive of one another. Through his exhaustive study of Tagore’s Home and the World and
the short stories like ‘Kabuliwala’ and ‘The Story of a Mussalmani’, Quayum posits the philosophical question of the ‘otherness’ of the self.

These essays open the context for an enquiry into the various binaries existing in South East Asia in the form of Hindu/Muslim, East Bengal/West Bengal, Individual/Nation, and at an abstract level, the home/world. Quayum’s study of Tagore is from the position of a humanist; Tagore as a sensitive philosopher–poet whose political interest was not limited to nation-building through mass freedom movements, but in nation-building through the freedom of the individual intellect. In Quayum’s essays we witness a constant dialogue between the private-personal life of Tagore and Tagore household, leading to the shaping of the global-public-political sentiments of the poet-writer. For instance, in ‘A Herald of Religious Unity’ he writes: ‘Tagore’s closest contact with the Muslim culture of course came from his interaction with tenants of his family estates in East-Bengal (now Bangladesh), who were mostly Muslims’ (87). In ‘Empire and Nation’, the contemporariness of Tagore is explored through the position of postcolonial and postmodernist theories. Quayum underscores Tagore’s thoughts through a prismatic reflection into the thoughts of Edward Said, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Noam Chomsky, and argues for a strong philosophico-literary position for Tagore. His analysis is based on the idea that Tagore is not an isolated, poet or a wandering minstrel – he is the clarion call of a time that was to come in the form of globalisation and mass migration in the late twentieth century.

Quayum’s reading of Tagore in these essays is a constant attempt to contextualise Tagore as an agent of change – a key to the problems of the South Asia of the twenty-first century. He interprets Tagore’s ‘neo-universalism’ through readings of couplets from the Mundaka Upanishads (156) regarding the oneness of the universe. It is important to note here that his interpretation of Tagore is not presented as ‘effective solutions’ for conflict-resolution: the focus is rather on approaching the conflicts through a dialogic reasoning of the hegemonic moulds and the ‘barbaric ferocity’ between the individual and the nation (150-1). Tagore’s worldview of the Mahatjati or the ‘Religion of Man’ (92) holds a key to the global issues and to the diabolical ongoing wars based on religion and nationalism in South Asia. His studies highlight the fact that Tagore’s importance for the present times lies in his refusal to be a ‘dogmatic’ or ‘exclusivist’.

Narsingh P. Sil’s essay in the volume, ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s Nationalist Thought’, presents the ‘other’ side of the dialogue between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Sil’s essay presents Tagore as a firm native voice embedded in a cosmopolitan spirit. He studies Tagore as the ‘troubadour’ (183), the homo viator (pilgrim man) of Bengal whose ambit of search for the self expanded beyond borders of political and regional ambitions.

Related discussions that emerge in The Poet and His World are ‘Who did Tagore write for? Who is the muse of Tagore?’ The answer is explored in Sukanta Chaudhuri’s highly nuanced essay: ‘Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet and the People’. Chaudhuri reads the Tagorean universe as densely populated with people who come from all walks of society, not just the bhadralok, and who are bound by the same creative force. He states that the reality of the class structure cannot be negated in Tagore, considering the trends of the historical moment in which Tagore was writing and composing. However, the poet is special because he was able to reach out beyond the structures of a close-node caste and class system in his writings and poetry. He discusses the counter-influence that Tagore had on the Baul community that actually saw a meteoric rise in their popularity following Tagore’s verses. His reading of Tagore in this essay is embedded in the quest for identity – identity of the self.

slowly, constantly bonding with the identity of the ‘other’. Chaudhuri’s analysis of Tagore seems to focus on the Renaissance spirit of the human as the microcosm of the spirit of the universe: ‘The most solitary, intimate constructions of Rabindranath’s poetic imagination link up with his absorption of the social and the universal’ (66). His stature as the Bishwakabi (World-Poet) is reiterated by Chaudhuri’s intricate weaving of Tagore’s poetry and prose with the Tagorean metaphysics in the collection.

To understand the Tagore’s world-view, there is a need for retrospection into Tagore’s era inclusive of his role as an educator, builder of an academic community, and the global cultural-political influence on his works. In this context, the essays by William Radice, Kathleen M. O’Connell, Martin Kämpchen, and Uma Dasgupta focus on the role of Rabindranath as an eternal teacher through his poetry and his socio-cultural activism. The early years of Bishwabharti (Shantiniketan) and Tagore’s ardent ambition of creating a global institution, as well as the future of Shantiniketan, is discussed in these papers. These papers focus on Tagore’s creative visualisation of the ‘global village’ (109). William Radice contextualises Tagore’s creative dreams for Shantiniketan in the fundamental ‘problems’ that this dream project faces at the turn of the twenty-first century. The Poet and His World is an important contribution to Tagore research. The book is a must have for the nouveau researchers on Tagorean studies. There are several layers of approach in this collection: Tagore as the poet-teacher, as the cosmopolitan voice for peace in turbulent times, as the writer-novelist, and the performer.¹ The collection is a treasure-trove for South-Asian studies also because of its rich analysis of historical-cultural, literary, and philosophical paradigms of South-Asia through the glass of shreds of Tagorean writings and philosophy.

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¹ See Ananda Lal and Abhijit Sen’s essays in the same volume.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.