

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy
of Traditions and Cultures 7

Debashish Banerji *Editor*

Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century

Theoretical Renewals

 Springer

Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures

Volume 7

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Debashish Banerji
Editor

Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century

Theoretical Renewals

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Editor
Debashish Banerji
Indian Studies
University of Philosophical Research
Los Angeles, CA
USA

ISSN 2211-1107 ISSN 2211-1115 (electronic)
ISBN 978-81-322-2037-4 ISBN 978-81-322-2038-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-81-322-2038-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014951347

Springer New Delhi Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Editor and Contributors

About the Editor

Debashish Banerji is Professor of Indian Studies and Dean of Academic Affairs at the University of Philosophical Research, Los Angeles. He is also Adjunct Faculty in Asian Art History at the Pasadena City College and Research Fellow in Asian and Comparative Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. Banerji is the author of *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore* (Sage, 2010) and *Seven Quartets of Becoming: A Transformative Yoga Psychology Based on the Diaries of Sri Aurobindo* (DKPW and Nalanda, 2012). His articles on South Asian art history, culture studies, and consciousness studies have appeared in various magazines, journals, and anthologies.

Contributors

Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at the University of Dhaka and currently a member of the Dhaka University Teacher's Association and the Dhaka University Senate. He is the author of *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English* (Writer's Ink, 2007); *South Asian Writers in English* (Thomson Gale, 2006); *Jibananada Das: Selected Poems* (UPL, 1999); *Bharati Mukherjee* (Twayne's Contemporary United States Authors, 1996) and *Daniel Defoe: Colonial Propagandist* (University of Dhaka Publications, 1989). He has been editor of Dhaka University Studies, Part A (Humanities) and the Asiatic Society Journal. His most recent work, which he has co-authored with Radha Chakravarty, is *The Essential Tagore* (Harvard UP, April 2011 and Visva-Bharati, August 2011). His translations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *Unfinished Memoirs* were published in December 2011 by University Press Ltd. in Bangladesh and Penguin Books elsewhere. He was a member of the jury of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for 2003 (Eurasia region) and is currently an adjudicator for the DSC South Asian Prize for Literature, 2011.

Radha Chakravarty teaches English Literature in Gargi College, University of Delhi. She has co-edited *The Essential Tagore for Harvard and Visva-Bharati*, and is the author of *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers* (Routledge, 2008) and *Tagore and the Modern Novel* (Routledge, forthcoming).

Monali Chatterjee teaches managerial communication and general management at Amrut Mody School of Management, Ahmedabad University, India. She is also on the editorial board for the AMSOM e-newsletter. Chatterjee's doctoral dissertation in English literature was titled *Women in the Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Saratchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore*. Her published work has focused on the literature of the Bengal renaissance and on contemporary postcolonial fiction, and has appeared in journals and anthologies of repute. She has presented papers in a number of conferences and has taught English literature and communicative English in India and England.

Amit Chaudhuri is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, with two critical works and five novels to his name, the latest of which is *The Immortals*. Among the many prizes he has won for his fiction are the Commonwealth Literature Prize, the Betty Trask award, the Encore Prize, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the Indian government's Sahitya Akademi Award.

Rosinka Chaudhuri is Fellow in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, India. She has been visiting fellow at the Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, USA, and Charles Wallace Fellow at Cambridge University, UK. She has published *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism* and the *Orientalist Project* (Seagull: 2002), *Derozio, Poet of India: The Definitive Edition* (Oxford University Press: 2008).

Saurav Dasthakur teaches at the Department of English & OMEL, Visva-Bharati, India. The areas of his research interest include 20th Century English Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and Children's Literature. He has published articles in journals of national and international repute.

Anuradha Ghosh is Assistant Professor, Department of English at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and specializes in the area of film, culture studies, and literary theory. She has contributed in several journals of national and international repute. Her doctoral dissertation on the ideological structures of Indian Cinema with special focus on the alternative Bengali cinema of the 1960s and 1970s has been partially published as *Signification in Image and Space*, in H.S. Gill edited *Signification in Language and Culture*, from the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, 2001. Her book, *The Politics of Imperialism and Counterstrategies*, co-edited with Pratyush Chandra and Ravi Kumar, published by Aakar Books, 2004, has received the critical attention of scholars in the area. Her forthcoming book from OUP, *Filming Fiction—Tagore, Premchand and Ray*, jointly edited with M. Asaduddin, is in the area of inter-semiotic translations. It focuses on the issue of filmic transpositions of Premchand and Tagore narratives by Satyajit Ray.

Patrick Colm Hogan is Professor in the Department of English, the Program in India Studies, the Program in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, and the Program in Cognitive Science at the University of Connecticut. Along with Lalita Pandit, he co-edited *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* (2003). He has examined novels and poetry by Tagore in *Colonialism and Cultural Identity* (2000), *Empire and Poetic Voice* (2004), and *What Literature Teaches Us About Emotion* (2011). He has also written introductions to new editions of *Tagore's Selected Stories* (2011) and *Reminiscences* (forthcoming).

Nita Kumar is Brown Family Professor of South Asian History at Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California. From publishing earlier on artisans, urbanism, and social change, she has been studying Indian education for the last 25 years from numerous perspectives. Her books and articles include *Artisans of Banaras* (Princeton, 1998), *Friends, Brothers and Informants* (Berkeley, 1992); *Women as Subjects* (Virginia, 1994); *Mai: A translation* (Kali, 2001); *Lessons from Schools* (Sage, 2001), *The Politics of Gender, Community and Modernities* (Oxford, 2007); and she is working on two books called *Managing a School in India and Education* and *The Rise of a New Indian Intelligentsia*. From 1990 she has also been engaged in innovative education in Varanasi, India, through both service and advocacy, working with children, teachers, families; to develop curricula, fiction for children, arts materials, and teachers' training units (www.nirman.info).

Partha Mitter is Emeritus Professor, History of Art, at the University of Sussex, Member of Wolfson College, Oxford and Honorary Fellow, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. In 2008 he received an Honorary D.Lit. degree from the Courtauld Institute, London University. Mitter was Radhakrishnan Lecturer at All Souls College, Oxford in 1992 and Getty Visiting Professor at Bogazici University, Istanbul in 2011. He has held fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts; and CASVA, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. In 2000 he was invited by the Indian Government to set up the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

His publications include *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977; Chicago University Press Paperback, 1992; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013); *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Indian Art, Oxford Art History Series* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002); *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde – 1922–1947* (Reaktion Books, London, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007).

Sachidananda Mohanty is Professor and former Head, Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He is the recipient of several national and international awards including those from the UGC, the British Council, the Salzburg, the Katha and the Fulbright. He has to his credit 23 books in English and in Oriya primarily in

the areas of British literature, women's writing, colonial history, and cultural studies. Mohanty's essays and articles have appeared in some of the leading journals and forums in the country. He has lectured at a number of leading universities in India and abroad.

Esha Niyogi De teaches English and women's studies at UCLA and recently, has been a Visiting Faculty of Critical Dance Studies and Cinema Studies at the University of California at Riverside. *Empire, Media, and the Autonomous Woman: A Feminist Critique of Postcolonial Thought* (Oxford University Press, August 2011) is her most recent publication. She is the co-editor of a collection of critical essays titled *Trans-Status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia* (Duke University Press, 2002) and the author of a variety of articles on postcolonial theory, feminist transnational studies, cinema, and English and Bengali literature in such journals as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Diacritics*, *Screen*, among others. She is working on a new book tentatively titled *Feminisms and the Transnational in South Asian Women's Cinema*.

Makarand R. Paranjape is Professor of English in the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is the author/editor of over 30 books which include works of criticism, poetry, and fiction. His latest work includes the two monographs *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English* (2010) and *Altered Destinations: Self, Society, and Nation in India* (2010).

Sumanyu Satpathy is Professor at the Department of English, University of Delhi, and Visiting Professor, Goethe University of Frankfurt, Germany. His recent publications include: *Southern Postcolonialisms: The Global South and the 'New' Literary Representations*, Routledge India, 2009; and *Reading Literary Culture: Perspectives from Orissa*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2009.

Satadru Sen is at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. His recent publications include: *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (Oxford University Press); *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia* (co-edited with James H. Mills, Anthem Press).

Saranindranath Tagore is Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, at the National University of Singapore. He was also an Affiliate Fellow, South Asia Initiative, Harvard University (2009–2010). During this period he also served as Coordinate Research Scholar, Harvard Yenching Institute, Harvard University from August to December 2009. Prior to this, he was a visiting scholar at the Munk Center for International Studies, University of Toronto, Canada, in the summer of 2005. His interests include Continental Philosophy, Indian Philosophy and Religions. Integrating these interests, he is currently working on the idea that cosmopolitan theory should attend to alternative conceptions of modernity.

Chapter 1

Introduction—Theory and the Performative Politics of Punctuation

Debashish Banerji

Abstract This essay introduces the intent, scope, and other essays of the anthology. It engages with the question of the significance of Rabindranath Tagore in our times, both in the milieu of his birth, Bengal, and in the world. Significance here refers also to both senses of the operation of Rabindranath Tagore as a sign or “author function” in the milieus of his reception and as a subjectivity which escapes definition, yet renews itself through a politics of punctuation. It is in these senses that the introduction explicates the volume’s choices of essays to tap into the unexpressed fertility of Tagore’s texts, rescuing them from museological obsolescence and making them live as part of the performative politics of our times.

Keywords Theory · Tagore · Cultural politics · Humanism · Posthumanism · Civilization studies

Nobel awardee of 1913 for literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) has been celebrated in his native Bengal and in India as a larger than life icon whose songs presently make up the national anthems of two nations. Poet, novelist, short story writer, playwright, writer of dance dramas, song writer and composer, artist, nationalist, internationalist, educator, and social thinker, Tagore enjoyed a legendary reputation in his time and in the twentieth century. But public opinion on Tagore has grown more complex since his passing, with both sharply critical voices that have sought distance or a space of emergence from under his shadow and the fossilization of adulatory phrases or images which have stereotyped him into obsolescence. New national and global concerns have emerged since his lifetime which seek solutions based on a context of thinking that has developed its own categories and constellations. One hundred and fifty years since his birth, does Tagore have any relevance to this postmodern and post-colonial discourse?

D. Banerji (✉)

Indian Studies, University of Philosophical Research, Los Angeles, CA, USA

e-mail: debbanerji@yahoo.com

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D. Banerji (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century*,

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 7,

DOI 10.1007/978-81-322-2038-1_1

Or does he belong merely to a moment in history, exalted by his hour into a prophet mouthing “guru English” in a humanist canon, fated to be a fossilized relic in an archive of cultural rituals or a simulacrum in anachronistic identity politics? “Punctuated Renewals” is an attempt to approach this question in our present time and age, using contemporary theoretical tools.

A contemporary recontextualization of Tagore within the international canon of critical modernism from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century would attempt to recover the trajectories of relevance linking his historicity to ours. In retrospect, post-coloniality is seen to be imbricated in postmodernity but not coincident with it. Yet modernism as a cultural response to the episteme of post-Enlightenment modernity fashioned much of its ammunition from an anti-colonial periphery, just as primary strands of anti-colonial resistance sought support in the ideals of the Enlightenment, including its practice of revisionary self-critique. As the twenty-first century draws us into an increasingly interdependent age, perhaps a new history of exchanges and negotiations is in the making, a vision of nomadic affective communities working toward a new homecoming. An agent circulating within such transnational webs, Tagore embodies an internal dialog of local, regional, national, and international concerns of cultures and their histories and the fashioning of new ethics and aesthetics, of subjects, subjectivities, and subjections, of lived and imagined communities, of identities and representations, and of the other, who is excluded or marginalized from representation and the yet other, who escapes or refuses representation.

An index of his significance may be seen in the aporia surrounding the two major representations through which he comes to the public mind of our times—a dimly remembered Orientalist sage or prophet in a sepia-colored page from the album of early twentieth century Nobel awardees; and a hugely adulated divine icon whose portrait continues to be endlessly reproduced and whose songs are incessantly played and learnt in almost every Bengali home. The first of these comprises the global reputation of Tagore, which rose and fell on the wave of his own English translation of *Gitanjali*, couched in a sonorous idiom that the Anglophone modernist tradition has long distanced itself from. Translations, as Radha Chakravarty’s chapter in this volume makes clear, can always be considered unfavorably, as more or less bad copies of an “original,” yet they have a life of their own, unfurling their nuances differently in different minds. Anglophone modernist poetics, masterminded by the likes of Eliot, Pound, and the later Yeats, sought a closer earthly grasp, the concreteness of the empirical image, which could fuse meaning, fantasy, and critique seamlessly. In the wake of this new poetics, the sentimentality or musicality without substance of Victorian versifiers evaporated quickly as in waking from a distasteful dream. Tagore’s translations have suffered the inevitable consequence of this revolution in taste. And yet it would be a mistake to think of this relegation to the margins of Anglophone taste as an extinguishment. American sensibilities, following Whitman and the Beats, have kept alive an ear for large cosmic themes and rhythms, and Tagore continues to be appreciated in translation among readers of poetry in North America. This is even more so the case in Latin America and the European continent, where translations

twice removed from the original or alien cultural resonances of the English have unfolded the Tagorean text in appreciable ways.

In his native Bengal, Tagore remains immortal, a phenomenon of divinity and enduring superstar magnitude far beyond possible critical acclaim, the very opposite of the peripheral significance of his global image. Apart from the simulacrum put to use in regional or national identity politics, this tells us of the cultural history of Bengal and the invocative and evocative powers of Tagore's texts within that intersubjective matrix of affect and meaning. Tagore's contribution to the modern Bengali language remains close to originary and is, in fact, intimately linked to his international persona. The rise of Bengali as a modern regional vernacular in the nineteenth century is itself a powerful act of collective translation between two cultures, colonized and colonizer, so as to append to the first the nuances and historical resources of the second, all the better to respond to its civilizational challenge. Such an effort involves a two-way hermeneutics, a bringing into presence of the regional and national past, as well as the trajectories of modernity, a discourse with its own complexities and internal differences, and the ability to sound each against the other. Of all the contributors to this shaping of a language as the vehicle of a dynamic participatory alternate modernity, Tagore's textual interventions may be easily considered primary, an infusion of fire and matter that continues to be reworked and is hardly exhausted. Thus, though Tagore's overabundant fertility and excess could have been spoken of in his own time in terms of concerns present to its theoretical corpus, the unspoken and the unthought continue to haunt his text and our aim in this volume has been to open a space for the living power of his critique and his creative innovations to fertilize our present engagements through theoretical visibility.

As Gilles Deleuze says, it is the singularity of the individual that precedes the species. So it is that the singularity of literature precedes language. Language comes to recognize its parts, its sinews, its sensations, its affections, and its cognitive categories only through literature. For Bengali as a language aspiring to embody a distinct modern subjectivity, Tagore, with his superhuman output in every genre—over one thousand poems; two thousand songs; eight volumes of short stories; two dozen plays; eight novels; and many books and essays on philosophy, religion, education, and social topics—stands out as an avatar of literature, whose texts fill out its subjective possibilities and overflow into the performative text of his lived experience. Irrespective of their qualitative difference, all of these must be taken integrally, each illuminating and being illuminated by all the others. Thus, we find that whether through affective invocations to nature, man, woman, or God, or critical responses to the problems of modernity or nation, the psychodrama of social archetypes, or the participative text of the educational and creative community of Shantiniketan, Tagore prepares a universal and integral humanism, preserving the marks of singularity yet reaching beyond the human.

This open question of the human, with its precedents and antecedents, saturates the Tagorean text, and grants to it its location in modernity and contemporaneity. As brought out by Amit Chaudhuri in his essay here, what Tagore achieved, against the grain of condescending marginalization, was a transformation of Orientalism

through an appropriation of humanism. Yet Tagore's critical humanism, rooted in a pre-Enlightenment Indian canon, included properties which exceeded the human, both laterally (cosmic inclusion) and vertically (transcendence). If it is for his universal humanism that Tagore was known in the modernist era, a more substantial Tagore comes to sight across the divide initiated by Martin Heidegger in proclaiming himself an anti-humanist. This postmodern slogan, echoed by Foucault who foresaw the approaching erasure of the image of man in the sands of time, can be traced to Nietzsche's definition of the human as a transitional being, "a rope thrown between the beast and the overman." Attentive to the empirical reality of humanity and the modern ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, Tagore nevertheless refused any bounded essence for the human. Drawing on Upanishadic intuitions, his thinking of the human privileged becoming, thus converging with the open horizon of phenomenology and existentialism, and crossing the humanist/anti-humanist divide. In repeated essays in this volume, we find a Tagore who, while including the freedom, justice, and poetry of the human, reached for identity beyond the human, a becoming-other, through affective empathy, an identification with existences beyond boundaries.

Yet such a becoming is not a mysticism which seeks its fulfillment in historical isolation in Tagore; its contemporaneity lies in his thinking through the possibilities of self-exceeding as a human problematic at our peculiar cusp of world history. The formation of this overman (*visva manav*) is folded into the problem of pedagogy and the making of the national child-subject as shown by Satadru Sen and Nita Kumar; it pursues transnational networks of affective communities in seeking a plural cosmopolitanism, as brought out by Sachidananda Mohanty and Partha Mitter; and it forms the cornerstone of an alternative understanding of world literature, as in the essay by Makarand Paranjape. It is not absent either from that most essential domain of literature and the one for which Tagore is best known—poetry. The postmodern imaginary is shot through with the reach for the utopian subject, the one who has access to a "language within language" or an "unthought within thought." Language is the house of Being, Heidegger said, looking to poesis for the disclosure of the *Zeitgeist*, and a parallel sagacity from India, Sri Aurobindo, sought to articulate his own overman-making project in terms of a redefinition of "mantra" seen as "the future poetry." This is not the transcendental silence of the mystic but a ubiquity of signification, a gift of tongues at the threshold of the human unconscious of language. It is this "rustle of language" at the borders blurring nature and culture at one end, man and overman at the other, that Rosinka Chaudhuri finds in the poetry of Tagore, and Saranindranath Tagore pursues beyond signification into an experience of non-duality in Tagore's "late style."

Yet the plunge into language is also the plunge into politics, both the transnational politics of ideologies and the micropolitics of subjectivation. Living through and participating in the emergence of new imagined identities, the regional, the national, the pan-continental, and the global, Tagore always sought to ground this difficult politics of becoming in habitus, whether the local intersubjective milieu of Jorasanko or the creative world community of Shantiniketan. In this process,

the seeking for autonomy runs counter to the orders of empire operating at all levels and attempting to co-opt agency whether through objective forms such as imperial/cultural colonization, statist or corporate administration, social or familial patriarchy, or forms of subjective conditioning through the mediative technologies of imagination. To read Tagore's text theoretically today is to parse the codes of resistance to or emancipation from such orders which underlie his own strategic use of media, whether verbal, visual, aural, or kinesthetic. My own essay on intersubjectivity and the language of portraits, Esha De's study of feminism in Tagore's dance dramas and Saurav Dasthakur's contemplation on the hybrid construction and dissemination of *Rabindrasangeet* elaborate on the visual and aural politics of this open dialectic; while Sumanyu Satpathy's exploration of the queer potential of Tagore's creative misreadings of the classical canon reveals the aporetic fertility of his texts.

Close to the mystery at the heart of the "rustle of language" lies the issue of translation. The singularity and excess of literature escapes reproduction and mutates with language use. In fact, perhaps, the single greatest factor in the huge difference in reception between Tagore's corpus inside and outside Bengal today can be attributed to translation and it is translation again on which his continued relevance depends. Radha Chakravarty's chapter on translating Tagore in our times reflects deeply on this issue. As discussed, Tagore's own translations into English and those of his work by others in his time have largely fallen out of favor in the Anglophone mind due to changes in critical taste. There is also the problem of the falsification of "originals," an anxiety endemic to translation and something which continually haunted Tagore. But this derivative understanding of translation has been challenged, and Chakravarty, among the outstanding translators of our time, affirms this in her chapter, pointing to translation as interpretation and hence an original with its own singularity. Enlivening a text within one's own space and time, translation also strategically exploits the resources of the host language, bringing new experiences to it, while being fully aware of the practice as performative politics. In this sense, the enterprise of translation can be thought of as coincident with that of the present project, a punctuated renewal, both in the sense of a punctuation or nuance interrupting the continuing reception of the text and in terms of new inflections in its articulation, voicing its contemporaneity. With the lapse of the copyright on Tagore's texts, a variety of new translations of Tagore are appearing in English and other languages, providing new vehicles for a pluralistic rebirth of Tagore in our times.

Critical perspectives on forms of imperial power have developed a much clearer articulation since the 1990s, but some key post-structuralist texts of the late 1960s and 1970s have formed the backbone of this discourse. Principally, one may think of Michel Foucault's studies in the archeology and genealogy of power in establishing orders of truth; and in the wake of these studies, Edward Said's 1978 text *Orientalism*, which demonstrated the complicity of Western political power, knowledge acquisition and subjective imagination in subjugating the non-Western world in the era of colonization and beyond. Since then, post-colonial scholarship has grappled with non-Western responses to imperialism, colonialism, and/or the

liberal humanism of post-Enlightenment modernity, viewing them in terms of their derivative status or subversive hybridity or indigenous difference. The Subaltern Studies collective is well known as an important group of scholars opening up these approaches since the 1980s. The essays in this volume ask similar questions of Tagore's text, but whereas the teleology or trajectory of post-Enlightenment modernity is contested or rejected wholesale by the majority of earlier post-colonial scholars, many of the writers in this volume find Rabindranath as someone who accepts what he sees as the telos of the Enlightenment toward the fashioning of a better world of universal freedom and creativity. While such a telos is centered for him in the autonomy of the individual, it looks to the cultural history of India for resources that can be brought into engagement toward this universality, so as to avoid the leaching of subjectivity through the ubiquitous action of capital's instrumental logic, to protect singularity and to ground becoming in local habitus. However, it is not therefore essentialistic; it engages cultures in a mutually transformative dialectic, struggling against phallogocentric appropriations, whether based in tradition or modernity. It also, as mentioned above, redefines humanism, including within it resources for self-exceeding and becoming-other, border-crossings in kinship with the non-human, that can bring such identities within its own expanding sphere of freedom and responsibility.

In Amit Chaudhuri's essay, for example, Tagore draws attention to Goethe and the English Romantic poets for their power of language in shaping a new vision of human emancipation, through communion and identity with nature. He opposes this ideal to the drive to dominate and exploit nature, the rapacious hunger of capital, thus participating in the ongoing revisionary enterprise within the discourse of post-Enlightenment modernity. But such participation is undertaken by Tagore from an Indian cultural vantage, not seen as an alien or exclusionary insertion but a transcultural contribution forming part of the hybrid inception and continuance of the Enlightenment. According to Chaudhuri, this wresting of cultural agency is achieved by Tagore by demonstrating the profound molding influence of Kalidasa on Goethe and through him on the English Romantics and then by linking Kalidasa's remarkable concrete visionary and sensuous style to his own, thus establishing the arche-poet of Indian classicism as a proto-modern. Here, we find that while Tagore's alignment with liberal humanism furthers and revises the discourse of post-Enlightenment modernity, it stretches the boundaries of the human toward a panpsychism or a panentheism. This opens up the postmodern potential of Tagore, moving toward the cosmic through an intense intimacy with nature.

Makarand Paranjape's essay overlaps in significant ways with Amit Chaudhuri's. Paranjape also references Tagore's invocation of Kalidasa and his influence on Goethe, but here in the context of establishing the boundaries, scope and purpose of the modern discipline of Comparative Literature in the emerging field of Indian national education. Paranjape focuses on a talk Tagore was invited to give in 1907 to the newly established National Council of Education in Calcutta. Though the talk was to be on Comparative Literature, Tagore declared that he had chosen to speak on World Literature. The modern academy forms arguably the central normative institutional pillar in the Enlightenment's world

spanning systemic spread, its disciplines geared toward establishing the locus of the human as the “measure of all things” and his civilizational telos. Here, Comparative Literature, like all other comparative humanistic disciplines, can be seen as a museological enterprise, ordering cultures through classifications and comparisons into center and peripheries, as part of its disciplinary order. Instead of engaging with this discipline, to contest its schema or to seek a more prominent representation within it, Paranjape points out how Tagore relates the purpose of such a study not to the ordering of some archive, but to the emancipation of the human through the formation of creative global subjectivities. World literature then becomes a field of transcultural exchanges, a history of give and take and of the expansion of the human spirit in individuals. Once again, we see Tagore undertaking a revision in the destining of the Enlightenment by enabling and pushing beyond its humanism toward the overman-making project of singular global subjectivities.

Sachidananda Mohanty’s intervention in a post-Saidean vein cleaves surprisingly close to the open-ended and transformative cultural dialog seen as a revisionary furtherance of Enlightenment humanism in Chaudhuri’s and Paranjape’s essays. Following on Leela Gandhi’s work on affective communities of the early twentieth century, Mohanty traces a transnational web of cultural voyages in a creative participation of cultures leading toward a global civilizational becoming. He also shows how these various participants attempted to ground their ideas in local experiments of intentional community. Again, such cosmopolitanism is not an exercise in the ordering of cultures or civilizations nor a denial of heterogeneous singularities; it is the expansion of singularities toward universality, the formation of global subjects rooted in cultural history.

Partha Mitter follows a similar trajectory in tracing a transnational web of art making, print journalism, and exhibitions in establishing early twentieth-century modernism in art. Here, while the canonical history of modernism is orchestrated through a Eurocentric narrative, Mitter illuminates a web of co-creative transactions in which artists, art critics, and travelers of the East, particularly of Bengal in India, played an important part. Tagore’s travels, interactions, and paintings, the “last harvest” of his life, are shown to be part of this rich pictorial conversation, constituted by a subjective primitivism, mining the resources of the psychological unconscious in response to a global modernity’s subjugation of the non-rational.

If poeisis with its aesthetically inflected Baudelairian intuition of cosmic correspondences at the threshold of human language and its invitation to a pluralistic global becoming formed the core of the Tagorean text, the ethics of the production of national and global subjects formed the bulk of his prose works and fused imperceptibly with the poetic in his performative creations. Though Tagore strongly espoused a surplus value theory of aesthetics, the excess of beauty over utility in a work, this seeming art for art’s sake was never without its ethical dimension. Drawing on the cultural history of India, he affirmed an understanding of *dharma*, law, or righteousness, as *shreyas*, *mangalam*, and *kalyanam*, terms awkwardly rendered as “auspicious,” which resist easy translation into English due to their cultural investment in an ontology of sensual harmonic exchanges

(*samjnana*). Other terms belonging to this ontological lineage intimate to Tagore include *lavanya*, *shri*, and *shivam* of the Vedic trio *satyam*, *shivam*, and *sundaram*, indistinguishably uniting truth, austerity, and beauty as a descriptor of reality. In this, Tagore's distaste for an austerity that maims harmonious flowering is evident, but he was equally conscious of the easy appropriation of aesthetics by the androcentric order and struggled against social odds to find a practical expression to the collective play of autonomous beauty beyond class, culture, and gender divides. Tagore's non-sectarian mysticism was built on the pillars of a subtle underlying unity of Being (brahman) and a Becoming in which conscious beings were agents who enabled or impeded a creative and affective dynamic realization of this unity (*lila*). If he imbibed his orientation to Being from his Vedantic Brahmo childhood, the affective choices which gave ethical and aesthetic meaning to life came for him from the regional Vaishnav tradition of Bengal, to which he added inflections from heterodox local and varied world traditions of mysticism. As mentioned earlier, such a mystical orientation was not for Tagore an other-worldly pursuit, but provided him with a vision and a framework for reading and interpreting the cosmic and social texts of being and becoming.

Thus, we find his novels and short stories, his plays and dance dramas, his critical essays on national and transnational civilizational matters, on society and culture, and on philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics, his tracts on education, and his children's literature, informed by the vision of a world of free exchanges based on openness to and delight in the simultaneous difference and oneness (*bhedabheda*) of beings and things. To arrive at a cosmopolitan and egalitarian world, free of biases and oppressions of race, ethnicity, class, or gender, in which such exchanges based on autonomy, singularity, and creativity become possible, constitutes the ethics of Tagore, an ethics whose activism is enacted not in the streets but in the hearts of humans, through the psychology and aesthetics of subject formation. In Patrick Hogan's essay on the proto-stories at work in the short stories and novels of Tagore, we find such a close analysis of the cultural psychology of affect through "attachment sensitivity" and "attachment openness" working within and across the boundaries of class and patriarchy in situations which thwart and maim or enable and amplify the joy of mutuality in human bonding and growth.

This practical hermeneutics of an affective intersubjectivity forms also the core of Tagore's thinking for the formation of national and transnational subjects of modernity. In this sense, the negotiations of cultural psychology can be seen as equally political, exchanges conducted across premodern-modern-postmodern, colonial-national, male-female, and elite-subaltern power boundaries. Satadru Sen's essay deals with Tagore's two autobiographical texts regarding his childhood as creative acts of re-membering the fragmented and remaindered regional/national/transnational child-subject. As part of Tagore's educational project, this critical importance given to the juvenile periphery is seen by Sen in terms of drawing the conditional framework needed for a strategic enablement of creativity as the basis of the national subject's responsible engagement with modernity from a vantage of freedom and joy. This implies not only new cultural resources of nature, environment, fantasy, and collective memory for the child, but also a new

patriarchy, a different dialectical relation between the governor and the governed, based on reason, eros and affect. Tagore's creative autobiography then becomes, like his educational environment at Shantiniketan, a didactic text for enabling a futuristic utopianism based on a sanctioned state of retreat from which to conduct a continuing creative negotiation between the premodern and the modern, ruptures in the cultural archive, territories lost and given, unstable virtualities, and habitual realities. Sen notes how through the privileging of Bengali Tagore envisages this process of subjectivation, undertaken with the primary instrument of the "mother tongue," as also a continuing creative refashioning of the lived regional/national cultural text, turning it into a vehicle for an alternative (post)modernity.

Nita Kumar's chapter, also dealing with Tagore's educational formation, ideas, and projects, overlaps in significant ways with Sen's. Kumar reiterates the educational value of Tagore's autobiographical childhood memoirs, but more as the record of a plural cultural pedagogy—formal and colonial, and multiple informal domestic streams of elite and subaltern native cultures. In this, Kumar points out that Tagore's education was not unique but represented the contribution of the home to the formation of the elite nationalist subject of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, like Sen, Kumar also points out that in Tagore's case, the unconventional social status, freedom of impersonal patriarchal encouragement, and cultural exposure, along with formal discipline of varied kinds, provided the impetus to a rich and wide-ranging creative exploration of home and world, rooted in native culture and language. Kumar sees the replication of these conditions at an institutional level as the basis of Tagore's educational aims, a personal creative project with the production of creativity as its goal. Again, like Sen, Kumar notes the furtherance of the national/regional cultural text through the insistent privileging of mother tongue. However, though Kumar considers Tagore's ideas and personal practices inspirational and innovative, she also sees his implementation inadequate to institutional replication, due to his inability to methodize a pedagogy based on creative freedom in the practices of teachers and students. Still, his work in education opens up ideals for the future and experimental practices which Kumar herself and others continue to attempt to establish institutionally.

As with the imagining of childhood, Tagore's critical and creative texts engage extensively with the question of the space and subjectivity of woman in the nascent emerging nation. Here again, the post-Enlightenment ethos of human emancipation is brought to bear on the structures of female subjugation within entrenched hierarchic networks of patriarchy. However, the humanist ideals of autonomy are also subjected to critique, the rootlessness, isolation, vulnerability, and erasure of cultural histories implicit in progressivist modernity pitted against the richness of a cultural subjectivity, drawing from nature and a poetics of cosmic harmony. Particularly in his fictional works involving human relations—his novels, short stories, plays, and dance dramas—these negotiations between tradition and modernity centering on woman develop a complex and nuanced unsettled repertory in which characters and their choices circulate like a mnemonic deck with variant surprising results. Several contemporary critics, however, hold that in these works, Tagore's exploration of female autonomy is repeatedly

preempted through ultimate conservative enablements complicit with patriarchy. Esha Niyogi De, in her essay on female subjectivity in two of Tagore's dance dramas, *Chitrangada* and *Shyama*, disagrees with this reduction, holding instead that though such compromises may represent Tagore's aporetic situatedness and sometime pessimistic assessments of gendered power relations in Indian society, the radical possibilities of female emancipation in his texts should not be lost sight of. Thus, these fictional spaces seem to her as heterotopias in which an open dialectic is performed, exploring female desire and agency within the codes of empire. De points to the song-and-dance drama as another operation of Tagore's magical fertility with the language of the threshold, here the intertextuality of the lyric and the kinesthetic, opening up a hinterland of ambiguous suggestions and alternate trajectories. Within this, the subtle didactics of the Tagorean text emerge—the empowerment of an autonomous female subjectivity, the destructive effects of the androcentric drive to capture and control feminine essence, the virtue of creative affect in relations, the positive potential of same-sex reinforcements, and the participation of liberated heterosexual eros (the family-to-be) in a distributed constructive communitarian life (the national-society-to-come).

Sumanyu Satpathy's exploration of the same dance drama *Chitrangada*, dealt with by De, makes it the focus of contemporary queer appropriations of fertile fissures and aporia in Tagore's texts. After demonstrating a broader possibility of this kind, Satpathy hones in on recently deceased transgender filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 adaptation of *Chitrangada*, which interweaves its sexual ambiguities with a queer framing narrative. Satpathy draws attention to deliberate creative mistranslations in Tagore's *Chitrangada* from the original Sanskrit text, which introduce possibilities of queer exploration, exploited in contemporary times by LGBT causes.

Monali Chatterjee's analysis of *Shesher Kobita (Farewell Song)* discloses a similar aporetic dynamic operating between patriarchal structures and female emancipation in the furtherance of gendered relations pertaining to the home and the world. The integration of cultural difference necessary to an alternative modernity is demonstrated here by Tagore in a female character of powerful intelligence and emotional maturity, but her relations with the male protagonist fail to traverse the spectrum from mental to material existence, revealing a chasm between native social reality and the demands of cosmopolitanism. The potential for emancipation and leadership of the national female subject is unable to realize itself in a nation-building project founded on conjugality and equal intimate partnership in an androcentric culture-resisting transformation. Yet, as in the case of Esha De's discussion of the later dance dramas, Chatterjee's analysis of *Shesher Kobita* opens up the vision of the full flowering of national female subjectivity as an utopian ideal for the future.

Though *Shesher Kobita* is set in the northeastern hill station of Shillong, this provides a background only to the lives of cosmopolitan and traditional Bengalis. We have seen earlier how Tagore brought together the regional, national, and transnational in exchanges conducive to the imagination of ideal national and global subjects of his time and of the future. Yet, in spite of his participation in

such affective multicultural webs, the political import of such exchanges was not lost on Tagore; he could not be blinded to the inequalities of the playing field. Member of a politically subject and culturally subordinated nation, while he sought franchise in modernity's self-determination, he also stood in solidarity against "the West's" self-identification as hegemonic civilization, through the horizontally hybrid strategic essentialism of a pan-Asian identity. This is what directed Tagore to other Asian lands and friendships, particularly in an "eastward" drift to Southeast Asian and East Asian cultures. Anuradha Ghosh explores an aspect of this eastward "routing" in which Tagore's creative imagination is "rooted." Instead of the continental discourse of the "distant" East, Ghosh chooses to look at the ways in which the internal peripheries of such an East—the northeast Indian hill states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur—contributed to the national text of Tagore's intellection. Just as in his engagements with the nations of Southeast and East Asia, Tagore sought out creative intersubjective relations, he consciously eschewed an internal Orientalism with respect to the national northeast, seeking rather for cultural variants and alternatives to the problematics of imagining national subjectivities. In the vein of New Historicism, Ghosh stretches the performative text of Tagore's fictions to ground them in his living relations with the court and commoners of this internal "East." She thus reflects on Tagore's texts set in such cultures to highlight alternative patriarchies and female subjectivities, based on ethical and aesthetic variations of national cultural codes, conducive to alternative national modernities. Ghosh demonstrates how the privileged braiding of the martial (*vira*) and the affective (*karuna*) in the cultural imaginary of this region allows for the thinking of such models of ideality. In the consideration of Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's reflections overlap with those of De in this volume, illuminating certain aspects through attention to cultural history.

No contemporary consideration of Tagore can be complete without a consideration of his place in a national and global politics of representation. What, if anything, does Tagore represent today, or in what ways is Tagore represented in a contested semiotic landscape and even, how did Tagore represent himself in the performative politics of his life and works? The presence of these questions forming the locus of representation can be seen in many of the chapter carried here. While Tagore's voice rose sharply, in his essays on nationalism, against the use of ideological and iconic representation in identity politics—a critique relumed in times closer to ours by Ashis Nandy in *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*—even in the post-swadeshi period of Indian nationalism, when he withdrew from the thick of anti-colonial activity, he was conscious of his own iconicity and continued to use it strategically for national and other liberation projects. Upholding the telos of individual freedom in a participatory global democracy, in a lived world of contested ideologies fought through the politics of representation, Tagore engaged in a strategic essentialism, his own iconicity a rallying force for a freedom from icons and the collective enterprise of creative growth toward universality.

In this context, Fakrul Alam's chapter outlines a historiography of national identity politics in Bangladesh, demonstrating the centrality of the politics of language to this process and Tagore's semiotic inseparability from this discourse.

Saurav Dasthakur moves the hands of the clock back to demonstrate how Tagore constructed a regional modern Bengali subject through the hybrid discourses he brought into engagement in the poetry and music of his songs in the form now known as *Rabindrasangeet*. Classical ragas, a variety of regional and national folk idioms and Western musical forms, were braided to create a community of address whose locus was a new urban vernacular identity, braiding elite, subaltern, and cosmopolitan subjectivities. From this consideration, he fast forwards to our times to question the contemporary relevance of *Rabindrasangeet* outside of its incessantly reproduced mechanical and pedagogical simulacra. In answer to his own question, he provides examples of the continued critical and creative function of *Rabindrasangeet* in autonomous projects of soul-making.

My own essay on the conversation of portraits in the intersubjective habitus of Jorasanko makes a distinction between the politics of representation and the fluid dialectic of becoming, both of which Tagore found it necessary to engage in. The complexities of their imbrication and co-existence continue to be part of the thematic of worlding in our age of the world picture and my essay attempts to explore this dimension in the Tagorean vein of affective intersubjectivity. Saranindranath Tagore turns to Tagore's last years to postulate an ontogenetic shift resulting in what he calls a "late style" in the poet and painter. The Vedantic lineage, inherited from his father, Debendranath, to which Tagore belonged as a Brahmo, kept its intimate closeness to the Vaishnav theism which formed his earlier family heritage. This granted coherence to the world and to the invocatory power of language as expressions of the god-in-life, *jibandebata*, that he related to all his life. But Saranindranath sees an Advaitic turn in the poet's last years, in which words and images lost their signifiatory powers and turned merely indicative instead of an experience of transcendence and utter non-duality beyond their range. This is a final refusal of representation, a post-human border-crossing, whose implications are yet to be fully articulated or understood.

All the scholars contributing to this volume have been prominently engaged in contemporary readings of Tagore texts and/or related texts of Indian national history in this 150th year of the poet's birth. We are particularly fortunate to include the sharings of the two editors (Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty) and the author of the Foreword (Amit Chaudhuri) for the recent Harvard University Press publication of *The Essential Tagore*. Esha Niyogi De's recently published *Empire, Media and the Autonomous Woman: A Feminist Critique of Postcolonial Thought* (Oxford, 2011) features readings of several Tagore texts and dance dramas, and her essay in this volume has been adapted from a chapter in that book. Rijula Das and Makarand Paranjape have produced a recent nuanced translation of Tagore's essay *Visva Sahitya* (World Literature) on which Paranjape's essay in this volume is based. Anuradha Ghosh's recent book *Filming Fiction—Tagore, Premchand and Ray* (jointly edited with M. Asaduddin) (Oxford, 2012) is in the area of intersemiotic translations and focuses on the issue of filmic transpositions of Premchand and Tagore narratives by Satyajit Ray. Patrick Colm Hogan has written introductions to new editions of Tagore's selected stories (2011) and to *Reminiscences* (forthcoming). Rosinka Chaudhuri's essay on "The Rustle of

Language” was published in the July 2011 issue of the journal *Seminar*, from which it has been reproduced. A number of other contributions here were adapted or reproduced from talks and publications. Amit Chaudhuri’s essay “Two Giant Brothers” was first published in the *London Review of Books* (2006) and later collected in *Clearing A Space* (Chaudhuri 2008). It is reproduced here with references and footnotes. An earlier version of Sachidananda Mohanty’s paper was presented at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations international seminar on “Rabindranath Tagore: At Home in the World” at Kathmandu, Nepal, September 22–24, 2011. Mohanty gratefully acknowledges support received from the ICCR, the Indian Cultural Centre, Kathmandu, and Professor Indra Nath Choudhury and extends his thanks to the editor of this volume for his suggestions and inputs. Earlier versions of Makarand Paranjape’s essay were presented at the 2nd Asia, Africa Latin America Literature Forum, Incheon, Korea, April 28–30, 2011, and at Rabindranath Tagore Birth Centenary Celebrations at the University of Yangon, Myanmar, August 11–12, 2011. An earlier version of Radha Chakravarty’s essay was presented at a conference on “Contemporizing Tagore and the World,” held in Dhaka (Bangladesh) on April 29–May 1, 2011, organized by Jamia Millia Islamia University, University of Dhaka, and Visva-Bharati. Earlier versions of the essays by Fakrul Alam, Patrick Hogan, Esha De, and Debashish Banerji were presented at “Towards the Universal Man” Tagore Festival, Los Angeles, September 29–October 2, 2010. With the exception of the essays by Dasthakur, Tagore, Mitter, and Satpathy, the chapters in this book were published as a special Tagore issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Thought* from Vadodara, India, in January 2012.

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Chapter 2

The Rustle of Language

Rosinka Chaudhuri

Abstract In this essay, named, after Roland Barthes, “The Rustle of Language,” the author explores the manner in which Rabindranath crafted his poetic voice in the poem “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*” [The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream], published when he was twenty-one, out of the vicissitudes of his early experimentation with meter and form in the shadow of other voices, other rhythms. The author demonstrates how in this poem the poet constructed, out of materials he had already played with before, his particular poetic voice. This discussion attempts thereby to understand why the English translation of Rabindranath's Bengali poetry inevitably fails at many levels, most of all failing to capture the repetition and rhythm of the Bengali words and lines as they rustle and murmur on the page or in the ear with a life of their own.

Keywords Poetics · Bengali literature · Literary history · Creativity · Psychology · *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*

At the start of the year 1877, when he was just sixteen, Rabindranath lay down one day in the inner quarters of a corner room of his ancestral home in Jorasanko, Calcutta, and wrote a line upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe* (within the dense flowering woods). In his recollection, “It had one day become very cloudy at mid-day. In that cloud-darkened delight of leisure, lying on my stomach upon a bed in a room, I wrote upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe*. Writing it made me very happy....” (*Jibansmriti*, 462). And rightfully so, for this was one of the finest lines in the collection of poems/songs that appeared in every issue of *Bharati* save one between the years 1877–1878 and was later to be known in book form as *Bhanusingher Padabali*.

All translations in this chapter from Rabindranath Tagore are mine.

R. Chaudhuri (✉)
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC), Kolkata, India
e-mail: rosinkac@gmail.com

The first line he wrote, however, was not the first poem he published in this collection. He had published the first poem of *Bhanusingha* in the *Ashwin* (September/October) issue of *Bharati* in 1877; this poem was to later undergo many revisions and become standardized as the song “*sawan gagane ghor ghanaghata / nishitha yamini re*” (Splendidly dark with clouds is the monsoon sky / in the dead of night).

This was the start of the regular serial publication in *Bharati* of poems written under the pseudonym *Bhanusingha*, the name that meant Rabindranath, which appeared listed on the contents page of that periodical as *Bhanusingher Kabita* (Bhanusingha’s Poems).¹ The story behind the publication of these poems by a sixteen-year-old Rabindranath has been told many times and is well known. Like most of the reconstruction of his early work, this story too is heavily premised upon Rabindranath’s own version of its composition as he presented it in *Jibansmriti*.

From 1874 onward, three years before the first line of *Bhanusingha* was written, Akshaychandra Sarkar, Saradacharan Mitra, and Barodakanta Mitra had edited and published a selection of poems titled *Prachin Kavyasangraha* (Collection of Old Poetry) serially in the *Sadharani* periodical, edited by Akshaychandra. Here, the verses of the medieval Vaishnava poet Vidyapati were reprinted along with footnotes; Rabindranath has described how the volumes of the periodical were purloined by him from his brother Jyotirindranath’s collection. [“My elders were regular subscribers but not regular readers. Therefore, to collect and take them away was not too much trouble” (*Jibansmriti*, 453)]. Reading the poetry of Vidyapati enraptured him, and making a careful study of the use of language in this old dialect in self-made notebooks, he proceeded to fashion in that language a number of poems in the style of the medieval poet.²

It should not, perhaps, be surprising that Rabindranath first found his voice in poetry in the disguise of an imagined medieval poet long dead, in a language strangely obscure and archaic, tangentially placed within modern Bengali as it was spoken and written at the time in literary quarters. Inspired by the legend of Thomas Chatterton, whom he had first heard about from his brother’s friend, Akshay Chaudhuri, the person he credited with introducing him to much of English literature in this period, he set about replicating the achievement. “Keeping aside the unnecessary part about his suicide,” he writes, “I rolled up my sleeves and began my endeavour to become the second Chatterton” (*Jibansmriti*, 461).

¹ The name Bhanusingha was derived from Bhanu, another word for the sun, or Rabi. The full name in both cases would then mean “lord of the sun”; it has been speculated that the name was one given to him by Kadambari Debi. Many of the poems that were being published in *Bharati* at this time, apart from the ones that belong to this collection of the *Bhanusingher Padabali*, were signed with the initial letter “Bh,” revealing the extent to which the half-hidden half-revealed productions of this period shelter under the anonymity of pseudonyms and one-letter signatures, shy of proclaiming their nature and identity out loud and in the open.

² His mastery over the subject was so complete that a few years later, upon re-reading Akshaychandra’s text, he wrote (no doubt goaded by that critic’s unsparing criticism of his own poetry so far) a trenchant and unsparing critique of the lazy and slipshod manner in which much of the work had been done in presenting Vidyapati in *Prachin Kavyasangraha*.

The difficulty and ambiguity of the Maithili dialect (a mixture of old Hindi and Bengali prevalent in eastern India) that he simulated to write these poems appealed to him for precisely those very reasons: their half-hidden, half-revealed nature, similar, he said, to the attraction held by “the seeds of trees, containing a mystery undiscovered underneath the earth.” Those were seeds that contained embryonically within their encrypted code, in the disguise of Bhanusingha, the core of Rabindranath’s poetic vocation, the musicality and mystery that his mature poetry would convey later with a direct intensity.

Pretending that he had discovered an old and tattered manuscript of a medieval poet named Bhanusingha in the library of the Brahmo Samaj, he read his poems out to a friend. The friend, in turn, excited by their beauty, claimed they were better than anything written by Chandidas or Vidyapati, and wanted them for publication, at which point Rabindranath informed him that the poems were his own by showing him his exercise book in which they had been written. The friend then apparently became very grave, and had to concede, “Not bad at all” (*Jibansmriti*, 462). At the time that the poems were appearing serially in *Bharati*, Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay, an academic, was said to have written a dissertation on these poems while in Germany, comparing them to European lyric poetry, thereby obtaining his doctorate on the subject, Rabindranath reported inaccurately, but with great pride, in *Jibansmriti* (p. 462).

Nevertheless, this section on the Bhanusingha poems in his autobiography, *Jibansmriti*, ends with a disclaimer. While expressing his satisfaction with the language of the poems, which closely resembled the language of the medieval Vaishnava poets, he nevertheless concludes by saying that they do not stand up to careful scrutiny as their made-up nature is then revealed; “they are not like the flowing, heart-melting tune of the *nahabat* (shehnai performance), but merely like the sound of the contemporary cheap English organ’s *tung tang*” (62).

In later life too, he referred to this collection as “an example of unlawful entry (*anadhikar prabesh*) into the precincts of literature,” (cited in Prabodhchandra Sen, *Bhorer Pakhi*, 131) and it has been surmised that he might never have published the poems separately in book form if not for the shocking suicide in April 1884 of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari Debi, wife of his older brother Jyotirindranath, close friend, childhood companion, and muse, at this time. In the dedication to *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali*, he wrote: “You had requested, many a time, that I publish the poems of Bhanusingha. At that time I did not grant your request. Today I have done so, and you are not here to see it.” Yet his own attachment to these adolescent compositions can be seen from the fact that although he omitted almost every other poem he wrote at this time from the precincts of the *Rabindra Rachanabali*, this group of poems were not conferred the same ignominy, but remain enshrined in his Collected Works in their rightful place.

After the first line of *Bhanusingha* had come into being, it took another six years to the publication of *Prabhatsangeet* in 1883, his breakthrough volume of poetry. (In the meanwhile, his first collection of poems, *Sandhyasangeet*, had been published to indifferent praise.) This collection included a poem that he felt bore the stamp of his own individual voice with a certainty and clarity not evident so

far—*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga* (“The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream”)—which was first published in *Bharati* on December 2, 1882. When it was later incorporated into *Prabhatsangeet*, the poem added sixty-seven lines to the original two hundred and one lines; subsequently, it underwent many changes and is currently available in the *Rabindra Rachanabali* in one hundred and fifty-four lines; however, the version in the *Sanchayita* is compressed to a mere forty-three lines.

It was with the publication of *Prabhatsangeet* that the tide of literary criticism turned substantially in his favor within the field of Bengali letters—critics and journalists across the spectrum, from Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay in the *Education Gazette* to the reviewers in *Somprakash* and *Sanjibani*—all published praise for the simple, unaffected marvel of language accomplished in some of the poems in this volume. Rabindranath grudgingly acknowledged as much of his own early work here: “In the period of *Sandhyasangeet* my mind was taken over by a cloying articulation of my inner forceful feelings alone. With the season of *Prabhatsangeet*, a few spontaneous forms began to be seen; that is, these productions were not the flowers but the fruit of harvest, although grown on uneducated, un-tilled farm land” (quoted in Pal, 132).

A long poem (in some versions perhaps too long), revised over and over again, the free flowing lyricism of “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*” was contained in a meter and rhythm of astonishing suppleness; the words on the page quiver and tremble with an intensity captured almost entirely through sound and language, constituting a magnum leap forward toward a form and style that was to become so distinctively his own. Revelatory and celebratory in its incantation of the beauty of morning, the poem’s narrative resides entirely in feeling and sensation, capturing the wonder of the world as the poet sees it one extraordinary dawn. While his essays and letters of this period were self-assured, argumentative, and sometimes sharp and impassioned, his poetry was still afloat upon a vague inner turbulence.

Returning home from England in 1880, he had published, in quick succession, four different volumes—*Balmiki Pratibha*, *Bhagnahriday*, *Rudrachanda*, and *Europe Prabashir Patra*—each in a separate genre, and each achieving some element of success within its own precinct. Yet in the matter of poetry, although he had just published the collection, *Sandhyasangeet*, he was still to make an advance into his own domain, both in his own perception as well as in the reader’s. With this poem, that breakthrough was finally accomplished.

Constructing the story of his beginning as a poet later in life, he regarded the poetic accomplishments before this as merely the prelude to “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*,” a poem that he said inaugurated his adult career as a poet, as is evident in his description of it as “the Preface or Introduction to his entire poetic corpus” (“*amar shamasta kabyer bhumika*”) (*Jibansmriti*, 492). Written in one sitting over the entire afternoon and evening of a day of extraordinary experience, Rabindranath has immortalized the poem not only on its own merit, but also upon the basis of the revelation on which it was sourced, an experience of whose importance he wrote repeatedly. Describing the sensation in *Jibansmriti*, he wrote:

At the place where the Sudder Street road came to an end one could see the trees in the garden of perhaps the Free School. One morning I stood on the

veranda and looked in that direction. At that time, the sun was rising from behind the leaves of those trees. As I stood there and looked, suddenly, in a moment, the curtain fell from my eyes. I looked, and saw the world and this earth enveloped in an astonishing glory, everything swaying in joy and beauty. Piercing in one moment through the many layers of dejection in which my heart was covered, my entire inner self was scattered in the light of the universe. On that day itself, “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*” seemed to flow out of me like a waterfall (492).

This was not the only occasion wherein Rabindranath had felt such revelatory joy—he catalogs many other instances in his childhood and life of a similar nature—but certainly it was the most sustained and powerful experience among them. “Piercing the veil” was an expression he used repeatedly to indicate, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, “seeing beyond” the “*pratyahik*” or the everyday, which “was ‘*anitya*,’ impermanent, subject to the changes of history. The realm of the poetic laced the everyday but had to be revealed by the operation of the poetic eye” (168).

The expression of wonder insists always upon that which cannot be understood but at the same time that which is undeniably premised upon the exigency of the experience. Ranajit Guha calls this heightened joy of wonder by its name in Indian esthetics, “*chamatkara*,” pointing out that it is usually rendered in English as “supernormal rapture” (67). Of the three similar childhood experiences cited by Rabindranath in the last essay of his life, *Sahitye Aitihasikata* (Historicality in Literature),³ of glistening dew, gathering clouds, and a cow licking a foal, each occasion was in fact a repetition or premonition of that central experience on Sudder Street, which was “a matter of seeing in a way Tagore claims to have been uniquely his own” (77). Guha then quotes Rabindranath himself in corroboration: “It is in this [seeing] that one is a poet” (80).⁴

To experience the world as an outsider was a feeling that animated other poems written at this time (“*Prabhat Utsav*,” “*Ananta Maran*,” and “*Ananta Jiban*,” “*Maha Swapna*,” “*Srishti*, *Stithi*, *Pralay*”), but nowhere more clearly and extensively as in this one, “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*.” The feeling had partly animated his composition of *Balmiki Pratibha* as well, where, in language that was strangely reminiscent of his experience of writing *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*, he had said he wanted to capture, in the character of Balmiki, how “a deep pity from within had pierced the dacoit’s stern exterior. His natural humanity had been covered over by hard habit. One day, there was turmoil, and the inner man was suddenly impelled into the open” (Tagore, *Balmiki Pratibha* 1). Whatever the internal impulse of wonder upon which “*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*” was composed, however, it is in its formal execution that the poem achieves a rupture in relation to Rabindranath’s entire poetic corpus.

This might not be his finest poem and is certainly not among the best poems of his career, but in it he constructs, out of material he has already played with before in *Bhanusingher Padabali*, his particular poetic voice. Discarding the disguise of

³ All quotes from this essay follow Guha’s translation in the appendix to his book (pp. 95–99).

⁴ Critic and poet Sankha Ghosh has just written on the importance of “dekha” [seeing] to Rabindranath in an eponymous special issue of *Desh* in May 2011.