

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
AND
EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM
AN ESSAY IN THEMATICS

Bikash Chakravarty



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PREFACE

Rabindranath Tagore and European Romanticism : An Essay in Thematics was originally written as a doctoral dissertation and presented to the Visva-Bharati for a Ph D degree way back in 1974. In the intervening years—spanning more than three decades—my views on Rabindranath as a poet have changed in some measure, but not so substantially as to warrant a new book on the subject. That is, if I were to write this essay now, I do not think that the underlying assumptions basic to my thesis would undergo any considerable change.

Therefore, when some of my former students, now friends, prodded me to publish this dissertation, I agreed to get it into print without any revision or updating of material.

While reading the manuscript for publication, it occurred to me that for convenience of those readers who do not know Bangla, some English version (however inadequate) of the original Bangla extracts from the writings of Rabindranath in the body of the text should be given in an appendix at the end of the book. Unless otherwise indicated, all renderings into English of the original Bangla pieces have been made by me.

My sincere thanks are due to my former student, Sri Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay, Special Officer, Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, and some of his friends, for taking keen interest in getting this essay published. I am also deeply indebted to Nilanjan for the beautiful cover design he specially made for this book.

Dwaranda, Sriniketan
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Bikash Chakravarty

PROLOGUE

This study, which I would call an essay in thematics, has a two-fold aim : first, it attempts, within limits, to state a case for Rabindranath as partly an existentialist poet and, secondly, to relate him to the European context, basically romantic in its assumption. That the romantic and the existential are related is taken for granted. It might appear that, now and then, out of a passion for comparison, I have pursued the poet in somewhat unfamiliar, if not improbable, regions. The justification lies in a widening of perspective : in the process he gets a new and more authentic look. About one so unique, ambivalent and multitudinous as Rabindranath, it is probable that we can never be wholly right ; and if we can never be right, it is perhaps better—as Eliot said about Shakespeare—that from time to time we should at least change our way of being wrong.

A study like this calls for a re-interpretation, however brief, or partial, of romanticism in existential terms. This I could not avoid. I have, however, taken existentialism to mean not a clearly defined historical movement, nor a school of philosophy, but a type of sensibility that can be sensed in all ages but which has, for many and obvious reasons, come to assume crucial—perhaps disproportionate—significance for modern man and society. With courage and insight, it sets out to light up, at least to encounter, the dark, contradictory and questionable elements in man's unaccommodated existence. 'The heart has its reason, which reason does not know.' And not the heart only. Whenever men have insisted on the limits of pure reason and

recognised the absurd or the irrational in the human situation, they have been taking some sort of an existential stance. In short, for my purpose 'existentialism' serves to re-define the subjective self and its modes of encounter with and adjustment to meaning, being and the world. Essentially romantic as these notions are, they need not be studied under the aspect of the romantic pathology (as Mario Praz might have done but did not), nor are they necessarily linked with that other variation or progeny of romanticism, the Symbolist Movement. It is in this complex of ideas that I have sought the *locus* of Rabindranath.

Clearly this is a complicated subject ; equally clearly my essay is short and tentative, laying no claim to exhaustive, specialist scholarship and treatment. For the sake of convenience, I have taken up *only a few themes* dealing with the assumptions stated above with special reference to the poetry of Rabindranath.

The first chapter is given to the clarification of the sense in which the concept of romanticism has been used and of the position taken in this essay. The theme of the artist in isolation and his suffering that comes of being 'chosen' by the Muse forms the centre of the second chapter. The third deals with the variations of the romantic voyage as a metaphor of longing for the beyond as of existential anguish. The assumption working here is that the artist, ever on the threshold of the not-yet, is tragically aware of his peculiar or crisis situation. In the fourth chapter the theme is directly related to some existential issues latent in romanticism. I have called it "Dialogue with Death", which should help to define the basic problems : man's modes of encounter and adjustment to the phenomena of dying, perhaps the greatest, absurd. The fifth and last chapter could as well have been the first. It seeks to describe the phenomenology of the poet's world of existence where all themes converge. A world of tragic vision, it has its own set of values, form and meaning.

In each chapter, I have generally moved from the romantic assumptions to their existential implications and then gone on to the poet for explication. That is, theme is also my method of literary criticism. Thematics, as now developed, is actually an existential critique of literature. As such, it deals not only with the form of the poem but also with the world it embodies and the tension between the two. In a deeper sense, thematics helps us to understand that the aesthetic of a work of art is not a mere appendage to the rest, but

a restatement of the entire *Weltanschauung* of the artist. If the essay, especially the notes, seems to be crowded with the philosophers, the pertinence lies here. It is not my purpose to amputate but to enlarge Tagore in terms both permanent and contemporary.

There is always a risk involved with matters so large and central. It is more than probable that I have taken a biased view of romanticism in general and Rabindranath in particular. For instance, the unmistakable note of pathos in Tagore's poems has been virtually overlooked. Nor have I always stressed Rabindranath's important differences with the European existentialists, so far as the latter's frenetic obsession with the tragedy of nihilation is concerned. If the historical factors involved in the perspective of existential 'alienation' have been more or less ignored that is because I have treated alienation as the basic human condition for artistic creation. The limitations of this study are either intrinsic or intended, to emphasize the existential image of Rabindranath generally obscured by critical platitudes both at home and abroad. Sooner or later such a reevaluation will have to be undertaken. This may be taken as a first essay in that direction. Burdened with a vision, the romantics were eager to arrive at an answer, but perhaps, their *forte* was question rather than answer. The existentialists are, apparently, not too worried over solutions, at any rate not the conventional or time-honoured formulas. There may of course be a state of awareness and an 'estate of poetry', where there is neither question nor answer. But that would be 'beyond existentialism' and, though perfectly valid, falls outside the scope of this study.

I am aware that it is impossible to do justice, within a single formula, to the most ambiguous of poets, fed from many sources, open or hidden. So much is pertinent and, so much is left out for lack of space. His brilliant short stories and plays, for instance, have not been dealt with. Nor have his novels and paintings been taken into account. The large body of prose writings and letters have only been scantily referred to. Since my principal concern was to pursue certain romantic assumptions or modalities with existential overtones, I have chosen to limit myself to Rabindranath's poems only—not the official and ceremonial pieces, but those that embody, I feel, his true voice of feeling. As much is true of my sparse use of the ever-growing Tagore criticism. I have restricted myself to those four or five critics of Rabindranath whose theses or incidental observations seemed strictly

relevant to my issues. Others—many of them with real merit—have been left untouched because they did not touch my field of interest.

The extracts from Rabindranath are given in their original Bangla version, partly because their competent English renderings are not available, but largely because the extracts in the original are imperative for the textual analysis attempted throughout this essay. The chronology of the pieces dealt with have not always been maintained for I have chosen to stress the growth of themes rather than the historical development of the poet. A number of related matters have been given in the notes. This, I thought, was the only way to reduce the bulk of the main body instead of loading it with too many asides.

Quotations from Rabindranath in this essay, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Centenary Edition, Government of West Bengal, 1368 B.S.) in fifteen volumes. The references are abbreviated to R for *Rabindra Rachanabali*, then the volume number in figures and then the page or pages on which the reference occurs.

Santiniketan
2 April, 1974

Bikash Chakravarty

I

RABINDRANATH AND THE ROMANTICS : THE FOCUS

Late in life, Rabindranath said of himself "I am a born romantic."¹ Dramatic though it sounds, the statement, part mask, part revelation, lights up some assumptions relating to romanticism. This is especially so if we remember that the line was written at a time when Rabindranath showed a distinct break in style and was moving towards "the fascination of what is difficult".² The fact that he had written dozens of obviously and at times remarkable romantic poems with assignable echoes from English Romantic poets is a commonplace in Tagore criticism. Equally commonplace is the notion that while espousing prose poems Rabindranath had apparently broken away from his romantic Muse. But why did he have to make such an admission at a fairly late stage of his development ? In what sense are his poems—both early and later—romantic ?

One of the most elusive poets of the modern times, the conventional definitions of romanticism are not likely to explain his poetry from *Sandhya Sangit* to *Sesh Lekha*. Moreover, even in his so-called romantic phase, Rabindranath wrote quite a number of poems, which are not susceptible to analysis by, for instance, Irving Babbitt's damaging account of romanticism as "emotional naturalism".³ Considering his varied and serious commitments to the Muse—at once a nostalgia for death because 'his eye hath bent on Beauty'