ABSTRACT:
This paper is an attempt to throw light on the backdrop of Nobel prize, which is exciting and interesting.

Full Version of Paper

The fruition of Tagore’s western voyage in 1912 came with his receipt of the Nobel Prize in late 1913, and unsurprisingly it was this event that provoked the largest number of column inches. By this time, Tagore had returned to Shantiniketan, where news of the accolade reached him by telegram on the afternoon of the 14 November. Much perturbed by what he saw as the undue attention he soon gained from his compatriots, who flocked to Shantiniketan to disturb the poet’s peace, Tagore happily avoided immediate exposure to much of what British journalists had to say.

The Brimingham Post wrote that “the chief significance of Mr. Tagore’s triumph is that it marks the culmination of the development of an offshoot of English literature”. There was much consternation that Thomas Hardy had not been awarded the prize. The Daily News and Leader of 14 November felt that Tagore was an easy and uncontroversial choice because “the great themes of the art are the same for the Orient as for the Occident”. (Tagore would have partly agreed with this assertion, though he would have disagreed that this should make his writings “easy” or unchallenging.) Linked to the idea of the spread of the English language as an imperial “gift”, many commentators were also keen to see the influence of a Christian ethic in Tagore’s work. In July 1913, William Canton wrote to his friend Edward J Thompson – later to become one of the foremost interpreters of Tagore to the English speaking world – that it was “impossible to accept the poems as Hindu pure and simple, unless Indian religion had been grossly misrepresented “. For Canton, they were “essentially Christian in their feeling”. An article by R. Ellis Roberts in the Daily News and the Leader of 27 October 1913 rejected the idea that East and West were different at all. What is important to recognize about India, he wrote, is that “neither in art nor letters has it ever reached the perfection which Europe attained”. Tagore’s popularity was on account of the fact that his “inspiration derived from Western rather than Eastern sources”. By early 1914, the tone in some quarters had turned from patronizing to hostile: “Unfortunately Tagore does not acknowledge his debt to Christianity”, wrote The Spectator on 14 February, and implicitly “asserts that India has nothing to learn from Europe on the spiritual side”. Tagore, they claimed, was so obviously influenced by Christian teaching that to claim his work “as an unaided product of Vedic inspiration was wrong”. In fact, it “veils a hostility and inexclusive ingratitude to his debt to Western teaching”. The story behind the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Tagore has been subjected to much speculation – and not too few conspiracy theories – many of which still have some currency today. The most significant one was the idea that the English version of Gitanjali was not in fact Tagore’s work, but was dependant upon Yeats’ translation. Sir Valentine Chirolan infamous imperialist reactionary and Calcutta-based correspondent for The Times – led public
acccusations that Tagore was essentially taking credit for someone else’s labour, and Tagore wrote to Thomas Sturge Moore in early 1914 expressing his concern over this matter.

A report has reached me from a barrister friend to mine who was present on the occasion when in a meeting of the leading Mohammedan gentleman of Bengal, Valentine Chirol told the audience that the English Gitanjali was practically a production of Yeats. It is very likely that he did not believe it himself, it being merely a political move on his part to minimize the significance of this Nobel Prize affair, which our people naturally consider to be a matter of national rejoicing. It is not possible for him to relish the idea of Mohammedans sharing this honour with Hindus. Unfortunately for me there are signs of this feeling of antagonism in England itself, which may be partly due to the natural reaction following the chorus of praise that Gitanjali evoked and partly as you have said in your letter, to the bitterness of disappointment in the minds of the partisans of the candidates for the Nobel Prize.

Tagore was acutely aware of the dangers of the suggestion, and in the context of both colonial politics and Tagore’s vision of a meeting of minds between East and West, the issue of authenticity is a matter of some importance.

Four days after receiving the prize, Tagore wrote to William Rothenstein to acknowledge his debt: “They very first moment I received message of the great honour conferred on me by the award of the Nobel Prize, my heart turned towards you with love and gratitude”. The extent to which his fame and fortune in the West was due to the assistance given to him by his Western, Largely English was an issue that was uppermost in his mind. The issue of direct involvement in the creating Gitanjali as a work of English literature still plagued him as late as April 1915, when Tagore wrote to William Rothenstein that “since I have got my fame as an English writer I feel extreme reluctance in accepting alterations in my English poems by any of your writers”. Well aware of the rumours that had circulated since Gitanjali’s critical acclaim, he added that he said -

“Must not give men any reasonable ground for accusing me – which they do – of reaping advantage from other men’s genius and skill. There are people who suspect that I owe in a large measure to C.F. Andrews help for any literary at it. But it is different about Yeats. I think Yeats man sparing in his suggestions, moreover, I was with him during the versions. But one is apt to delude himself, and it is very easy for me to gradually forget the share Yeats had in making my things passable … if it be true that Yeats’ touches have made it possible for Gitanjali to occupy the place it does then it must be confessed.”

With regard to the translations, the evidence is mixed. Throughout his life Yeats would continue to refer to the significance of the changes he made to Tagore’s work. One of the last documented conversations Yeats had with an Indian scholar about Tagore took place at Yeats’ Riversdale cottage in the Dublin Hills on 1 June 1937. During the exchanges between Yeats and Abinash Chandra Bose – a young Bengali scholar who had recently completed a PhD at Trinity College on mysticism in East and West – Yeats is reported to
have reaffirmed, yet again, that “he used to ask Tagore to give a literal translation of the original [Gitanjali] in certain cases and then touch it up to make it come nearer the Western mode of the expression”. That Yeats would have sought such changes may be expected given his stated belief that “no Indian can write or speak in animated English”. As we have seen, Tagore was somewhat ambivalent as to the extent of Yeats’ role. William Rothenstein, by contrast, was unequivocal: “I know that it was said in India that the success of Gitanjali was largely owing to Yeats’ re-writing to Tagore’s English. That this is false can easily be proved. The original of Gitanjali in English and Bengali is in my possession. Yeats did here and there suggest changes but the main text was printed as it came from Tagore’s hand. And even for those who were not intimate with the facts of the case but judged Gitanjali on its literary merit alone, it was felt that “no amount of correction – short of absolute re-writing – could make it what it is.”

The issue of translation is significant in that it represents yet another example of the way in which Tagore as writer and thinker – as an agent in his own right, from a different, non-Western culture- has become gradually concealed by the web of individuals and influences in the West that provided the context for his rise to fame in 1912 and 1913. We have already explored some of these themes: the “accidental” nature of his voyage to the West; the practical assistance given to Tagore by friends such as Rothenstein; the alleged help with translation offered by Yeats: and the Christian sentiments that had passed – by some mysterious process of osmosis – into Tagore’s psyche and enabled him to produce Gitanjali. A further issue of some importance relates to the basis upon which Tagore was awarded the prize by the Nobel committee. This is so because it remains widely held and often repeated that Tagore won the prize for Gitanjali alone. If this was so – and it appears that Tagore himself believed this to be the case – then the role of Yeats and others in London who helped to promote Gitanjali during 1912 and 1913 (men such as Thomas Sturge Moore, who as a member of the Royal Society of Literature was responsible for Tagore’s initial nomination) appears to be crucial. If, however, the Nobel committee considered a wider range of material, which was largely unseen (and certainly untouched) by any London based critic, then the importance of Gitanjali is diminished. The definitive research work dealing with the the Nobel Prize in literature is Kjell Espmark’s The Nobel Prize in Literature. A Study of the Criteria Behind the Choices (1991). In this discussion of the prize for 1913, Espmark has

The prize of Tagore in 1913 seemed like an expensive gesture, but in reality it illustrates ….. limitation. The proposal originated not in India but from member of the Royal Society of Literature in Britain, and the final decision was based on Tagore’s English version of Gitanjali, without the aid of Oriental experts to access the rest of his production. (One of the committee members Esais Tegner, Jr, could in fact read Tagore in Bengali, but there is no indication that use was made of his expertise in the matter.)

Contrary to Epmark’s assertions, there is in fact some evidence that Tagore was read in the original Bengali. Three works in Bengali- Naivedya, Kheya and Gitanjali – were received by the Nobel literary on 18 July, 1913. The English Gitanjali was composed from these three Bengali texts. The Nobel committee, consisting of just five members, was the body responsible for deliberating the merits candidates and subsequently making
recommendations for the prize in the literature to the Swidish Academy. In 1913, the committee included Harald Hjarne (chairman), Karl Alfred Melin and Erik Axel Karlfeldt. A fourth member was Hans Hilderbrand who died on February and was replaced by Per Hallstrom. The fifth member was a notable Swedish novelist and a man of letters, Esais Tegner the younger, who as Espmark points out, had knowledge of Bengali was is difficult to establish, but from an investigation of the accessions register, we learn that Tegner actually borrowed the three Bengali texts mentioned above in August 1913. In response to this fact, it is perhaps worth making two further points: first, it is hard to imagine why Tegner would have taken Bengali texts out of the library if he could not read them; and second, in a committee consisting of just five people – and particularly given Tegner’s high standing within Swedish intellectual circles – it is also responsible to assume that if Tegner did read Tagore in the original Bengali, his reading and interpretation of its merits would have had some bearing on the committee’s deliberations. The notion that the Nobel committee had access, via Tegner, to the three original Bengali components of the final English Gitanjali is significant, for it reduces the importance of Yeats’ “collaborative” role.

Similarly, the idea that the Nobel Prize of 1913 was awarded to Tagore solely on the basis of Gitanjali also need to be called in question, for it has tended to give credence to an interpretation to Tagore as someone who lacked the depth necessary to produce work of much diversity. In fact, the 1913 presentation speech given by the aforementioned Haralds Hjarne, Chairman of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, tells a different story. Hjarne said that Gitanjali was “one of ….. (Tagore’s) works that especially arrested the attention of the selecting critics”, but he also mentions that The Gardener (1913) and Lyrics of Love and Life (1913) came before the committee, and that though these “we see another phase of his personality, now subject to the alternately blissful and torturing experiences of youthful love, now prey to the feelings and joy that the vicissitudes of the life rise to, the whole interspread nevertheless with glimpses of a higher world.” Hjarne also refers to Glimpses of Bengal Life (1913), and the records of the Nobel Library show that the committee received English translations of this text prior to its decision to award Tagore the prize. The browsing register shows that The Gardener and Glimpses of Bengal Life were frequently withdrawn by a member of committee members in late October and early November, with one committee member borrowing Glimpses of Bengal Life as late as 13 November. We also know that according to a statement issued to the Swedish Academy on 24 October, the committee was at its point minded to recommended the award go to the French writer Emile Faguet. This gives the committee’s readings of The Gardener and Glimpses of Bengal Life, which took place after this time, even greater significance.

One possible influence upon the committee’s late swing towards Tagore may have been a letter sent from Gustav Verner von Heidenstam – a member of the Swedish Academy, a respected Swedish Orientalist and an enthusiastic supporter of Tagore – to the permanent secretary of the Academy, Erik Axel Karlfeldt (also one of the five committee members) on 18 October. In his letter he expressed his intuition that the committee appeared to want to give the prize for 1913 to a writer of prose fiction, which would concur with the reports that at this stage Faguet headed the list. Von Heidenstam also informed the
committee that a new English translation of a Tagore text had become available, and they ought to acquire this before taking any final judgments. For von Heidenstam, Tagore’s thought and poetry was “united in a depth of rare spiritual beauty”, and “the loving and innate religiousness that flows through all his thoughts and feelings’ were indicative of a ‘purity of heart’ and ‘natural sublimity’ such that no contemporary, writer on the world stage match him. At a meeting of the academy on 23 October, reference was made to von Heidenstam’s letter and it is soon after this date that several members of the committee began to borrow both The Gardener and Glimpses of Bengal from the Nobel Library.

We also learn from the second of Per Hallstorm’s two reports on Tagore, which he prepared as briefing documents for the committee, that there is a shift in focus from the first to the second: that is, between April 1913 and October 1913. Hallstorm’s first report was, by his own admission, a native document: in it, he states that he is “entirely ignorant of the Indian language and literature”, but nevertheless states that on the basis of Gitanjali alone Tagore merits the Nobel Prize. The second report, submitted to the committee on 29 October following the recommendations from von Heidenstam and the acquisition of both Glimpses of Bengal and The Gardener, makes numerous references to the latter text. According to Hallstorm’s judgment at the time, “it ought to be possible to predict with fair certainty that the admiring appreciation that has been accorded to Gitanjali in England and America will not be in the least diminished by The Gardener. On the contrary, it will perhaps be acclaimed still more warmly and spontaneously.”

In the event, Hallstorm was wrong. Nevertheless, the evidence presented here shows – contrary to the received wisdom amongst both academic students of Tagore and the public at large – that it was not simply on the basis of Gitanjali that Tagore received the Nobel Prize, and that the Nobel committee did, via Esais Tegner the younger, have some access to Tagore in the original Bengali. This detracts from the overreaching significance of Yeats’ contribution, raises the profile of Tagore’s works other than Gitanjali and puts him and his work in a more central historical position.

It seems that there was a very complex story was flowing, unclea Tagore received the prize. Even after receiving his prize, the story continues.

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