

Rabindranath Tagore and Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study in Poetic Affinities*

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Abstract

The affinities between Rabindranath Tagore and Gerard Manley Hopkins are not fortuitous; rather both of them appear to belong to the same poetic tradition. In respect of their poetic vision, their technique, their attitude to nature and the mundane world there is a remarkable similarity between the two minds. Besides, temperamentally also the two poets share a close relationship. Both the poets appreciated with a sense of wonder every object of nature in minute detail and at the same time saw in them a universal significance. Hopkins was a religious poet and Tagore's appreciation, particularly in the west, was as a mystic poet. Both Tagore and Hopkins practiced a theocentric aestheticism. They felt that God is not merely the creator; he is also the force behind each and every object of nature. Although there is no concrete evidence that Tagore was acquainted with the poems of Hopkins, it may be deduced on the basis of some literary facts that such a possibility is not altogether a remote one.

[Key words: Victorian, sensuousness, painting, religion, prosody, sprung rhythm.]

I

A study in poetic affinities between Rabindranath Tagore and Gerard Manley Hopkins may perhaps seem a bit strange to the readers. Apparently there is no connection between the two great poets—one belonging to Victorian England and the other's poetic career spanning from the last two decades of 19th century to the modern period in the 20th century. Survey of Tagore criticism also does not corroborate any resemblance between the two poets. Edward Thompson in his book *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* points in one place to a possible resemblance between Tagore's poem "Sea Waves" and Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (71). In fact comparative study between two or more poets of different times and belonging to different nations can be taken up by any scholar. But why do I choose Hopkins and no other poet to compare with Tagore probably requires an explanation. And here is my apology before I go into the details of my study.

II

When I read the poetry of these two poets the affinities between them strike me as not something accidental, rather both of them appear to me as belonging to the same poetic tradition. In respect of their poetic vision, their technique, their attitude to nature and the mundane world there is a remarkable similarity between the two minds. Besides, temperamentally also the two poets share a close relationship. Apart from being a poet Hopkins was also a painter

and showed a keen interest in music. The multitude of his drawings reveals his preoccupation with the beauty of nature. His numerous pencil sketches evince a clear influence of Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing*. Tagore's genius was a versatile one—he was a poet, novelist, and dramatist all combined into one. Side by side he was also a painter of eminence and musician. Tagore's drawings sometimes resemble Victorian illustrations (Neogy 199) and like those of Hopkins his paintings also reveal an "intensity of visualization" (Neogy 200). Both Hopkins and Tagore wanted, at one point of time, to opt for the career of a painter, and in both of their cases, the art of painting exerted considerable influence on their literary career. Hopkins made a number of pencil sketches and Tagore, on the other hand, made his early monochromes in pen. Both of them returned to painting at the later stage of their lives although in case of Hopkins the return, unlike Tagore, was rather desultory. The emphasis on the particular was a feature of both. Their drawings reveal their ability to observe critically and carefully and both of them could divine the Infinite in the finite. In a letter dated 28th November, 1928 Tagore wrote:

The joy that pictures bring is the joy of definiteness; within the restraint of lines we see the particular with distinctness. Whatever the object I perceive whether it is a piece of stone, a donkey, a prickly shrub, or an old woman—I tell myself that I see it exactly as it is. Whenever I see a thing with exactness I touch the Infinite and feel delighted. (qtd. in Maitra 169)

The ability to fuse the response to the beauties of external nature with a profoundly inward religious quest can also be seen in Hopkins. For example, on May 18, 1870 Hopkins recorded in his *Journal*:

Oneday when the bluebells were in bloom I wrote the following. I do not think I Have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at I know the beauty of our Lord by it. (199)

Both the poets appreciated with a sense of wonder every object of nature in minute detail and at the same time saw in them a universal significance.

In respect of poetic technique Tagore is acknowledged as an innovator in prosodic measures. In the "Introduction" to *The Oxford Tagore Translations* of Tagore's *Selected Poems* Sankha Ghosh discusses in some detail the poet's experiments with traditional prosodic measures. He observes that

Rabindranath proceeds from *Balaka* (Flying Geese, 1916) onwards to break free of patterns and conventions and evolve the *muktabandha* or 'free-bound' verse form. This consists of rhymed lines (usually couplets) of irregular length and varying prosody, often drawing on conversational rhythms. And finally in his last decade, harking back to the youthful poetic prose of *Puspanjali* (recalled in the interim in *Lipika*), he sets aside all constraints by using free verse to capture the authentic patterns of contemporary life. (29)

Hopkins is regarded as the innovator of a new rhythm—"Sprung rhythm". Talking about the use of new rhythm in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" Hopkins wrote to

Dixon: "I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realized on paper" (*Correspondence* 14). And his rhythm, he himself said, was 'oratorical' and his advice always was to read his poems not with the eyes but with the ears: "My verse is less to be read than heard..." (*Letters* 46). What Hopkins wanted to point out was that the language of poetry should be energetic, forceful. Hopkins was thinking in a positive way about the shape or structure of the poetic medium and incidentally how it can achieve maximum stress or emphasis.

Politically the two minds had something in common as far as their attitude to England as a colonial power was concerned. Both of them regretted and spoke against the unjust domination and oppression practiced by the British over countries like India and Ireland. Hopkins in a letter to Coventry Patmore wrote in 1886:

I remark that those Englishmen who wish prosperity to the Empire (which is not all Englishmen or Britons, strange to say) speak of the Empire's mission to extend freedom and civilization in India and elsewhere....No freedom you can give us is equal to the freedom of letting us alone: take yourselves out of India, let us first be free of you. Then there is civilization. It should have been Catholic truth. That is the great end of Empires before God, to be Catholic and draw nations into their Catholicism. But our Empire is less and less Christian as it grows. (Hopkins *Poems and Prose* 182-83)

Tagore's attitude towards the British government was not much different from that of Hopkins. When in 1903 Lord Curzon was trying to divide Bengal there was wide spread protest all over Bengal. Tagore gave voice to the protest of his countrymen. Sankha Ghosh observes:

There was fierce resistance to the proposal, and Rabindranath became one of the Chief ideologues of that resistance. Through rallies, through the *rakshabandhan* ceremony (tying the brotherly knot) that captured the popular imagination, through song after song, he strove to arouse the patriotism of his countrymen." (Ghosh 37)

In 1919 after the brutal massacre in Jalianwallahbag in Punjab Tagore strongly condemned the incident and considered it a shame to use the Knighthood conferred on him by the King. In a strongly worded protest letter to Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy which was published in *The Statesman*, June 3, 1919, he wanted to be relieved of the honour. Never since Rabindranath used the title.

Hopkins was a religious poet and Tagore's appreciation, particularly in the west, was as a mystic poet. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee Tagore was a "mystic and devotional poet," who "takes his place with the greatest seers, sages, and devotees of India and the world" (21). Umasankar Joshi also opines that 'Tagore was looked up to as an oriental sage, a seer, a prophet" (40). Hopkins was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1868 and for a time being he felt that he should not write poetry any more because the admiration and praise that he might enjoy

as a poet would be detrimental to his spiritual growth. So he decided not to write any more poems and there ensued a self enforced silence for seven years. He did not compose almost anything up to 1875. In a letter to R. W. Dixon Hopkins wrote in 1878: "...I meant that it [fame] is a great danger in itself, as dangerous as wealth every bit, I should think, and as hard to enter the kingdom of heaven with" (Hopkins *Poems and Prose* 183). And it is almost the same view that Tagore held as far as the reputation of a poet is concerned. Although he never allowed his poetic career to suffer a break like that of Hopkins we may, at this point, take note of Tagore's view on this. In a letter, dated 20th September, 1921, written to E. J. Thompson, who was a professor of English at Bankura Wesleyan Mission College, (presently known as Bankura Christian College) Tagore wrote:

Reputation is the greatest bondage for an artist. I want to emancipate my mind from its grasp not only for the sake of my art, but for the higher purposes of life, for the dignity of soul. What an immense amount of unreality there is in literary reputation, and I am longing...to come out of it as a 'sanyasi', naked and aloof. (*A Difficult Friendship* 132-133)

In a way Tagore was a 'sanyasi' and he did achieve a kind of poetic 'nirvana' in his mature life when praise or adverse criticism did not affect him.

III

A close look at a number of Hopkins's poems shows that the treatment of nature is reminiscent of the romantic tradition, particularly the Keatsian tradition. The sensuous appreciation of nature and her objects, the pictorial details, the use of words for their sonorous effects—all these are features of romantic poetry. I would like to quote here the first couple of lines from a poem "The Windhover", by Hopkins. The poem was composed in 1877, the most prolific year in Hopkins's poetic career, and talking about the poem in 1879 in a letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins himself said that the poem was "the best thing I ever wrote" (85). The poem begins thus:

I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-
dawn-drawn falcon
In his riding.

The windhover, as described by the poet in the above lines, is a feast for the eyes. The bird is described as the favourite of morning, the crown prince of day. The dawn is multicoloured and the falcon is attracted by the beauty of the morning. The compound "dapple-dawn-drawn" reminds one of Keats. Walford Davies, one of the editors of Hopkins, rightly points out that "The bird is attracted by the dawn, certainly; but it is also pictorially 'drawn', being outlined vividly against the dawn light. And we suddenly realize that it is a poet who was also an artist" (Hopkins *Major poems* 24). Side by side with such sensuous description of nature the reader is struck by the brilliant use of alliteration and consonant chiming in the poem. The repetition of the "m" and "d" sound in the first and second lines respectively create a sonorous effect. Side by side in the first line

the “ing” endings create an effect of consonant chiming. In fact the word “kingdom” has been deliberately broken in the middle by the poet keeping “king” in the first line and taking “dom” to the second for creating a sonorous effect. Hopkins always wanted his poems to be read aloud. In one of his lecture notes entitled “Poetry and Verse” included in his *Journals* Hopkins wrote:

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. (389)

Coming to Tagore’s use of words in his poems we may take note of what Ezra Pound said in this connection. Pound wrote:

The appearance of *The Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* is...very important, [but] I am by no means sure that I can convince the reader of his importance. For proof I must refer him to the text. He must read it quietly. *He would do well to read it aloud*, for this apparently simple English translation has been made by a great musician, by a great artist who is familiar with a music subtler than his own. (qtd in Dasgupta 12-13) (Emphasis mine)

In many poems of *Song Offerings* we find the beautiful use of alliteration adding to the total effect of the poem. For example in the first stanza of poem no 6 (from *Gitanjali*) the poet writes: “ছিন্ন করে লও হে মোর / আর বিলম্ব নয়। / ধুলায় পাছে বারে পড়ি / এই জাগে মোর ভয়।” And the English translation reads: “Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not / I fear lest it **d**roop and **d**rop into the **d**ust.” Such examples can be multiplied; for example one may refer to poem nos. 33, 35, 38, 44, 45, 46 and many others. In the famous poem no. 35 the Bengali original begins with the following words: “চিত্ত যেথা ভয় শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির / জ্ঞান যেথা মুক্ত?...” and the corresponding English translation is—“where the mind is without fear and the **h**ead is / **h**eld **h**igh; where knowledge is free....” And again in the same poem the two lines “যেথা তুচ্ছ আচারের মরুবালুরাশি / বিচারের স্রোতঃপথে ফেলে নাই গ্রাসি, are translated thus: “Where the clear stream of reason has not lost / its way into the **d**reary **d**esert sand of **d**ead habit.” Talking about the alliterative beauties of Tagore’s verse Taraknath Sen points out that the alliterative wealth of Sanskrit and Vaisnava poetry was one possible influence on the poet. According to him Tagore’s “acquaintance with Sanskrit” contributed to the magnificence of Tagore’s style in verse and prose. (257)

Tagore’s poems dealing with the beauty of nature speak of the rich sensuousness and often the pictorial quality of these poems strikes us with wonder. In the English poetry of the Victorian period one important characteristic was abundance of word pictures. Tagore’s famous poem, “*Black Beauty*” gives a pictorial description of the girl whom Tagore calls the ‘black beauty.’ The first stanza gives us the impression of the girl in a concrete manner:

লক্ষকলি আমি তারেই বলি,
কালো তারে বলে গায়ের লোক,
মেঘলা দিনে দেখেছিলেম মাঠে

কালোমেয়ের কালো হরিণ চোখ।
 ঘোমটা মাথায় ছিলো না তার মোটে,
 মুক্তবেণী পিঠের পরে লোটে।
 কালো? তা সে যতই কালো হোক
 দেখেছি তার কালো হরিণ-চোখ।

I call her Black Blossom, though the folk
 Down in the village simply call her dark.
 On a cloudy day, I saw her in the fields,
 Dark girl with dark doe-eyes.
 Her hand was bare, her slack
 Ungathered hair tumbled along her back:
 What if she's dark? However dark she be,
 Her dark doe-eyes I did see

(Translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri)

As we read the lines we feel as if we are visualizing the girl before our eyes. The description reminds us of D. G. Rossetti's famous Pre-Raphaelite poem "The Blessed Damozel" where Rossetti pictorially describes the damozel in every detail. In a poem entitled "A-no" ("Ashes") from the anthology, *Lôfe; (Kalpana)* we have brilliant examples of word pictures. One such example can be found in these lines: "নামে সন্ধ্যা তন্দ্রালসা, সোনার আঁচল খসা / হাতে দীপশিখা / দিনের কল্লোলখণ্ড-*fI V;e cm* *Teouil / Oe kh@eL;Z*" "The drowsy evening comes / Her golden cloth has slipped off her shoulder, / She has a lamp in her hand / Over the din of the day a thick curtain is drawn/ By the call of the cricket." (Translation mine) The advent of evening is compared to a lady, who is the personification of sleepy indolence. Her dress is disheveled and the golden colour of her dress is suggestive of the colour of the parting rays of the sun. She is having the evening lamp in her hand while the call of the cricket is metaphorically compared to a curtain gradually falling on the day. Incidentally it may be mentioned here that Rabindranath praised Jibanananda's poem "মৃত্যুর আগে" for the beauty of its word pictures. Another of Tagore's poem "হপ্;" ("Basanta") included in the anthology *Kalpana* is remarkable for its rich sensuous description of the spring season. The first stanza of the poem is quoted below:

Ak@ h@sar Age, he basant, pratham falgune
 j s L@hmf
 f;bm yedin xuli nandner dskhin duyar
 marte ale chli,
 AL0j;it daid@hile manber kutir prangne
 f;la;@l fl,
 Eam; E@rri h@te E@h@y@ Unmad pbne
 j;@;l j;@;l
 dle dle narnari chute al gh@har xuli
 laye b@ga benu-
 matiya pagal nutye hasiya kabil hanahati
 chude pushpa le#

Many years since, O Spring, during the first Falgun
 When opening the southern portals of Nandan
 You made your maiden appearance on this earth
 With crazy enthusiasm,
 Stopping suddenly by the courtyard of the humans
 Wearing your green dress,
 Scattering in the wild wind the amaranth buds
 From your impatient scarf
 Men and women carrying lute and lyre
 Came running out of their homes in great numbers
 Dancing madly and smilingly attacking each other with pollen.
 (Translation mine)

The poem describes the joy of the world at the advent of spring—the season of bright flowers. The use of alliteration in the line, *Eamí Eubrí háte EsíCuí Eanáid pabne / jʰcɪl jʰʂɪf* - add to the sense of mad rush of wind which blows the flower buds: The lines speak of the poet's spontaneous response to the arrival of spring and his keen sensitivity to the vernal beauty of nature. Hopkins also wrote a poem entitled "Spring." The octave of the poem describes with warm sensuousness the beauty and freshness of the spring season:

Nothing is so beautiful as spring
 When weeds in wheels, shoot long ad lovely and lush;
 Thrush's eggs look like low heavens and thrush
 Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
 The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
 The glassy pear tree leaves and blooms, they brush
 The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
 With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

It is not difficult to feel the immediacy of the poet's experience in his depiction of the sights, sounds and colour in nature. In both the poems quoted above the happy rapidity of movement is suggested by appropriate words. The resonance of alliteration in Hopkins's poem, like that in Tagore, adds to the beauty of the poem. The flowers of the wild weeds blossom along the stem in a manner that the plant looks like a spoked wheel. In line the simile indicates that the colour of the thrush's egg is blue and the thrilling note of the bird's song is aptly captured as the poet compares it to the "lightnings." The pear tree is covered with white flowers and budding leaves and is almost touching the descending blue sky. In the meadow the lambs also are enjoying the season. As one reads the lines one becomes aware of a picture hanging before him, as it were.

Both Tagore and Hopkins discerned the glory of God in the world of created things. In poems like "God's Grandeur", "Pied Beauty", Hopkins says that that the world is an outward manifestation of the magnificence of God and as such its purpose is to praise God. Whenever Hopkins observes the beauty of the created universe he recognizes the shaping hand of God behind it: "I feel thy

finger and find thee” (line 8 “The Wreck”). The impassioned feeling roused by minute observation helps Hopkins to integrate the artist with the priest, or in other words, the physical and the spiritual. In “God’s Grandeur” the poem begins thus: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;” the world is the world of nature, the world of created beauty which is pervaded by the power of God; but the power is latent and it may reveal itself any moment in the manner of the sudden flash of lightning. Tagore’s view of the immanence of God is very much similar to that of Hopkins:

...If ever I have somehow come to realize God, or if the vision of God has ever been granted to me, I must have received the vision through this world, through men, through trees and birds and beasts, the dust and the soil. (qtd. in Radhakrishnan xix)

Tagore’s poem “আনন্দ লোকে মঙ্গলালোকে বিরাজ সত্যসুন্দর” (“O Thou truth and beauty dwell in this world of joy and hallowed light”) also speaks of the immanence of God in the world. The spirit of truth and beauty stands for God. The rest of the lyric goes like this:

মহিমা তব উদ্ভাসিত মহাগগনমাঝে
বিশ্বজগৎ মণিভূষণ বেষ্টিত চরণে।।
গ্রহতারক চন্দ্রতপন ব্যাকুল দূতবেগে
করিছে পান, করিছে স্নান, অক্ষয় কিরণে।।
ধরণী পরে বারে নির্বরি, মোহন শুধু শোভা
গহ্বরি-নান্দ-পল্ল-বরণে।।
বহে জীবন রজনীদিন চিরনূতন ধারা,
করণা তব অবিশ্রাম জনম মরণে।।
স্নেহ প্রেম দয়া ভক্তি কোমল করে প্রাণ,
কত সান্ত্বন করে বর্ষণ সন্তাপহরণে।।
জগতে তব কী মহোৎসব, বন্দন করে বিশ্ব
শ্রী সম্পদ ভূমাস্পদ নির্ভয়শরণে।।

The grandeur of thee is revealed in the vast sky
At thy feet lies encircled the gem like world
Tha planets and stars, the moon and the sun in restless speed
Are drinking and bathing in thy eternal rays.
On this earth is shed the fountain of thy fascinating sweet radiance
Flowers and twigs, song and scent bid thee a sweet welcome.
Life flows day and night with eternal freshness
Thy grace is continually showered in birth and death.
Affection and love, mercy and devotion make life endearing
Thy shower of consolation takes the grief away.
The universe is singing of thy great fest in the world
The wealth of beauty, the world’s abundance rests safe in thee.
(Translation mine)

The whole universe including the world of created beauty is pervaded by the power of God. Both Tagore and Hopkins practiced a theocentric aestheticism. They felt that God is not merely the creator; he is also the force behind each and

every object of nature. It is this kind of a religious revelation that both of them speak about in poem after poem and it is this awareness that endowed them with the responsibility to proclaim that all great art is praise of God, who is the author of all creation.

IV

I started by pointing out that there was no proof of Tagore's acquaintance with the poems of Hopkins; but Tagore was familiar with many a Victorian poet who include D. G. Rossetti, his sister Christina Rossetti, Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne. There was some correspondence between Robert Bridges and Tagore and one must not forget that it was Bridges who edited the first volume of Hopkins's poems when it was published in 1918. Hence although there is no concrete evidence that Tagore was acquainted with the poems of Hopkins, it may be conjectured that such a possibility is not altogether a remote one. According to E. J. Thompson

Tagore (though his work,... came to judgement in the age of the First World War and of T. S. Eliot) as a writer was the contemporary of the later Tennyson and Browning and of Robert Bridges. In fairness, he must be judged as the Victorian poets are judged..." (vii).

I also feel that Tagore is more a Victorian than a poet to be grouped with any British poet of the modern period.

**This article contains some Bengali texts and to view them the Bengali font Amar Bangla Normal needs to be installed locally.*

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