



## Tagore And Yeats: A Cross-Cultural Literary Dialogue

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### Abstract

In 1912, W.B. Yeats read Rabindranath Tagore's English prose translations of his Bengali devotional poems and declared himself profoundly moved. The introduction he wrote for *Gitanjali* helped secure Tagore the Nobel Prize in 1913 and established the terms in which Western readers would understand and misunderstand the Indian poet for decades to come. This paper reexamines the Tagore-Yeats encounter, arguing that it was shaped as much by mutual misrecognition as by genuine affinity. Drawing on biographies by Dutta and Robinson and by Foster, and engaging with the orientalism critique associated with Said, I trace the structural parallels between two poets who were simultaneously conducting projects of cultural nationalism in colonized nations, while also attending to the asymmetries of power and perception that ensured their dialogue would remain, in important respects, a conversation at cross-purposes. The paper does not debunk the encounter. It tries to understand it honestly, which is a more difficult and more interesting task.

**Keywords:-** Tagore, Yeats, *Gitanjali*, Comparative Literature, Orientalism, Irish-Indian Literary Connections.

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### Introduction

Yeats was not a modest man, and his introduction to the English *Gitanjali* does not pretend to modesty. "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days," he wrote, "reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me" (Yeats, Introduction xiii). It is a wonderful sentence self-dramatizing, performatively intimate, designed to make the reader trust Yeats's taste by witnessing his emotion. But it is also, I want to suggest, revealing in ways Yeats did not intend. What exactly was Yeats reading? What did he think he was reading? And how much of what moved him was Tagore, and how much was Yeats himself reflected back in an exotic mirror?

These are not hostile questions. I admire both poets enormously, and I think the encounter between them facilitated by the painter William Rothenstein at a London gathering in the summer of 1912 was a genuinely significant event in literary history. But significance does not require transparency, and the Tagore-Yeats relationship was marked by misunderstandings that are at least as instructive as the moments of genuine connection. This paper traces both.

## Parallel Nationalisms, Different Tongues

The structural parallels between Yeats and Tagore are striking, and they have been noted often enough. Both lived in nations under British domination. Both were centrally involved in cultural movements that sought to recover indigenous traditions as foundations for national identity. Both distrusted aggressive political nationalism even as they participated in nationalist cultural projects. And both produced bodies of literary work that are inseparable from the historical circumstances of their production.

But the parallels break down on closer inspection. Yeats wrote in English he had no other literary language, despite his romantic attachment to Irish as a symbol of cultural authenticity. Tagore wrote in Bengali, a language with an autonomous literary tradition stretching back centuries. As Kiberd has argued, the Irish Literary Revival was constitutively shaped by its dependence on English, a condition that produced both creative energy and permanent ambivalence (Kiberd 115). Tagore faced no equivalent linguistic dilemma. When he translated his own poems into English, he was performing an act of cultural export, not of cultural survival. This asymmetry matters enormously for understanding what happened when Yeats read those translations.

Das has documented the network of Irish-Indian cultural connections in the early twentieth century political solidarity between nationalists, mutual fascination among literary intellectuals (Das 78). The connection was real. But it was also, inevitably, unequal. Ireland was a colonized European nation with deep cultural ties to the imperial metropole; India was a vast, internally diverse subcontinent whose relationship to Britain was qualitatively different in scale, history, and racial politics. To treat the Yeats-Tagore encounter as a meeting of equals is to misunderstand the colonial literary world in which it took place.

## What Yeats Heard and What He Didn't

Yeats's introduction to *Gitanjali* reads Tagore through the lens of Yeats's own obsessions: the search for a spirituality rooted in lived experience rather than institutional religion, the dream of a culture where art and devotion are inseparable, the longing for an organic community untouched by industrial modernity. "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us," Yeats writes, "seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image" "Met our own image." There it is. Said would have recognized the gesture immediately: the East as mirror for Western desires, the other culture valued not for its otherness but for its resemblance to an idealized self (Said 3). Yeats found in Tagore the organic, spiritual, premodern poet that industrial England could not produce a figure who validated Yeats's own artistic project by embodying it in a more "authentic" cultural context. Dutta and Robinson, in their biography, document both Yeats's genuine enthusiasm and his tendency to simplify Tagore into a mystic sage, stripping away the social critic, the educational reformer, the political commentator (Dutta and Robinson 198). Tagore himself was uncomfortable with the casting.

And then, abruptly, Yeats lost interest. Foster's biography reveals that by 1914 barely two years after the rhapsodic introduction Yeats was privately dismissive, telling friends that Tagore had "spoiled his work" (Foster 467). The reversal is instructive. What Yeats had admired was not Tagore but an idea of Tagore, a projection that the actual, complicated, fully human poet could not sustain. When the projection failed, the admiration evaporated.

## What They Shared (and Where They Diverged)

It would be a mistake, though, to reduce the encounter entirely to orientalist projection. There were genuine affinities real thematic resonances that exist independently of Yeats's

distortions. Both poets were preoccupied with the relationship between the spiritual and the material, seeking a language that could hold both without reducing one to the other. Both found in nature a vocabulary for spiritual experience that avoided the abstractions of systematic theology. And both distrusted the aggressive nationalism that surrounded them, though they arrived at this distrust from very different positions.

Tagore's skepticism about nationalism was, arguably, the more radical. His 1917 lectures, published as *Nationalism*, warned that the nation-state was a Western invention fundamentally hostile to India's pluralistic traditions (Tagore, *Nationalism* 18). This is not a position Yeats would have endorsed. Yeats's nationalism was culturally romantic a dream of Ireland as Celtic otherworld and it remained central to his imaginative life even as he grew politically conservative. The gap between Tagore's cosmopolitan internationalism and Yeats's mystical nationalism is one of the real differences that the encounter's surface of mutual admiration tended to obscure.

Formally, the differences are even starker. Yeats was a formalist of extraordinary discipline compressed, allusive, intellectually demanding. Tagore's Bengali poems are musical, flowing, and rhythmically complex in ways that his English prose translations could not capture. Chaudhuri has argued convincingly that the Gitanjali Yeats championed was, in important respects, not the Gitanjali that Bengali readers knew (Chaudhuri 34). The translation smoothed out the musicality, flattened the cultural specificity, and left something that was more amenable to Yeats's orientalist reading than the original warranted. Lago's study of Tagore's correspondence documents the poet's growing frustration with being reduced to a handful of devotional lyrics when his actual output novels, stories, essays, songs, paintings was staggeringly diverse (Lago 112). Ray has called the Western "cult of Tagore" a product of Western needs rather than Indian realities (Ray 87). The assessment is harsh but not unfair.

## What Remains

Despite everything I have said about misrecognition and asymmetry, the Tagore-Yeats encounter matters. It established a precedent for cross-cultural literary dialogue that subsequent generations would build on, and it raised questions about translation, reception, and the politics of literary reputation that remain unresolved. For Irish studies, the Indian connection expanded the frame beyond the familiar Anglo-Irish binary, situating the Revival within a global network of anticolonial cultural movements. For Indian studies, the Yeats connection illustrated both the possibilities and the dangers of Western recognition the way international prestige could elevate and distort simultaneously.

## Conclusion

The literary dialogue between Tagore and Yeats was not the seamless communion of kindred spirits that Yeats's introduction implies, nor was it the straightforward case of orientalist appropriation that some postcolonial critics have alleged. It was something messier and more human: an encounter between two gifted poets who shared enough common ground to recognize each other's importance but whose differences ensured that recognition would always be entangled with projection, simplification, and the power imbalances of the colonial literary world.

The most honest thing I can say about this encounter is that it demonstrates both the necessity and the impossibility of reading across cultural boundaries. Necessary, because literature that speaks only to its own tradition is impoverished. Impossible, because the act of reading across cultures is never transparent it is always shaped by the assumptions, desires, and blind spots that the reader brings. Yeats heard in Tagore what he needed to hear. Tagore accepted Western recognition on terms that constrained as much as they celebrated. These are

not failures to be corrected but features of cross-cultural exchange that we ignore at our intellectual peril.

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