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**The Seamless Web of Contradictions: Re-Reading Tagore's Essays through Postcolonial Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Humanism**

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**Abstract:**

Rabindranath Tagore occupies a paradoxical position in the canon of South Asian literature. Celebrated globally as a mystic poet and Nobel Laureate and yet consistently misread as a monolithic nationalist icon, his prose writings are often subordinated to his lyrical legacy. This paper undertakes a postcolonial re-reading of Tagore's essays, arguing that his defining intellectual characteristics, more specifically, ambivalence and non-conformity are not contradictions to be resolved but productive tensions that anticipate the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and third space, as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern consciousness. Drawing on Tagore's engagements with nationalism, caste, feminism, and East-West relations, the paper contends that his prose constitutes a critical site of resistance to both colonial ideology and the uncritical nationalisms of his contemporaries. It further argues that the institutional canonization of Tagore as a mystic-nationalist figure has systematically suppressed his more radical humanist and cosmopolitan interventions. The paper calls for a renewed, theoretically informed engagement with Tagore's essays that retrieves their disruptive political potential for contemporary readers.

**KeyTerms:** Postcolonial ambivalence, hybridity, non-conformity, vernacular cosmopolitanism, subaltern consciousness, anti-nationalism, caste critique, humanist universalism

**Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most celebrated and, simultaneously, most misappropriated writers in the history of world literature. The Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded in 1913, conferred upon him a global reputation that paradoxically narrowed the terms by which he was read: the Bengali poet-sage, the mystic laureate of the East, the author

of *Gitanjali*. This image, largely constructed through W. B. Yeats's influential introduction to the 1912 English edition and subsequently institutionalized by literary societies, postcolonial academies, and nationalist projects, has proven both enabling and deeply limiting. It has enabled Tagore's cross-cultural reception across continents while suppressing the plurality and dissonance of his intellectual voice, particularly as it manifests in his essays and lectures.

The present paper undertakes a critical re-reading of Tagore's prose writings like his essays, lectures, and public interventions to argue that ambivalence and non-conformity are not incidental features of his thought but its animating energies. Far from being a serene sage who transcended politics, Tagore was a restless, dissenting intellectual who consistently refused the available ideological certainties of his time, the certainties of colonial Enlightenment, of Hindu nationalism, of Gandhian caste orthodoxy, and of anti-colonial populism. His essays constitute a critical archive of dissent that is best understood through the lens of contemporary postcolonial theory particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and hybridity and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of the subaltern and the limits of nationalist representation.

The critical literature on Tagore has grown considerably since his centenary celebrations in 2011. Scholars such as Michael Collins, Mohammad A. Quayum, and K. L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty have substantially complicated the picture of Tagore as nationalist icon. What remains underexplored, however, is the specific texture of his prose ambivalence and the way in which his essays simultaneously inhabit and subvert the dominant discourses of his time. It is this gap that the present paper addresses, attending to Tagore's essays not as repositories of philosophical wisdom but as performative sites of ideological contestation.

### **Ambivalence, Hybridity, and the Third Space**

The theoretical resources best suited to a re-reading of Tagore's essays are those developed within postcolonial studies in the decades since his death. Homi Bhabha's concepts of colonial ambivalence and the third space of enunciation, elaborated in *The Location of Culture*, offer a particularly productive framework. Bhabha defines ambivalence not as mere uncertainty but as "a controversial proposition"-the insight that colonial discourse, in its very attempt to fix the identity of the colonized, generates a "slippage" or excess that undermines its own authority. The colonized subject, in Bhabha's account, is never simply dominated; he or she inhabits a third space that is "neither the One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between" (Bhabha 53).

Tagore's essays enact precisely such a third-space dynamic. He cannot be placed straightforwardly within the binary of colonizer/colonized, nationalist/cosmopolitan, East/West. His writing consistently inhabits an in-between position, acknowledging the claims of each side while refusing the totalizing logic of either. This is not intellectual weakness or inconsistency, as his detractors from George Lukács to certain nationalist critics have charged; it is, rather, the condition of possibility for his most searching political thought. As Tuteja and Chakraborty observe in their *Tagore and Nationalism*, "Tagore's ambivalence towards nationalism as an ideology was apparent in the responses in his discussions with Indians and non-Indians alike" (7).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's intervention is equally relevant. Her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" alerts us to the ways in which elite nationalist discourse including the discourse of figures like Tagore himself may inadvertently silence the voices of those it purports to represent. Spivak's later essay "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" engages Tagore directly, recognizing in his work both a critical awareness of subaltern experience and the inevitable limitations of his *bhadralok*(elite) subjectivity. This double recognition of Tagore's political reach and his social situatedness is precisely the kind of nuanced reading the present paper advocates.

A third theoretical resource is Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, which Tagore's essays implicitly critique before the term was coined. Tagore recognizes that the nation is a cultural construction, but he goes further than Anderson by questioning whether such a construction, in the Indian context, can be other than an instrument of majoritarian domination. Recent scholarship by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Mohammad A. Quayum has further elaborated the ways in which Tagore's "vernacular cosmopolitanism" operates as a critical alternative both to narrow nationalism and to the "colourless vagueness" of Eurocentric universalism (Quayum, *Nationalism, Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism* 2020).

### **The Making and Unmaking of a Nationalist Icon**

Any serious engagement with Tagore's essays must begin by confronting the institutional history of his reception. In India and to a considerable extent globally, the canonization of Tagore as a nationalist icon was a deliberate and strategic process that took shape in the decades following independence. The postcolonial state's need for unifying cultural symbols, combined with the prestige of the Nobel Prize, made Tagore an indispensable representative figure. Academic institutions, literary societies, and spiritual organizations collaborated in stabilizing a Tagore whose universalism was subordinated to his Indianness, and whose political dissent was absorbed into a narrative of benign cultural nationalism.

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This process of iconization is itself a form of the ideological violence Tagore spent his career resisting. By fixing Tagore as the author of the national anthem and the laureate of Bengali culture, the postcolonial establishment performed precisely the kind of essentializing reduction that Tagore's essays consistently work against. As Sudipta Kaviraj has observed, Tagore's "peculiarity" lay in his ability to "observe critically the strange impulses that emerged from nationalist sentiment" (Kaviraj, qtd. in Collins 2022). To flatten this critical restlessness into nationalist iconography is to betray the very impulse that makes Tagore worth reading.

W. B. Yeats' role in this process is worth examining. Yeats' introduction to *Gitanjali* constructed an image of Tagore as a "wise and simple" sage who embodied the mystical East, a construction that served Yeats' own romantic orientalism as much as it served Tagore's reception. This image, enthusiastically reproduced by Western readers and later by Indian cultural nationalism, effectively suppressed the Tagore who wrote scathing analyses of British imperialism, who publicly quarreled with Gandhi over caste, who renounced his knighthood after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and who warned his Japanese audiences against the militarism of Asian nationalism. It is the recovery of this subterranean Tagore, the Tagore who was, in Federico García Lorca's memorable words, "closer to blood than to ink," that contemporary scholarship demands.

### **Nationalism as Menace**

The most sustained and politically consequential dimension of Tagore's essays is his critique of nationalism, a critique that was radical in his own time and remains provocatively relevant in the era of rising right-wing nationalisms across the globe. His series of lectures, subsequently published as *Nationalism* in 1917, constitutes one of the most remarkable anti-colonial texts of the early twentieth century: remarkable precisely because it refuses the consolation of anti-colonial nationalism as an answer to imperial nationalism.

Tagore's position is not, as his critics have sometimes caricatured it, a simple rejection of political organization or a quietist retreat into spirituality. It is, rather, a structural critique of nationalism as a form of power that privileges the spirit of patriotism over the essential quality of humanism. In his own words, nationalism is not "a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being," but a great menace which is "supremely dangerous to humanity" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 3). This formulation anticipates, in striking ways, the postcolonial critique of nationalism developed by Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and later Homi Bhabha, the insight that the anti-colonial movement risks reproducing, in its own organizational structure, the very forms of exclusion and domination it seeks to overthrow.

Tagore goes further by providing what amounts to a proto-Andersonian analysis of the contingent and constructed character of Indian nationhood: “India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity. I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity” (Tagore, Nationalism 105). This is not the voice of a political quietist; it is the voice of someone who understands that a nationalism built on cultural homogeneity and the suppression of internal difference will marginalize the communities—the Dalits, the Muslims, the peasants—who most need liberation.

Tagore was, as Collins has persuasively argued, alert to the dangers of what he called the “cult of the nation” and its tendency to generate a conformist and exclusionary politics that mistakes cultural particularity for universal truth. This is why he remained, throughout the independence movement, skeptical of Swadeshi chauvinism even as he supported the broader aspiration for political self-determination. His position was not anti-nationalist in the simple sense; it was, rather, what recent scholars have called a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Quayum 2020) an attempt to hold together the legitimate demands of cultural particularity and the imperative of universal human solidarity.

The response of George Lukács to Tagore’s *The Home and the World* illustrates the costs of this position. In his review, Lukács dismissed Tagore with extraordinary venom:

His creative powers are non-existent; his characters pale stereotypes; his stories threadbare and uninteresting; and his sensibility is meagre, insubstantial. He survives by stirring scraps of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita into his works amid the sluggish flow of his own tediousness. [...] The English bourgeoisie has reasons of its own for rewarding Mr. Tagore with fame and riches (the Nobel Prize): it is repaying its intellectual agent in the struggle against the Indian freedom movement. (Lukács 8)

Lukács’ critique is revealing: it demonstrates the impossibility, in a polarized political climate, of occupying the third space that Tagore’s essays inhabit. A position that refuses to endorse either colonial authority or anti-colonial nationalism will be read as complicit with the former by those committed to the latter. What Lukács cannot see and what his own political commitments blind him to is that Tagore’s refusal of easy anti-colonial solidarity is motivated not by complicity with the British but by a deeper solidarity with those whom nationalist politics itself tends to exclude.

### **Caste, *Varna*, and the Limits of Reform**

Tagore’s engagement with caste is perhaps the most striking instance of the productive ambivalence that characterizes his prose. His position on caste and the *varna*

system reveals both the progressive thrust of his humanism and the limits of his social situatedness as a member of the *bhadralok* limits that a Spivakian reading cannot ignore. In his public writings and debates, Tagore adopted positions on caste reform that were, in significant respects, more radical than those of Gandhi. While Gandhi supported the *varna* system with certain qualifications writing that “the law of *Varna* is intimately, if not indissolubly connected with birth, and the observance of the law of *Varna* means the following on the part of us all of the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty” (Gandhi, qtd. in Tagore, Selected Essays 78). Tagore consistently challenged the hereditary allocation of social roles as economically inefficient and humanly degrading. He saw the persistence of hereditary occupations as “destructive of an innovative quality of mind” and argued that the *varna* system, by assigning lowly occupations to some and elevated ones to others by birth, “restricted human freedom” (Tagore, Selected Essays 85). Tagore denounced untouchability as an abomination and recognized, with unusual clarity for his time and class, that the emancipation of the “depressed classes” (to use the terminology of the period) was inseparable from the political liberation of India. His argument had both an ethical and a strategic dimension: ethically, the treatment of fellow human beings as subhuman was a moral catastrophe; strategically, a nation that could not treat its own marginalized citizens with dignity had forfeited its moral right to demand dignity from its colonial masters. As he wrote in “The Future of India”: “So long as we, out of personal and collective ignorance, cannot treat our countrymen properly like men, so long as our landlords regard their tenants as a mere part of their property, so long as the strong in our country will consider it the eternal law to trample on the weak, the higher castes despise the lower as worse than beasts, even so long we cannot claim gentlemanly treatment from the English as a matter of right” (Tagore, Selected Essays 112).

Yet, as Kalyan Sen Gupta has documented in *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Tagore’s spiritual commitments complicated and sometimes contradicted his social critique. His deep fidelity to the Upanishad tradition, with its emphasis on the unity of Atman and Brahman, led him at times to aestheticize or spiritualize the very social structures he critiqued. Sen Gupta notes that while Tagore was receptive to the traditions of the Bauls, Sufis, Vaishnavism, and Buddhism, “it was always to the Upanishadic endeavour to relate everything to a single ultimate reality that he remained most faithful” (Sen Gupta 112). This fidelity occasionally issued in passages as in his essay “Nationalism” where the caste system is re-described as an expression of India’s “spirit of toleration,” a characterization that sits uneasily with his critiques elsewhere.

This internal contradiction is not a failure of thought but a manifestation of the structural ambivalence that Bhabha identifies as constitutive of the colonial subject’s

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position. Tagore cannot step entirely outside the ideological formation that produced him; his critique of caste, however genuine, is always also a negotiation with the tradition from which he draws his intellectual sustenance. What distinguishes him from his contemporaries is not the transcendence of this ambivalence but the honesty with which he inhabits and exposes it. Indeed, he was one of only two public figures of his era, the other being Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who openly challenged Gandhi's defense of the *varna* system, a courage that has been insufficiently acknowledged in mainstream Tagore scholarship.

### **East, West, and the Colonial Mirror**

A related dimension of Tagore's ambivalence concerns his treatment of the East-West binary. This binary was central to the civilizational discourses of his time and remains, in modified forms, active in contemporary global politics. Tagore's position, once again, refuses easy categorization. He is neither a cultural nationalist who idealizes Indian tradition and rejects the West, nor a *compradora* intellectual who defers to Western modernity. He inhabits the third space between these positions, using each to critique the other.

On the surface, Tagore may appear hostile to the West. But what he opposes is not Western civilization as such. He was a lifelong admirer of Goethe, Shelley, and Tolstoy but the West's imperialism and its exploitation of colonized peoples. At the same time, he refuses to valorize an Indian tradition that has its own internal oppressions. His critique of the East is as sharp as his critique of the West: he condemns the Indian propensity toward social rigidity, the vulnerabilities that enabled colonization, a lack of self-respect in the face of foreign domination, and a sometimes "bedazzled fascination" with everything Western. As he advises in his essays, the East must learn from the best of the West while remaining critically alert to both the costs of wholesale Westernization and the dangers of reactionary nativism.

This double critique carries significant political implications. Tagore recognized, with a prescience that has only become more apparent in the decades since his death, that a cultural politics built on the wholesale rejection of Western influence would inevitably harden into communal exclusivism. A declining of the West for an indigenous Indian tradition was dangerous, he warned, since it would result in hostility to other external influences including Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and above all Islam that had shaped Indian civilization over centuries. In this respect, Tagore's civilizational thinking anticipates not only postcolonial theory but also the contemporary critiques of Hindutva nationalism and its exclusionary versions of "Indianness."

Tagore's biographer Krishna Kripalani has noted that Tagore "loved his country and his people, but made no secret of the fact that he admired the British character more than the

Indian” (Kripalani 287). Coming from a quite different angle, Nirad C. Chaudhuri suggested that Tagore sought from the West “the kind of recognition he was missing at home” (Chaudhuri 214). Both observations illuminate the complexity of Tagore’s international positioning and his use of his global reputation as a platform from which to critique both colonialism and the failures of his own society. This is a form of what Spivak calls “negotiating with structures of violence”, the attempt to use the privileges afforded by one’s social position for progressive political ends, while remaining alert to the ways in which those privileges implicate one in the structures one seeks to critique.

### **The Subaltern Horizon**

The transformation of Tagore’s intellectual identity, from romantic-spiritual poet to committed humanist, is one of the most significant and under-examined aspects of his career. In the earlier phase of his writing, his concerns were primarily metaphysical and aesthetic: the mystery of the individual soul, the divine, the natural world. In the latter half of his career, however, and increasingly after the First World War and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, Tagore gave voice to the minds of the colonized and the oppressed and expressed his passionate desire to be identified with them.

This transformation is legible in the language of his later essays, which increasingly draws on the imagery of labor and material life: the tiller who tills the ground, the stone-breaker who lays the road, the peasants, weavers, and fishermen of Bengal. Tagore lamented what he called the “missing notes” of his flute, his inability, as a member of the educated elite, to fully inhabit the world of the rural poor. Yet he “struggled throughout his artistic life eagerly for the close-to-the-earth poet to give voice to the voiceless hearts” (Tagore, *Selected Essays* 210). This aspiration to speak with rather than for the subaltern is what distinguishes Tagore’s humanist turn from the paternalistic philanthropy of many of his contemporaries. It is worth noting, in this context, that Tagore’s vision of social transformation was fundamentally incompatible with the kind of state-centric nationalism that dominated the independence movement. For Tagore, social reform had to precede and underpin political liberation; a nation-state built on unreformed social hierarchies would merely reproduce, in indigenous form, the oppressions of the colonial state. This conviction led him to invest in education most notably through his experimental schools at Santiniketan and the rural reconstruction work of Sriniketan as the primary vehicle of social change. Recent scholarship on Tagore’s pedagogy, including Quayum’s edited volume on *Tagore, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism*, has begun to recover the political dimensions of this educational project. Yet, as Spivak’s framework reminds us, even the most sympathetic voice from the bhadralok cannot simply speak for the subaltern without risking a new form of appropriation. Tagore’s awareness of this risk expressed in his laments about the “missing notes” and his inability to break through the fences of class and education is itself a mark of his intellectual honesty.

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He does not pretend to have solved the problem of representation; he inhabits its difficulty. And even as he declared his unshaken faith in humanity, "I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man" (Tagore, Selected Essays 198) he recognized that such faith must be grounded in the material conditions of the dispossessed, not in an abstract humanism that floats free of social analysis.

### **Writing and Political Reality**

The present paper has argued throughout that Tagore's ambivalence is productive rather than symptomatic, a critical stance rather than a failure of commitment. But it is also necessary to acknowledge the genuine tensions and incompatibilities that Tagore himself recognized in his position. His essays are remarkable in part because they do not paper over these incompatibilities; they dramatize them.

The most fundamental of these incompatibilities is between the writer and the society. Tagore wrote in English as well as Bengali and his use of English, the language of the colonizer, as a medium for critiquing colonialism and constructing a universalist humanism was itself a form of the hybridity that Bhabha theorizes. His writings, as he recognized, reached audiences that the Bengali originals could not; but they also inevitably shaped and constrained what could be said. The ambivalence inherent in writing across linguistic and cultural boundaries occupying the third space of translation is inscribed in the texture of his essays.

The reception history of Tagore's work illustrates the political stakes of this ambivalence. His renewed significance after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 when his song "Amar Shonar Bangla" became the national anthem of the new nation is a striking instance of the way in which a cosmopolitan humanist was claimed, posthumously, for successive nationalist projects. Tagore the citizen of the world was given, ironically, a Bengali-nationalist rebirth. The Bengali identity that Tagore is associated with remains a hard shield to the unearthing of his universal personality.

This institutionalization of Tagore as a nationalist icon has had consequences beyond his own reception. By placing Tagore at the center of the Indian literary canon as a representative of universal Indianness, the postcolonial establishment has marginalized other equally significant and equally complex literary figures Subramania Bharathi, Vallathol Narayanan, and Subramania Bharathi and Bharathidasan, among others, whose contributions to regional literary traditions and to anti-colonial thought have been relatively neglected. The canonization of Tagore has, in other words, reproduced at the level of literary culture the very hierarchies of center and periphery that his essays so powerfully critique.

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**Re-Reading Tagore for the Contemporary**

The essays of Tagore, read through the theoretical lenses of postcolonial ambivalence, hybridity, and subaltern consciousness, reveal an intellectual whose significance for our contemporary moment is considerably greater than the image of the mystic-nationalist laureate would suggest. Tagore's refusal of ideological certainty, his capacity to inhabit contradictions without resolving them prematurely, and his insistence on the priority of humanism over nationalism-these are not weaknesses but the most durable resources of his thought.

In an era characterized by the resurgence of exclusionary nationalisms, the erosion of cosmopolitan norms, and the intensification of caste-based and communal violence, Tagore's critiques carry a renewed urgency. His warning that nationalism, unchecked by humanism and social reform, becomes a "menace" to humanity reads as prophetic in the context of twenty-first-century political developments across South Asia and beyond. His insistence on the inextricability of political liberation and social justice, on the necessity of dismantling caste hierarchy and gender oppression as conditions for genuine nationhood anticipates the most searching debates in contemporary Indian public life.

The task for readers and scholars is not to sanctify Tagore to reproduce the very mystification that has obscured his political thought but to read him critically and generously: attending to both the reach and the limits of his vision, both the radicalism of his dissent and the social situatedness of his subject position. A Tagore stripped of the unnecessary sanctity that distances the lay reader, a Tagore taken to the "rural pockets with simpler versions of his works," is also a Tagore whose essays can speak to the ongoing struggles for dignity and justice that he spent his career championing.

The essence of Tagore lies not in the mystical sublime of *Gitanjali* but in the restless, questioning, non-conformist intelligence of his prose, an intelligence that was, to invoke Lorca's tribute to Neruda, "closer to blood than to ink." It is this Tagore, the ambivalent humanist, the cosmopolitan dissident, the reluctant icon who deserves, and rewards, our most serious critical attention.

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