Humanist Spirituality and Poetry: Rabindranath Tagore & George Herbert

Kitty Scoular Datta, Independent Scholar

Abstract:

This paper concentrates on how the growth of Rabindranath’s spiritual awareness is gradually revealed in his poetry from 1882 onwards, and in his prose lectures and novels, especially Gora and Chaturanga. Comparison of his devotional outlook with George Herbert’s (already present in the review of the English Gitanjali, Times Literary Supplement, 7 November, 1912) is further explored for the present. His sense of divine presence in the natural world and in the heart (jivan devata) is related to his social consciousness and his moderation, and transcended the ordinary thinking of his conflict-ridden times in both East and West, to present a continuing challenge to both religions and secularity in the post-colonial world.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, George Herbert, Gora, Chaturanga, spirituality, social consciousness, East/West
abindranath’s creative writing and his spiritual experience are so
closely related that one can hardly discover the heart of one without the
other; and while this is supremely true of an important part of his poetry,
there are also what could be called accounts of revelation in his fiction.
That is what this paper is about, and if I am going also to compare him
with a writer from another background, it is to point to parallel discoveries
they made.

My own first encounter with Indian literature was when I discovered of
Rabindranath’s own translations of his poetry as a Scottish mid-teenager,
which impressed me so much that I transcribed some of them, from the
English Gitanjali, in a notebook of my own long before going to live in Kol-
kata, studying the Bengali language and reading Tagore short stories and
poems for myself in 1958-9. George Herbert, whose poems I taught at
Jadavpur University, has had a recent splendid biography by John Drury
of All Souls College, Oxford, with the title Music at Midnight1, and on read-
ing it I was struck by the extent to which this late Renaissance figure and
Rabindranath shared insights in common, though arising from largely
different life-situations and religious traditions, so that setting them side-
by side might yield some value, especially in a post-colonial world where
faiths are in transit to what we hope is further mutual understanding.

Let us remind ourselves that the branch of the Tagore family to which
Rabindranath belonged were descendants of Dwarkanath Tagore, the im-
portant early nineteenth-century merchant-prince, industrialist, landown-
er, philanthropist, and beneficiary of India’s imperial rulers. He had been
involved in formation, with Raja Rammohan Ray, of the reforming Hindu
group, the Brahmo Samaj, with its reverence for the ancient scriptures, the
Upanisads, and its shedding of image-worship. As is well-known in India,
his son Devendranath, father of Rabindranath, withdrew from involvement
with the business-world, concerned rather with the development of his
country estates in eastern and western Bengal and with the provision of a
rural ashram-retreat for Brahmo Samaj devotees in the Birbhum coun-
tryside well beyond Kolkata with the name Santiniketan, meaning ‘abode of
peace’. Though Rabindranath did not settle into regular city schooling, he
was well versed through his father in the Upanisads and the Sanskrit and
Bengali classics. George Herbert, more obviously than Rabindranath, fol-
lowed expectations in his education at Westminster School and Cambridge
University as a classicist and junior member of the elevated Herbert family
headed by the Earl of Pembroke. Both young men entered early manhood
without much sense of purpose, were inclined to melancholy and self-
questioning, and gravitated towards care for their families’ country estates,
yet with interim political concerns, Rabindranath through his connection

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1 John Drury, Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert (London:
with non-violent moderates in the movement for independence from British rule. He articulated himself as a poetic voice of the new age, while founding his rural school at Santiniketan as a less formal Brahmo alternative to the western-style city schools he had disliked in Calcutta, and as one of many expressions of his care for country people, their welfare and their future. In his own way, Herbert’s withdrawal from city-life and his repair of family churches in the countryside expressed his distrust of Stuart pomp and power (he was an MP for only a year) and displayed his poetic talent in his sole book of English poems, published after his early death as *The Temple.*

His profoundest family influence was his widowed mother Magdalen Herbert, friend of John Donne, who preached her commemorative sermon. Though Herbert was ordained as a deacon of the Church of England in 1624, without a fixed church, he became a country priest in 1630, after his marriage. His most striking expression of his journey through university and court towards country priesthood is ‘The Pearl. Matth. 13’, from ‘I know the ways of learning; both the head| And pipes that feede the presse, and make it runne’, and ‘I know the ways of honour, What maintains| The quick returns of courtesie and wit’, to ‘I know the ways of pleasure, the sweet strains,| The lulling and the relishes of it’. Each stanza ends ‘Yet I love thee’, addressed to God; and the poem as a whole ends with

> I know all these, and have them in my hand:  
> Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes  
> I flie to thee...  
> Yet through the labyrinths, not my grovelling wit,  
> But thy silk twist sent down from heav’n to me,  
> Did both conduct and teach me, how by it  
> To climb to thee.

What connects these two men among their very different circumstances is a personal discovery of a spiritual life for their own times, while sharing a sense of the divine. It is well known that Rabindranath’s English *Gitanjali* translations—selected mainly from the Bengali *Gitanjali*, *Gitimalya* and *Naivedya* collections—, after an immediate admiring reception by British literati in 1913-14 and his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, were down-played by Indian critics for the narrow impression they give. Instead of being only a modern-day Indian sage, Rabindranath was multifaceted and also a lyricist-musician, dramatist, novelist, short-story-writer, essayist and painter. Yet Rabindranath consciously chose to appear this way to both western and far eastern audiences, as he lectured around the world to

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3 Herbert, *The Temple*, lxiv.
5 Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali (গীতাঞ্জলি)* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1913).
collect funds for his newly-founded ‘world university’, Visvabharati. Herbert, on the other hand, has remained a favourite Anglican poet, for his expression of the ‘middle way’ in post-Reformation England between Roman ritualism and Puritan economy, emphasising ‘inner and spiritual grace’ symbolised in sacramental celebration and beyond. So it may seem eccentric to link Herbert, to whom Rabindranath did not refer, with someone whose links are rather with the Wordsworth of The Prelude he quoted in The Religion of Man (from the Hibbert Lectures he delivered in Oxford in 1930):

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe,
Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,
And giv’st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion...8

Indeed, as Amit Chaudhuri has argued in the London Review of Books (20 April, 2006), Rabindranath suggested in his essay ‘The Religion of the Forest’ the influence of ‘the philosophy of India’ mediated through German writers on English Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley in their sense of nature’s harmonies.9

Yet in Herbert’s poem ‘The Flower’, the perception of natural change is already thoroughly intertwined with his inner transitions:

How Fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ...

Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivel’d heart
Could have recover’d greenesse? It was gone
Quite under ground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,...

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light,
It cannot be

That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.
These are thy wonders, Lord of love...

It is fascinating to set beside this Rabindranath’s first notable celebration of such an awakening in his poem composed in 1882 and translated in a later version in Sukanta Chaudhuri’s Poems as ‘The Spring Wakes from its Dream’. It begins ‘How have the sun’s rays in my heart! Entered this morning! How have the songs Of morning birds into the dark cave broken’, and later continues ‘When the soul is roused in gladness, | What are rocks and what is darkness? | What need I fear when longing surges so? | I’ll pour out my compassion: I’ll burst this rocky dungeon, I’ll break in flood, I’ll comb the world with my distracted song’. A later poem in this mode in Gitanjali is, in Tagore’s own English translation, ‘The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.’ These experiences are related to what Tagore described in the prose of Jibansmriti in the following terms, relating to the awakening of 1882: ‘The months of depression that had overcast my heart, layer on layer, were pierced in an instant; the light of the universe spread through my inner being’; and to such moments he returned in The Religion of Man:

The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind; and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man. The poem that I wrote on the first day of my surprise was ‘The Awakening of the Waterfall’. The waterfall, whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation, was touched by the sun and, bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea. After four days the vision passed away, and the lid hung down on my inner sight. In the dark the world once again put on its disguise of the obscurity of an ordinary fact.

His interpretation of such significance took some time to articulate itself clearly in the sense that

some Being that comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art. To this Being I was responsible, for

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10 Herbert, The Temple, cxxxiv.
12 Ibid., p.45-6.
13 Gitanjali, lxix, from Naivedya, xxvi.
15 Tagore, The Religion of Man, p.92.
the creation in me is his as well as mine. It may be that it was the same
creative Mind that is shaping the universe to its eternal idea; but in me as a
person it had one of its special centres of a special relationship growing into
a deepening consciousness... I felt that I had found my religion at last, the
Religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and
came close to me so as to need my love and cooperation.\(^{16}\)

What follows is Rabindranath’s own translation of his Bengali poem,
*Livjan devata*, ‘Lord of my Life’:

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\text{Thou who art the inmost Spirit of my being,}\nonumber \\
\text{Art thou pleased,}\nonumber \\
\text{Lord of my Life? For I gave to thee my cup}\nonumber \\
\text{filled with all the pain and delight}\nonumber \\
\text{that the crushed grapes of my heart had surrendered.}\nonumber \\
\text{I wove with the rhythm of colours and songs the cover}\nonumber \\
\text{for thy bed,}\nonumber \\
\text{And within the molten gold of my desires}\nonumber \\
\text{I fashioned playthngs for thy passing hours.}\nonumber \\
\text{He imagines his Lord gazing at the dark of his heart, and forgiving his failures and wrongs, his sloth and forgetfulness, and asks that his tiredness be transformed into fresh energy, in a wedding of delight.}\nonumber \\
\text{Many poems placed at the beginning of the English* Gitanjali* are concerned with this sense that the supreme divine Poet has called him to celebrate the universe in all its variety of change, weather and locale. This is not far from Herbert’s sense, in the seventeenth-century poem ‘Providence’,\(^{18}\) that the One ‘who from end to end strongly and sweetly moves’ places in the hand of humankind the ‘penne’ which appoints the writer as ‘Secretarie of thy praise’. ‘Man is the great high Priest: he doth present | The sacrifice for all’, while springs and winds only managed to ‘mutter an assent’, and depend on the human voice. The regularities of the cosmos are expressed through the lives of the creatures:

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\text{If we could heare}\nonumber \\
\text{thy skill and art, what musick would it be!}\nonumber \\
\text{Thou art in small things great, not small in any:}\nonumber \\
\text{Thy even praise can neither rise, nor fall.}\nonumber \\
\text{Thou art in all things one, in each thing many:}\nonumber \\
\text{For thou art infinite in one and all.}\nonumber \\
\text{This is worth setting beside the Isopanisad as Rabindranath paraphrased it: ‘He who knows that the knowledge of the finite and the infinite is combined in one, crosses death by the help of the knowledge of the finite

\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp.58-60.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.62.  
\(^{18}\) Herbert, *The Temple*, xcii.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
and achieves immortality by the help of the infinite’. Tagore’s commentary on this and other verses of the Isopanisad takes us to the heart of his theology and the foundation of his humanism. His arguments here and elsewhere carry him beyond the abstractions and instrumentality of the sciences to a defence of the personal in terms of relationship, reverence, and ultimately of moral values. Again a reflective poem by Herbert, ‘Man’s Medley’ crosses the same territory, though maybe with less complexity, in considering the relationship of soul and body: ‘Man ties them both alone, and makes them one. With th’ one hand touching heaven, with th’ other earth... Happie is he, whose heart Hath found the art To turn his double pains to double praise’. In a less optimistic mood in ‘The Search’, Herbert felt this division as an inexplicable absence, considering his belief that God was a Being of love:

Thy will such a strange distance is
As that to it
East and West touch, the poles do kisse,
And parallels meet.
Since then my grief must be as large
As is thy space,
Thy distance from me; see my charge,
Lord, see my case.

The contradictory mixture of sentiments, of absence and indwelling, has a parallel in English Gitanjali lxxxiv (Bengali, xxvi): ‘It is the pang of separation that spreads throughout the world and gives birth to shapes innumerable in the infinite sky. It is the sorrow of separation that gazes in silence all night from star to star and becomes lyric among rustling leaves in the rainy darkness of July.’ Compare Herbert’s poem:

Now I am here what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show:
I read and sigh, and wish I were a tree,
For sure then I would grow
To fruit or shade; At least some bird would trust
Her household to me, And I would be just.

Though this sounds like an ending, it is not, for he further contemplates giving up: ‘Well, I will change the service, and go seek Some other master out’, but then turns back: ‘Ah, my dear God! Though I am clean forgot, Let me not love thee, if I love thee not’. Set beside this Rabindranath’s ‘It is this overspreading pain that deepens into loves and desires, into sufferings and joys in human homes; and this it is that ever flows in songs through my poet’s heart’.

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21 Herbert, The Temple, cxxxiv.
22 Herbert, The Temple, cxxxi.
Still another feature of the two poets’ writing has a kinship. Before John Drury, other commentators on Herbert have noticed his love of the words ‘sweet’, ‘sweeten’ and ‘sweetness’ to express spiritual joy, especially in ‘The Odour, 2 Cor. 2’:

How sweetly doth my Master sound! My Master!
As Amber-greese leaves a rich scent
Unto the taster:
So do these words a sweet content,
An oriental fragrancie, my Master.
With these all day I do perfume my minde...\(^{23}\)

He imagines the Master calling him ‘my Servant’, itself ‘a breathing of the sweet’, a ‘commerce’, which would employ all his life.\(^{24}\) For Tagore, too, the blossoming of a flower gives ‘a sweet trace of a strange fragrance in the south wind’.\(^{25}\) That vague sweetness made my heart ache with longing and it seemed to me that it was the eager breath of summer seeking for its completion. I knew not that it was so near, that it was mine, and that this perfect sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart.’\(^{26}\) This is one of those lyrics in which Rabindranath naturally wades into the sensuous language of Vaisnava devotion, but without the complexity which Herbert finds in St. Paul’s *euodia*, found in II Corinthians 2.14, as a sweet fragrance given by Christ to his followers to spread abroad among others, like the fragrant incense from the Hebrew burnt offering. Yet sometimes Rabindranath could transfer ritual celebration towards spiritual awareness of other people’s lives:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with all doors shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil...What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and the sweat of thy brow...\(^{27}\)

This is not the only *Gitanjali* poem which invites us to identify ourselves and give companionship to ‘the poorest, the lowliest and the lost’.\(^{28}\) This was exactly the line quoted by Rabindranath’s Christian friend C. F. Andrews in a letter from South Africa in 1914, expressing his sense that ‘Christianity in its alliance with the white race is utterly unable to cope

\(^{23}\) Ibid., cxlvii.
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Tagore, *Gitimalya*, xvii; Tagore, *Gitanjali* (English), xx.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Tagore, *Gitanjali* (English), xi; *Gitanjali* (Bengali), cxix.
\(^{28}\) Tagore, *Gitanjali* (English), x; *Gitanjali* (Bengali), cvii.
with the evil of racism’. In 1909, in the first letter, Rabindranath is said to have written in English, to an American sympathizer with Indian causes, Myron Phelps, he had spelled out clearly his opposition to social discrimination by either race or caste in any country, and suggested that India had yet to overcome such differences in order to fulfil her own destiny of reconciliation. He mentioned the Muslim poet Kabir, a weaver, and other earlier writers representing such opposition, and translated *A Hundred Poems of Kabir*, with the assistance of the writer on mysticism Evelyn Underhill, who called him ‘my beloved Indian prophet... it was a real joy and education to be with’. Its second poem reflected: ‘It is needless to ask of a saint the caste to which he belongs; For the priest, the warrior, the tradesman, and all other castes are seeking for God’.

With all his commitment to his rural flock, Herbert’s thinking about social relations in the prose of *The Priest to the Temple* and about the morality of overcoming differences, whether religious (between Roman Catholics, Nonconformists, Anglicans and atheists) or class-bound (landowning aristocracy, urban professional gentry, servants, farmers, craftsmen, literate or illiterate) took account of the conditions of his own times and a good priest’s attitudes:

> He holds the Rule, that Nothing is little in God’s service; if it once have the honour of that Name, it grows great instantly. Therefore neither disdaineth he to enter the poorest Cottage, though he even creep into it, and though it smell ever so loathsomely. For God is there also.

This reflection is close to Herbert’s hymnic poem ‘The Elixir’, ‘Teach me, my God and King | In all things Thee to see’, with its lines ‘A servant, with this clause, | Makes drudgery divine, | Who sweeps a room as for thy laws, | Makes that and th’action fine’.

Herbert’s prose is as often down-to-earth and blunt: ‘Country people are full of these petty injustices, being cunning to make use of another and spare themselves. And Scholars ought to be delighted driving of their general School-rules ever to the smallest actions of life’. The priest should avoid over-solemnity in his ordinary dealings, but ‘sometimes refresheth himself, as knowing that Nature will not bear everlasting droopings, and that pleasantness of disposition is a

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32 Tagore and Underhill, ii.
33 Herbert, *The Priest to the Temple*, chapter xiv.
34 Herbert, *The Temple*, clvi.
35 Herbert, *The Priest to the Temple*, chapter xxvi.
great key to do good.\textsuperscript{36} This is also the language Herbert used in his consideration of how as a priest to counter doubts and depression among his flock: ‘But if he sees them nearer desperation than Atheism, not so much doubting a God as that he is theirs; then he dives into the boundless Ocean of God’s Love, and the unspeakable riches of his loving-kindness’\textsuperscript{37} One of Rabindranath’s most confessional lyrics uses similar language, as it recognizes an inability to become as devoted as God himself in his brotherly oneness with humanity: ‘I know thee as my God and stand apart – I do not know thee as my own and come closer. I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet – I do not grasp thy hand as my friend. Thou art the Brother amongst my brothers, but I heed them not, I divide not my earnings with them, thus sharing my all with thee. In pleasure and in pain, I stand not by the side of men, and thus stand by thee. I shrink to give up my life, and thus do not plunge in the great waters of life’\textsuperscript{38} Both poets understood profoundly the proximity of loving God and one’s neighbour.

Something of the same conclusion about dedication to ‘the poorest, the lowliest and the lost’ is reached through some of Rabindranath’s important fictional writing. His novel \textit{Gora}, published in parts from 1907, and complete in 1910, had explored the same territory of withdrawal and identification, with an intimate concentration on changing human relations between young adults and parents, between the sexes, and disagreement between different religious groups.\textsuperscript{39} Gora, the young hero, is dedicated to the welfare of poor villagers oppressed by their local and imperial employers, to the nationalist idea of Bharatvarsha as a cultural ideal, and to Hindu orthodoxy as a way of upholding it. The irony is that he is not Indian himself by birth, but the child of an Irish soldier killed in the Indian uprising of 1857, whose wife died in childbirth, a fact concealed by the Bengali couple who adopted him as their son. Attracted to a Brahmo girl, his orthodoxy forbids him from thinking of marrying her, but throws him into confusion. So that on discovery of his true identity he feels a great sense of release, and turns to the one senior figure, Paresh Babu, whom he recognizes as himself a liberated spirit, a Brahmo not tied to his own organization, saying:

\begin{quote}
Only you have the clue to such freedom. That is why you find no place in any community. Please make me your disciple. Teach me the mantra of that deity who belongs to all – Hindu, Musulman, Christian, Brahmo – the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste or any race.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Another example of such a progression is found in \textit{Chaturanga} (1916), a novella translated by Kaiser Haq in 1993 as \textit{Quartet}, the story of disputes

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\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., chapter xxvii. & \\
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., chapter xxxvi. & \\
\textsuperscript{38} Tagore, \textit{Gitanjali} (English), lxxvii; \textit{Gitanjali} (Bengali), lxxxi. & \\
\textsuperscript{39} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Gora} (London: Macmillan and Co, 1924). & \\
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 476. & \\
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in an urban middle-class goldsmith’s family, whose elder brother declares himself a religious unbeliever through positivist influence, while his younger brother remains an orthodox ritual-practising Hindu. When his son Sachish follows his uncle, and works for political independence of India with a group of college students, he is expelled from the family house, which is divided. Yet when the uncle dies, Sachish’s need of following a senior guide prevails and he joins a Vaisnava sect under the leadership of Swami Lilananda, along with his friend Sribilash, the narrator of the story. They spend their days in religious ecstasy stoked through a programme of singing, dancing, sermons and self-discipline, until at length disturbed by the arrival of a young widow, Damini, whose dead husband has bequeathed her to the care of Lilananda. Yet though she cooks for the community, she is a complete dissenter, a disturbing force who explains to Sribilash, a less wholehearted disciple, the extent to which she objects to the group’s way of life. This is after the suicide of another young wife abandoned by her husband: ‘You have seen what ecstasy is, haven’t you? It has no mercy, no shame, no sense of propriety.’ Both young men decide to leave the group but choose distinct ways; Sachish retaining his philosophy of devotion and separation, Sribilash choosing service to the community and marriage to Damini, at a time when widow-remarriage was forbidden by the orthodox. Rabindranath’s portrait of Sachish includes half-ironic comments on some of the stances taken from Gitanjali poems, such as ‘I plunge into your formlessness’, while Sribilash is closer to other poems of dedication and concern for community welfare.

Rabindranath’s thinking about women through his use of Hindu mythology contrasts with Herbert’s approach to his classical heritage, described in his poem ‘Dotage’ as ‘guilded emptiness’, ‘embroid’red lyes’. Though Herbert was a Cambridge classicist, he reserved a touch of the mythic past to his sixteen devoted poems to his dead mother, written in Latin and Greek, and published with John Donne’s memorial sermon for her in 1627. In contrast, one of Sukanta Chaudhuri’s most accomplished translations is of Rabindranath’s ‘Ahalyar prati’, from his collection Manashi, composed at Santiniketan in the 1890s, based on a tale in the Krittibas Ramayana. As Rabindranath himself summarized it, Ahalya, ‘sinning against the purity of marital law, incurred a curse of her husband, and turned into stone, to be restored to humanity by the touch of Rama-

42 Ibid., p.57.
43 Ibid.
44 Herbert, The Temple, cxxxv.
46 Chaudhuri, pp 64-6.
What is remarkable about his own poem is how he imagines the earth-mother’s ‘enormous pangs, dumb wordless joy or plight’, her ‘eternal sleepless pain’ as life rises and falls, and the surprise of the universe at Ahalya’s recovery, concluding (in Chaudhuri’s translation) ‘You look upon the world amazedly; | The world looks upon you, and says no word. | You face each other, here upon the shore | Of an unbounded mystery, here to meet | Anew what you had always known before’. This is of course only one of Tagore’s countless explorations of the feminine.

His fascination with nature’s turbulence of wind and water also developed, moving from Hindu mythology’s manifestations of natural disturbance in terms of Indra and Rudra, to his discovery of how such scenes convey his sense of human wars and injustices. This is particularly true of his Balaka poems of 1916, reflecting his perception of what came to be called the Great War. If the poem called ‘A Flight of Cranes’ sees the birds’ movement into a mysterious distance as symbolizing human agnosticism over personal and natural futures, another poem, translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri as The ‘Storm Crossing’, carries us beyond the wrath of destructive storm, and Balaka xi concludes in a startling divine address: ‘Thereupon I cried to thee and said ‘Forgive them, 0 Terrible!’ Thy forgiveness burst in storms, scattering their thefts in the dust. Thy forgiveness was in the thunderstone, in the shower of blood, in the angry red of the sunset.’ This is Tagore’s own simplification of his Bengali lines, ending with conflict’s ‘sudden scourings’ or cleansing acts. As Rabindranath himself commented in prose on that war:

A little of the roar of the First World War was reaching this country through the newspapers. We were discussing it casually to lend excitement to the tea-table. O you impoverished mean-spirited rout, look at the bloodshed and tears where this war is true and real. Waves of liquid fire are flowing, poison gas is spreading all around, bombs are raining down from the sky, anti-aircraft guns are firing their shells from below, land and sky are wrestling in death’s embrace. We have to find a path through this to steer the ship of history to the shore of a new age.

Tagore had already objected to the violence of the Boer War in his poem ‘Sunset of the Century’ of 1899:

The last sun of the century sets amid the blood-red clouds of the West and the clouds of hatred. The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its...

47 Ibid., p. 381.
48 Ibid., p. 66.
49 Rabindranath Tagore, Balaka (Kolkata: Indian Publishing House, 1916).
50 Ibid., xxxvii; Sukanta Chaudhuri, pp. 232-6.
drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance…\textsuperscript{53}

As Rabindranath’s thought in this area intensified, it was crucial to his disagreement with Mahatma Gandhi, in spite of their deep friendship. This and other issues were involved in the debate between the two men over the use of force to gain political freedom, discussed with trenchant economy by Uma Das Gupta in *Rabindranath Tagore. A Biography*, 2004, and illustrated in her volume *Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism* for the *Oxford India Tagore* (2009). Yet Rabindranath continued to wrestle with this problem in his fiction in the following decades, including his novella *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)*, about a Kolkata revolutionary group, and its tragic ending through treachery.

One of Rabindranath’s best-known *Naivedya* translations (English *Gitanjali xxxv*) in a toned-down version of his dedication to both moral and political freedom, begins

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
> Where knowledge is free;  
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
> Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
> Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
> Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action –  
> into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Sukanta Chaudhuri’s more precisely accurate ending is ‘With ruthless blows from your own hand, awaken India, o Father, into that heaven’.\textsuperscript{54} By 1917 Rabindranath had articulated his own political reflections in a series of lectures, delivered when invited to Japan and the United States, entitled *Nationalism*,\textsuperscript{55} which is a powerful critique of Western political influence throughout the world, in particular the Western view that nations define themselves through conflict, warfare and the modern use of arms, the belief that, as he put it, ‘the best guarantee of peace is preparedness for war’. E.P. Thompson, who edited the lectures for its 1991 edition, declared them to be ‘a prescient, even prophetic, work, whose foresight has been confirmed by sufficient evidence—two world wars, the nuclear arms race, environmental disasters, technologies too clever to be controlled’.\textsuperscript{56} Like his father Edward Thompson, Tagore’s long-standing friend, he admired him.

\textsuperscript{53} In Bengali: Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Satabdir surja’, in *Naivedya*, lxiv.  
\textsuperscript{54} Chaudhuri, p. 1.  
for his universalism and commended him to the postcolonial world for his ‘far-sighted intuitions’. This carries us far from the limited English conflicts of the seventeenth century amidst which George Herbert was exploring an early modern spiritual stance, to the considerably more complex world situation amidst which Rabindranath Tagore committed himself to a human-focused spirituality, to the divine Spirit at work in the heart and in the world, articulating striking hopes for South Asia and for life on earth in the future which expand upon Herbert’s hope for humankind.

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**About the author**

Dr Kitty Scoular Datta was educated at Edinburgh and Oxford Universities and taught English literature in British universities until 1957 and from 1968 to 1988 in Indian universities (South Church College, 1958-62; Calcutta, Delhi and Jadavpur Universities). 1988-9 she was Visiting Fellow at Christ Church College, Oxford, and retired in 1990. Afterwards she taught literature and Indian religions part-time in Oxford Theology Faculty until 1999, and the course on ‘Britain and India, 1600-2000’ for Open University until 2009. Dr Kitty Scoular Datta gave the Asiatic Society Annual Lecture in Kolkata in 2011 on the 200th death anniversary of its Scottish Secretary, the linguist orientalist and poet John Leyden.