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Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Ode to Africa'

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Ode to Africa

Monish R. Chaterjee



A painting by Rabindranath Tagore

During his illustrious lifetime, Rabindranath Tagore travelled extensively around the world, spreading inspiration and gaining veneration in most destinations as the emissary of the East and of a deeply futuristic Universalist philosophy. An assessment of the intellectuals and cultural icons of the world whom Tagore encountered, interacted with, and influenced, is both astonishing and indeed still waiting to be adequately evaluated. His exchanges with Einstein, Wells, Rolland, Gide, Freud, Durant, Yeats, Rothenstein, Andrews, Noguchi, Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Nehru, Bose and numerous others are well-documented.

Tagore's literary works and public life centred on rejoicing in and celebrating everything unique and artistic in human culture. In the grandest sense, he saw all cultures (East, West, Middle-East, or Latin America) as equally rich in their potential to inspire lofty pursuits of the human mind. As much as he participated in India's freedom movement against British imperial rule, serving as the nation's inspirational voice through his lectures, teachings, literary works, and of course, his greatest forte—poetry and musical compositions, Tagore empathized as well as identified with the cause of freedom and the struggle against oppression and violence everywhere in the world. In Iran, where he was received and feted by the Shah, he spoke in highly reverential terms about the works of Hafiz, Omar Khayyam and other Persian poets and philosophers.

In Turkey, he developed special bonds with Kemal Ataturk and expressed favourable views of the latter's efforts at forging a secular republic in the Muslim world. I have read that Ataturk sent Tagore an entire collection of books (probably of Turkish origin) for the library at Tagore's newly-founded Visva Bharati University in Bengal. So great was Tagore's influence upon the literary and political firmament during his lifetime, that more than once regimes with dictatorial leanings attempted to woo the great Eastern ambassador in the hopes of receiving positive endorsements from him. The list of such world leaders included Mussolini (whose efforts did not succeed) and Stalin. Tagore visited Russia during the early years of the Stalinist regime. Given his natural leanings towards national development from the grassroots, and the need to address the problems of poverty, illiteracy and high mortality among the unprivileged, Tagore was initially much impressed by what he perceived to be efforts to create an egalitarian society built upon the ideals of sharing, equity, obligation towards fellow citizens, and a culture devoid of pomp and muscle-flexing. His early Russian tour resulted in the relatively favourable Letters from Russia. Doubtless, the Stalinist purges, the Gulag and associated repressions would greatly disappoint Tagore later on. As for the United States, which Tagore visited at least four times, he seems to have been unimpressed with its cultural life, finding the pervasive commercialism distasteful. In this regard, Tagore merely reflected what Henry David Thoreau had felt and expressed many decades earlier.

In the Americas, Tagore left a far stronger and more favourable legacy in the Southern continent—specifically Argentina (where his admirers included Victoria Ocampo), Chile (where a young Pablo Neruda was notably influenced by Tagore's romantic poetry), Brazil (where the poet Cecilia Meireles translated Tagore's works into Portuguese) and elsewhere.

In the context of Indian history itself, Tagore identified with the struggles and heroic actions of people from different regions of India. Of particular note is his magnificent poem ('Bandi Bir'- The Valiant Prisoner, 1899) about the sacrifice of the Sikh hero, Banda Singh Bahadur, whose live body was ripped apart using red-hot tongs on imperial orders, even after the valiant fighter had been forced to plunge a knife into his own young son's chest while uttering Hail to



A self portrait of Rabindranath Tagore

Guruji! during the Sikh resistance against Mughal incursions into their dominion. This poem, I have found, is recounted by Sikhs to this day, including special mentions on websites dedicated to Sikh history. Thus, as with the poem dedicated to the great Maratha hero, Shivaji ('Shivaji Utsab'- Celebrating Shivaji, 1904), the Bard of Bengal extended a hand of timeless friendship to virtually all regions of India. His travelogues and commentaries of cultural celebration include Travels in Persia, Travels in Japan, and of course, Letters from Russia. It should therefore come as no surprise that Tagore would hold sympathy for and a deep understanding of Africa as well, a continent with whom India has shared much history, some of it painful.

I present below my translation of Rabindranath Tagore's seminal poem on

Africa, a strident condemnation of colonialism, imperial brutality and racism—here applied to the ravaging of Africa by imperial Europe, but applicable universally.

Ode to Africa

– Rabindranath Tagore (tr. Monish R. Chatterjee)

In the chaos and confusion of those ancient eons
 When the Creator, roiled by his own discontent
 Shook his head violently and
 Destroyed, again and again, his primeval creation-
 Caught in the vortex of his impatience and disapproval
 The ruthless arms of the primordial oceans
 Snatched you, Africa, from the breast of the primal Earth-
 Binding you in the impossible weave of the wakeful forest
 Deep within the sanctum of miserly light.
 There, surrounded by impenetrable privacy and leisure
 You embarked upon your quest
 To unravel the secrets of the uncharted--
 Learning how to read the incomprehensible signs
 Of the seas, the land and the skies
 Nature's magical alchemy, unseen, unheard
 Awakened mantras within your subconscious.
 Emboldened, you mocked the Terrible
 In the guise of the unpleasant
 It was but your attempt at defying fretful apprehension
 Much as creatures amplify their visage
 In the spellbinding greatness of the monstrous
 The cataclysmic sounds of Tandava.
 Alas, O Veiled One-
 Underneath the obscurity of your dark facade
 Lay unknown your human identity
 Degraded by the collective gaze of derision.
 And then they arrived, manacles in hand
 Claws sharper by far than any on your wolves;
 They arrived, human rustlers and traffickers all
 By vanity and arrogance blindd, sightless by far
 Than your darkest, sun-less forests.

Than your darkest, sun-less forests.
 Civilization's barbaric greed
 Revealed in stark nakedness
 Its shameless, remorseless inhumanity.
 Your wordless bemoaning and tears
 Mingled with the fetid vapors of the jungle;
 Soaked in your tears and your blood
 The dirt transmogrified into a noxious swamp.
 The mud-laden tracks of demonic cleats
 Left behind for all eternity, the markers of your humiliation
 Upon the pages of your history.
 Just then, across the seas, in their hallowed precincts
 Church bells pealed in their halls of worship
 Morning and evening, invoking the name of the Compassionate Father;
 Children frolicked upon mothers' loving laps;
 Poets composed heavenly dirges
 Touched by divine notes of offerings to Beauty.
 Now, when dusk approaches the Western shores
 And ominous storm clouds gather with bated breath
 When, from their secret lairs the animals emerge
 Their menacing growls portend the end of daylight-
 Come, Poet of the New Age
 As the last rays of light fade into darkness-
 Take your remorseful place next to that violated Woman
 Forgive, you plead, hoping to be forgiven-
 Like a silver lining upon the clouds of your delirium
 May that be, of your civilization, the very last divine pronouncement.

Prof. Monish R. Chatterjee is a Professor of Electrical & Computer Engineering at the University of Dayton, USA. Besides his technical and academic work, Prof. Chatterjee is deeply committed to humanities and social justice. He has published four books of translation, and contributed numerous essays to literary magazines and anthologies. He is an avid reader and essayist.