

Worlding Literature, Literary Cosmopolitanism and Tagore' *Visva Sahitya*

Sourav Kumar Nag

Abstract

The article contextualises Tagore's notion of Visva-Sahitya in the emerging field of World Literature. Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the only Indian writer who came forward with a new gesture to World Literature at the beginning of the 20th century. In a lecture delivered by him at the Indian National Council for Education in 1907 in Calcutta Tagore ushered literary cosmopolitanism. David Damrosch in the Preface of *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2005) maintains that the term "World literature despite being some two centuries old has turned into an emerging field with the recent turn towards globalization cosmopolitanism and transnationalism" (Damrosch 2005: xviii). The uneasy coexistence of the World Literature and the Comparative Literature presupposes the notion of planetarily (Spivak 2005: 71) to move beyond the idea of globalization and to critic the disciplinary organization of the study of literature (D'haen 2013: 207). The primary argument on which the present article navigates is that Tagore's idea of Visva-Sahitya is markedly different from what we call World Literature today.

Keywords : *Tagore, Visva-Sahitya, Dissemination, Archival, Pilgrimage*

The article contextualises Tagore's notion of Visva-Sahitya in the emerging field of World Literature. Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the only Indian writer who came forward with a new gesture to World Literature at the beginning of the 20th century. In a lecture delivered by him at the Indian National Council for Education in 1907 in Calcutta Tagore ushered literary cosmopolitanism. David Damrosch in the Preface of *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2005) maintains that the term "World literature despite being some two centuries old has turned into an emerging field with the recent turn towards globalization cosmopolitanism and transnationalism" (Damrosch 2005: xviii). The uneasy coexistence of the World Literature and the Comparative Literature presupposes the notion of planetarily (Spivak 2005: 71) to move beyond the idea of globalization and to critic the disciplinary organization of the study of literature (D'haen 2013: 207). The primary argument on which the present article navigates is that Tagore's idea of Visva-Sahitya is markedly different from what we call World Literature today.

The primary focus of the article is Tagore's notion of Visva-Sahitya and its significance in the contemporary debate on World Literature. With the emergence of transnational discourses, World Literature got its impetus in the current literary space. Said's theorisation of the world in terms of coloniser/colonised binary or Bhabha's notion of the third space evaporates with the embracing of transnational discourses that erase the partitionist propaganda and welcomes the formation of a global fraternity among all nations. The article has a tripartite structure. It begins by referring to the inception of the notion of World Literature in the early 19th century as Goethe put it as *Weltliteratur* and then moves on to offer a comprehensive reading of the emerging theories of World Literature and finally deals with Tagore's notion of Visva-Sahitya as an inclusive idea based on his spiritual faith on interpersonal relations and cosmopolitanism.

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, the eminent German writer and critic of the 19th Century first gave the clarion call for the dissemination of literature across the globe. He famously wrote in a letter to Johann Eckermann in 1827: "National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Damrosch 2014:19). In this very letter, he used the newly minted term *Weltliteratur*. The epoch of the world literature that Goethe predicted almost two centuries before is the present epoch of globalness which we live in. What did Goethe mean by *Weltliteratur*? Did he mean a text must travel beyond the geography of its origin? Its culture? Or its language? Back in the 19th century, it could only mean an extensive collection of books written by hundreds of writers from hundreds of places in hundreds of different languages. Claudio Guillen, quoted by Damrosch, quips at the very possibility of such archival heterogeneity and abundance as it is possible only with "a deluded keeper of archives who is also a multimillionaire" (Damrosch 2003:01). Suffering from the anxiety of influence of the Great European Writers, Shakespeare included, Goethe advocated decanonisation long ago the inception of the postcolonial studies: "Late in his account, he records Goethe's remark that "the daemons, to tease and make sport with men, have placed among them single figures so alluring that everyone strives after them, and so great that nobody reaches them" Goethe names Raphael, Mozart, Shakespeare, and Napoleon as examples" (Damrosch 2003: 02). Goethe's theorisation of World Literature as a transnational entity was implemented slightly modified in the university discipline of Comparative Literature that offers analogical interaction of literary texts while preserving their national, linguistic, and cultural originalities. The domain of Comparative Literature does offer comparative, intersectional reading of literary texts from different places of the world. World Literature, on the contrary, rubs out the dividing line between texts and welcomes a global fraternity of textuality and literariness. The methods for moulding a text into a World Literature are variegated. Generic themes, universal perspectives and translations are some of the possible means. Translation of a literary text meets challenges and ambiguities since the only available and 'global'

language we have is English. Translating texts into English, many assume, may generate linguistic hierarchy and discrimination.

In the 21st century, World Literature has gained an unprecedented impetus resting on the template of Anglophone Literature. World literature presupposes a double process for a literary work to acquire its global dimension; that the work must be 'literature' and that it must be circulated beyond its linguistic and cultural origin. For formulating World Literature, the word 'literature' needs to be analysed etymologically and semantically. Etymologically the term 'literature' was derived from the Latin root *litteratura* or *litteratura* that means both 'learning' and 'writing.' Broadly applied the term 'literature' means any written document. In this sense, a legal document, an advertisement, or the writings on a packet of biscuits amount to literature as much as the novels of D.H. Lawrence. The epistemological aspect of the term defines its literariness. Now the literariness of literature may rest on several elements such as language, culture, formal intricacies and so on. Though not as customary as the formal literariness demanded by the Russian Formalists, literature embodies its literariness, its uniqueness achieved with the help of language.

A few 'globelectic' (Thiong'o 2012) attitudes emerge in the post-1950s scenario that catapulted the provincializing (Chakrabarty 2008) of Eurocentric literature. Nevertheless, the irony of the worlding of literature seems to be rooted in the language question. If a work has to be 'worldly' it needs to be either written in a global language such as English or be translated into one such language. The debates surrounding Anglophone Literature threaten the crystallisation of World Literature per se. While Chinua Achebe defended writing in English since he has "no other choice" (Achebe 1976:125), challenged Achebe's claim in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986): "English, like French and Portuguese, was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African. people in the same nation and between nations in Africa and other continents. In some instances, these European languages were seen as having a capacity to unite African peoples against divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicity of African languages within the same geographic state" (Thiong'o 1987: 6-7). In *Globelectics* (2012) Thiong'o advocates the idea of cultural globalisation without any global centre: "the shape of the globe. On its surface, there is no one centre; any point on the surface is equidistant to it-like the spokes of a bicycle wheel that meet at the hub. Globelectics combines the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multi-logueÖ." (Thiong'o 2012: 08). Aamir R. Mufti in *Forget English!* (2016) quips: "The nationalization of languages over the past two centuries all over the world has been accompanied by the globalization of English" (Mufti 2016:146). The issue of translating a text in English for its inclusion in World Literature has resulted in controversies. English is still considered to be the language of the elite and therefore worlding a text by translating it in English justifies that a text becomes global only when it acquires elitist authentication.

David Damrosch maintains a tripartite definition of World Literature that it must embody 1. oviform refraction of national literatures; 2. Literature that goes beyond the national boundaries through translation and 3. A mode of reading beyond time and place. When a literary work survives the weal and tear of time and acquires the dimension of 'classic' it crosses the boundaries of language, culture and continents and is presented to the world in translations. Now the obvious challenge of translating work in a different language is to preserve its original essence. It's difficult to retain the cultural nuances that a language embodies while translating a work. Raja Rao in the Foreword of *Kanthapura* reiterates the difficulty of writing a regional novel, a *sthalapurana* in English:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien,' yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up (Rao 1967: 31).

In Rao, the problem, though, is not that of translation, yet his level of difficulty in transcribing his thoughts into 'an alien language' is conceivable. On the other hand, Spivak in *Death of Discipline* (2005) uses the term "planetarity" to suggest alterity among human beings: "The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan" (Spivak 2005:72). The notion of alterity moves beyond the threshold of the existing epistemological systems and embraces a broader spectrum of knowing beyond.

In a lecture on "The Literature of the Bengali People," delivered at the annual meeting of the Literary Council of Bengal in 1895, Rabindranath Tagore observed: "The word *sahitya* comes from *sahit*. Hence, Ö we find in the word *sahitya* the idea of union. It is not simply a union of idea and idea, language and language, book and book: nothing except *sahitya* or literature can establish deeply intimate ties between one person and another, between past and present, between far and near. The people of a country deficient in literature have no vital bonds to join them: they remain isolated" (Tagore 1919a: 179). Rabindranath Tagore spoke of Visva-Sahitya in a lecture he delivered at the Jatiya Sikhsa Parishad (the National Council for Education) in 1907 in Calcutta. Tagore used the word 'visva' to suggest a unitary body of all living organisms and the non-living objects integrally connected with the greater Consciousness (Brahman). Tagore's notion of collectiveness and inter-corporeality derived from the Upanishads and other religious and philosophical texts. Tagore named the educational institution Visva-Bharati that he founded on the tract of land given to him by Debendranath Tagore. In his "Visva-Sahitya," Tagore asserts that the only objective of man's intellect is to reach out to others. He categorises three types of interpersonal relations- 1. The connection of intellect 2. The connection of need and 3. The connection of joy. The

connection of intellect operates being confined to the ego. The connection of need is a connection of self-interest. It's the connection of joy that dissolves all differences: "...there remains no pride; we do not hesitate to give ourselves to the very small, to the weak. There the king of Mathura [Krishna] is at his wits' end trying to find a way to hide his royal dignity from the lowly milkmaid of Vrindavan where the connection is that of joy, we are not limited by the power of the intellect or the power of work: we only experience ourselves. There remains no cover or calculation in between" (Banerji et al. 2015: 278). Evidently, Tagore's theory of Visva-Sahitya is built upon the philosophical idea of spiritual cosmopolitanism. He observes that man can know himself easily in others. He can experience himself in others: "In this way, all that manifests itself so luminously on the outside, be that the Sun's bright rays or the brightness of a great character or the emotion of our hearts—whatever kindles our emotions from one moment to another, that, the heart entwines in a creation of its own and clings to as its own. In such instances it is the heart that expresses itself more and more concretely" (Banerji et al. 2015: 281).

The formulation of Tagore's spiritual cosmopolitanism is closely associated with his voyages. Tagore's travel diaries later published under titles *Europe Jatrir Diary* (*The Diary of a Wayfarer to Europe*), *Paschim Jatrir Diary* (*The Diary of a Wayfarer to the West*), and *Java Jatrir Patra* (*Letters of a Traveller to Java*) testify to his cosmopolitanism. Disenchanted with the nationalist discourse, Tagore set out to explore distant lands, foreign cultures as he never wanted the freedom movements of India to emulate European nationalism. In a letter to Nirmalakumari Mahalanobis on 15 July 1927, he wrote: "We have embarked on this pilgrimage to see the signs of the history of India and to establish a permanent arrangement for research in this field" (Bose 2011). In his *On the Edges of Time*, Rathindranath wrote: "Father was an inveterate traveller. Even in his early life, he would not stay at home for long. He had then to satisfy himself with moving about within the limits of India, with only two brief visits to England" (Bose 2009:109). In 1912 Tagore commenced his oceanic voyages under the shadow of the First World War. Beyond India, he set foot first in Burma and then voyaged to Japan. Next, he crossed the Pacific Ocean to reach North America. From North America, he journeyed towards the East and reached Japan. Between 1924 and 1925 he crossed the Indian Ocean to reach Latin America in response to an invitation from the Peruvian Government. He visited Java in 1927. He described his voice to Java as a pilgrimage in his travelogue *Java Jatrir Patra* (*Letters of a Traveller to Java*). In 1932 he visited Iraq and Iran. In 1933 he visited Sri Lanka. This was the final voyage I undertook beyond his country. The oceanic voyages that Tagore undertook beyond India expanded his vision and helped him to understand the essence of life. Besides, Tagore's extensive study of the Upanishads and Indian philosophical schools such as Buddhism, Jainism and so on helped him formulate his cosmopolitan wisdom. Sugata Bose commented on Tagore's voyage to Java: 'Tagore's westward voyage in 1924–1925 had kindled an emotion that was to circumnavigate the globe, transcending all boundaries despite the challenges of literary and cultural translation' (Bose 2009: 245).

One of the most crucial elements in Tagore's philosophy is the knowledge of altruism. It is through self-giving that one knows oneself fully though there are hindrances such as pride and selfishness obstructing such altruistic dissemination (Paranjape 2018: 33). The readiness to move beyond one's oneself, to leave the cocoon of cogito to get mingled with the flow of lives, the effusion of light and joy is the key to the ontological wisdom of Visva-Sahitya:

To manifest the pride of her (of hriday-Lakshmi/heart goddess) reciprocal hospitality she fashions her tray of offerings with many ingredients, many languages, sounds, brushes, and blocks of stone [for carving]. In so doing, if any of her needs be served, well and good, but often, even at their expense, she is eager to express herself. She wants to display her lavishness even if the price is bankruptcy. Self-expression is that department in man's nature which is the chief site of incautious spending—it is here that the accountant of the intellect laments over his losses, striking his forehead in frustration (Banerji et al. 2015: 282).

Tagore's notion of Visva-Sahitya is quite different from what Goethe proposed as *Weltliteratur* or World Literature. Tagore's philosophy is neither confined to archival heterogeneity nor the global circulation of literature. In Tagore's philosophy, literature is the expression of the collective unconscious (Jung) or the feelings of Visva-Manav (the world man): "Therefore we see the similarity between this world-samsara and the human samsara (the macrocosm and the microcosm). God's truth and knowledge are manifest in the work of the world, and his joy is instantiated in the flavours of the world. It is difficult to grasp his wisdom through work, but there is no difficulty in experiencing his joy in the rasas. Because in these pleasures is He expressing himself" (Banerji et al. 2015:284). Tagore in his essay distinguishes between self-interest and self-expression. Literature is the ocean of self-expression that knows no limits or boundaries. It drowns the shores of self-interest with its rolling waves. Tagore's speech on Visva-Sahitya has already been pointed out before, advocates deliverance of self-expression beyond the precincts national cultural linguistic and personal boundaries. Tagore's visionary philosophy of Visva-Sahitya is quite different from the idea of world literature. Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig "The Directions of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*" criticises the idea of literature in the following words: at a critical juncture, when readers look to the most compelling range of works, world literature presents no more than an extensive archive of dead letters (Uhlig 2004: 27). The amorphous nature of World Literature as we understand it today leads to ambiguities among critics. René Wellek complains that World Literature is an unreliable guide because of its lexical ambiguity (Wellek 1970:15). World Literature is an offshoot of Comparative Literature. Visva-Sahitya rests on interpersonal, cosmopolitan relationships. The idea is to give away oneself to others, to disseminate one's feelings among others. His idea is spiritual and cosmopolitan:

All I have wanted to say is that just as the world is not merely the sum of your plough field, plus my plough field, plus his plough field—because to know the world that way is only to know it with a yokel-like parochialism—similarly world literature is not merely the sum of your writings, plus my writing, plus his writings. We generally see literature in this limited, provincial manner. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnectedness with every man's attempt at self-expression—that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to (Banerji et al. 2015: 288).

Tagore's theorisation does not encourage archival heterogeneity or the circulation of texts beyond the boundaries of language; instead, he views literature as a collective body, as an all-encompassing entity—a surplus that integrates the emotions of an individual with the generosity of the world. A text is a record of one man's integration with the world—the macrocosm beyond himself.

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Bio Profile of the Author:

Assistant Professor & Head, ~
Department of English,
Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya