

# An Eriksonian Interpretation of Few Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore

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## Abstract

Creation of Rabindranath Tagore is a glorious archive of creative self. The present study aims to interpret some poems of Rabindranath Tagore from Eriksonian viewpoint (Erikson1950). It includes psychological interpretation of few aspects of Tagore's life as the background of this narrative study. The poems of last eight years of his life (total number of poems 41) were collected from *Shanchayita* (Tagore 1941, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition) and interpreted by two psychologists. Findings indicate that along with the wisdom, the reflection of other ego strengths, namely, hope, fidelity, love and care are also evident in those. Ritualism namely, idolism is also evident in few poems.

[**Keywords:** Erikson, Freud, psychological, Ritualism, idolism, childhood]

The term narrative carries many meanings and is used in variety of ways by different disciplines. Briefly by a narrative a speaker connects events into a sequence i.e., consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants to take away from the narrative. (Riessman 2008) Narrative includes drama, comedy, mime, painting, cinema, autobiography, diaries, archival documents, and, any form of art. Poetry wants to express a purpose, a meaning. If the nature of a poem is analysed, different forms are found. Sometimes it lights upon the language, some times it focuses upon the feeling components. So, roughly it is a blending of a cognitive and an affective part and jointly it makes a connective effort to express the purpose of the poem. But we must remember that these all are nothing but a play of mind.

Poems could be considered as the continuous overflow of spontaneous feelings. The source of this continuous overflow of feelings is the creative self. The essence of self involves integration of diverse experience into a unity. Narrative enables us to describe these experiences and to define ourselves in constructing a personal narrative, and individual selection of certain aspects of his/her life help in connecting them with others. These processes enable us to assert that individual's life is not a disconnected sequence of events but have a certain order (Murray 2008). This process of narrative identity formation is dynamic and occurs in changing social and personal context. The value attached to different experiences in that context influences the character of events recalled and thus the shape of the story told.

At present, contemporary socio cultural environment is facing an enormous value conflict, which might be the groundwork for the emergence of new definition of cultural constructs. At this juncture, each and every self would get benefit from his or her archival documents. Newly developed selfhood of the society could be enriched with the analyses of these archives. Rabindranath Tagore himself and all his creations are the glorious archive of creative self. So, any kind of searching for selfhood will be enlightened with the reinterpretation of his writings which in turns will help in developing coping resource to deal with life crises more adequately.

Rabindranath Tagore could be considered as a volcanic source of research. Among different research articles from India, some of the main contributors are Halder (1931), Bhattacharya (1997, 2000), Debnath (2000), Paul (1885), who have emphasised their area of focus on complexity of the personality, perception, waves of interpersonal interactions, source of inspirations, poetic analysis of his creations etc. Dasgupta (2004) analysed the life of Rabindranath as a poet. Among several research works they have mainly highlighted how the writings of Tagore had been influenced by his life, i.e., biography and literature have been studied in a complementary basis. Another research work by Quayam (2005) focused on Tagore's novel *Ghore Baire (The home and the world)*. It is regarded as an exploratory work.

Researcher from abroad like Bharucha (2006) wanted to focus on the relationship dimension of Tagore. The work of Dutta and Robinson (1997), based on selection on some three fifty letters spanning Tagore's entire life, is also a novel attempt. A research work was conducted by Biswas (2003) in a new direction and the outcome of it evolved round thoughts of Rabindranath and Freud. He has highlighted the similarities and dissimilarities of Tagore's opinion regarding Freudian thought, which gradually changed from the position of severe criticism to an almost complete rejection of appreciation, especially of its good use in literature and literary criticism. On the basis of literature it may be said that analyses of the poems in the context of the events of his life are very few. Psychoanalytical studies are mainly done in the field of literature and are mostly done from Freudian perspective. Researches from other psychoanalytical viewpoint are almost absent in analysing Tagore.

The present study aims to interpret the some of Tagore's poems from Eriksonian viewpoint. Still today, the psychosocial theory of Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994), a famous psychoanalyst, is a treasure for assessing personality. It consists of some inevitable psychosocial crises and some sequences. It is a process of interaction, which helps to create strong ego strength and a positive way of interpreting the life as a whole. And, it ranges from birth to death.

In focusing on the above concepts, the present study is a modest attempt to correlate this theory with the life of Tagore on the basis of his poems. Without describing at least some aspects of his life from the psychological perspective it

would be a baseless attempt to interpret his poems as a reflection of personality development. Hence, the present study has been conducted into two steps- first to describe briefly his life from the psychological perspective which has been done by the researchers on the basis of existing literature and overall understanding of dynamic psychology; and second to interpret his few selected poems from Eriksonian angle.

### **Life of Rabindranath Tagore from psychological perspective**

In his entire life span Rabindranath was confronted with several deaths of near and dear ones. In his adolescence, he encountered death for the first time with the loss of his mother. Initially, when he lost his mother (1875), he became very upset but gradually he identified his mother's love with the nature. This is an example of the extended self of the poet and through this identification he could enjoy the mother's love in spite of her physical absence.

In 1884, when he lost another closest one, his Natun Bouthan (sister-in-law), he became disappointed. This was the second experience of death for Rabindranath. He was then twenty-four years old. This experience created a tremendous impact on his philosophy of life which had been reinforced by several other death experiences, like his wife (1902), father (1905), son (1903), daughters (1907, 1918) and other deaths of close persons.

Theoretically, in case of any attachment, ego invests its total energy in that love object. But when this love object dies or gets detached, then ego experiences a loss as Freud mentions by the loss of ego (Freud 1917). Though the pain of separation is unbearable, it becomes faded with the time. Slowly he becomes quite and calm. As his ego exerts a tremendous effort to get rid from the depression, the negative force gradually diminishes. He slowly understands the inner meaning of eternity (Basu 2008). Progressively, growth of personality occurs— the individual starts perceiving life in more matured way.

Rabindranath confronted an internal dilemma in the face of the interfering death and continuation of life. This conflict made him standstill. As a result he looked for the worth of life. He sublimated his agony in a positive and healthy way. Though he lost his love objects many a time, a positive approach of life helped him to regain the faith of life with new inspirations. Again and again he was able to substitute his love object and push the libido onto the newly found loved object. For this reason he generated his integrated self. Thus the self-content integrity ultimately became the cardinal trait of his old age. Integrated self which is a cumulative result of the developmental process is characterised by wisdom.

### **Eriksonian interpretation of few poems of Rabindranath Tagore**

For the present study, Tagore's poems of the last eight years (total number of poems = 41) were selected from *Sanchayita* (Tagore 1941) and were interpreted by two psychologists. Discussions of only those findings are included here. Total process of interpretation included the following steps:

Step 1: Selection of narratives / poems

Step 2: Reading of those narratives / poems.

Step 3: Overall meaning of the narratives and various issues to be identified.

Step 4: Interpretation with the help of Eriksonian Theory of Personality. (Erikson 1950)

### **Interpretation of selected poems**

Wisdom is such a quality, once achieved, becomes the king of the world of happiness. It is an ultimate expression of all positive qualities. It is like a mystery of life that no one can see or possess. It is a matter of perception. It is such a feeling that it can easily change one's meaning of well-being. From an existential or spiritual aspect it is regarded as the highest position of the life cycle. In this stage one basically uses his maximum intelligence for his well being in a most positive manner. It is a process of unfolding his knowledge to give the light to his soul and his generation too. At that stage all materialistic needs become meaningless. He becomes more mature by that time. So, automatically, his attention shifts to his basic roots, values and meta-cognitive queries.

Chronologically this is the last stage of life. But every human being is a unique one. Though theoretically wisdom comes in old age but the preparation may get started from the earlier phases. It depends on the psychosocial experiences and the exposure of the life. And it also depends on the way of receiving those experiences on the background of his philosophy of life. Due to these reasons maturity varies from person to person irrespective of the age.

In Eriksonian theory (Erikson 1950), we achieve the highest quality in terms of an epigenetic principle. So, it is assumed that when one achieves this highest stage, he should have achieved other qualities and surely could overcome the primary crisis adequately. But practically, we observe that the crisis might not be resolved completely. It may leave some residue. So, many a time, partly resolved crises may rise to the surface level. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore is not an exception. It is evident from his life and his developmental process that he had tremendous ego strength and it was also true that he confronted the entire crisis in a unique way but it is assumed that the crises were partly resolved.

If we look into some of his poems of the old age, we can distinguish the variations. Sometimes it reflects a complete mature self where wisdom is vividly understandable, and somewhere, we see that there is an expression of despair i.e., a loss of hope; again sometimes idolism is prominent. So, at the same time

we can perceive a contradiction, for an example in 1938, when he was seventy-seven years old he wrote *Janma-din* (1941), *Bodhū* (1941), *Śyāmā* (1941), *Śrādhya* (1941), etc. A complete wisdom is present in *Janma-din*, *Śrādhya* etc. In *Śrādhya*, he represented a picture of his whole life. He perceived it like a drama where every actor participated and played different roles in life. Total cycle was painted with positive and negative colours, and ups and downs. This flow is a symbol of life. Without this, nobody could understand the essence of life. So, everybody should confront with his or her situation to get a real and colorful picture of life. But in *Bodhū*, or *Śyāmā*, he depicted his childhood experience. He remembered his near and dear ones. In '*Bodhū*, he portrayed his '*Natun Bouṭhan*'. An experience, which he wrote in *Reminiscences* (Tagore 1917) regarding his '*Natun Bouṭhan*', also supports the content of *Bodhū*. He wrote when Kadamvari devi became his *Natun Bouṭhan*, he was too young. Gradually, he became closer to her and their formal relationship turned towards the informal friendship. But those nice days did not last long. Here the poet said that till then she was moving around alone in the universe. An expression of 'idolism' is present here, which is the core pathology of the phase of basic trust vs mistrust. In his other writing '*Maraṇ*' (Tagore 1941), which was written in his young age, there was also an expression of 'Idolism'. So, we can say that the partly unresolved crisis was still carrying its impressions but the expression was changed. It became more matured and integrated. Romanticism in early life was not present and the expressions were changed due to the experience of his age.

On the contrary, when he wrote '*Rūpkathā*' in (Tagore 1941), he was seventy-seven years old. He fantasised a world, which is unknown and mysterious. On this context he wrote, 'there are two different worlds - life and death'. He started preparing himself to accept his death and he was ready to go to that other world. In his mind he received a representation of that mysterious world. That inquisitiveness made him to take positive approach towards that unknown world. At the same time, he welcomed his death gloriously. Thus, this is an absolute picture of graceful aging. Furthermore, it is very much surprising that how easily he could overcome his separation anxiety and get ready to surrender him to that unknown world. A similar type of poem he wrote in 1940 was *Sangsārer Prānto Jānālāy* (1941). In this poem the expression was different and he wanted to say that the days were numbered and he was to leave. He has described the preparation of that journey and how gracefully he was waiting to receive his death. It is the expression of wisdom. In *Āmār Diner Seṣ Chāyāṭuku*' which he wrote in 1940 at the age of seventy-nine a reflection of wisdom along with generativity was painted with the beautiful color of life. Here he wanted to be immortal, wanted to remain alive. But at the same time he realized that days were approaching towards death and he became ready for another long journey to the unknown world. But before that he wanted to do something for the people of next generations, which would keep him alive in the world.

In 1940, he wrote *Joper Mālā* (1941) where he expressed his desire to be free and to retire himself from all his activities. Here he reminisced his past sweet memories and he became emotional for the fact that his near and dear ones who are no more in this world. He felt that everyone finished their responsibilities and left him alone. Hence, the poet has nothing to do but remember them, and it reflects a sense of despair and a loss of hope. The same concept is expressed in “Ghaṅṭā Bāje Dūre” (1941), where he represented himself as a loser. He expressed himself as if, he lost everything pleasurable. He desired to possess his lovely past days but failed to do so. He became depressed. From these two poems a sense of despair is reflected.

A degree of despair is present in “Prathamdiner Sūryo” (1941), but the touch of feeling is different. Here the poet is searching for the metaphysical meanings of his life. But he could not get his satisfaction with the result. The feeling of despair is also expressed in this poem but the nature is not alike. Here, identity confusion is also present. He was not satisfied with the answer of ‘self’. So, here a confusion within his fidelity appeared which was more evident in his earlier writings.

Other two contemporary poems ‘Smarāṅ’ (1941) and ‘Āmār Diner Śeṣ Chāyāṭuku’ (1941) are of same content. In ‘Smarāṅ’ hope, will and fidelity were found to be of extreme nature. Likewise, ‘Āmār Diner Śeṣ Chāyāṭuku’ the poet did not want to lose his life and tried to remain alive in everything within the world. But a question arises automatically in this respect that how long it would be possible to remain alive in the world. The answer appears quite vague to him. But the wish to live more is strongly present. Thus it appears that sometimes the poet became immature and sometimes became very wise. Interestingly, this variation is found in his last phase of his life. Sometimes he wanted to avoid facing the truth and sometime he greeted smilingly the harsh truth of life. In ‘Rūp Nārāyaner Kūle’ (1941), when he was around 80 years of age, he showed extreme fidelity. Here he realised that death is the ultimate and it brings a new dimension to existence. Though sometimes truth is very much harsh but the ability to accept that harshness is the essence of life. The same concept is also seen in ‘Tomār Sṛṣṭir Poth’ (1941). It is almost one of the last few writings of his life where he admitted the eternal phenomenon that the truth is always beautiful. These two contemporary poems reveal his depth of experience and wisdom.

The most authentic way of manifesting maturity is sublimation. One who can sublimate his distress through his creation he becomes one of the most creative persons in the world. Undoubtedly Rabindranath was an exceptionally resourceful person, one who could sublimate his love towards the nature. He was able to identify nature with his mother’s love or love object. Whenever he became depressed he searched his peace in nature, like in a mother’s lap. By this process he could overcome the phases of crisis easily. In ‘Khule dāo dwār’, written in 1940, a full expression of extended self is present. In this poem he sublimates his love towards nature. He perceived ‘nature’ as a source of peace

and happiness, he wanted to get absorbed within it, and hence symbiotic relation of mother and child could be maintained. Here expressions of hope, love, and integrity are maximally present.

In the last few years' writings it is also noticeable that he shifted his attention towards the unnamed people or mass who contribute to the world silently and anonymously. He expressed respect for the workers and the work. He paid them respect through his writings 'Oikotān' (1941), 'Muktobātāyan Prānte' (1941), 'Orā Kāj Kore' (1941). In 'Oikotān' he said that as a result of his experience, his perception regarding the concept of life touched the reality. Here the sublimated and integrated person focused himself on the world's prosperity with immense generativity. Self-orientation had been shifted to the searching happiness within the grassroots mass. Here the name 'Oikotān', itself is very much important and apt because he found the touch of life within these unnamed people. The same concept is reflected in 'Orā kāj kore'. It reflects that the 'work' and the 'walk' must go on to bring the light of life. Wisdom intermingled with generativity is the essence of these writings. To conclude, in spite of the different miserable experiences Rabindranath could reach the point of ultimate personal growth where the acceptance of eternal truth of life was realized – wise integrated self emerged.

#### Note

All poems referred to here are from Shanchayita, 1941, 3rd edition.

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