

The poetics of self in Iqbal and Tagore: A comparative study

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ABSTRACT

Comparative studies in its Eurocentric form is on a fast decline since the rise of postcolonial studies but it is a flourishing discipline among postcolonial comparatists who invoke comparative study between subaltern texts to recuperate and establish the voice of the marginalized societies. Dr Muhammad Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore are the two eminent poets of the subcontinent who used their art to lend intellectual authority to the forces of resistance against imperial rule. Both the poets try to reconstruct the identity of their people whose culture and history have been misrepresented by the colonial discourse. Iqbal and Tagore take inspiration from pre-imperial spiritual and cultural heritage of their societies to recuperate true self of their people. This research article invokes comparative study of the poetics of self in Iqbal and Tagore to identify commonalities in the poetic responses of the two poets to the peculiar socio-political scenario of their land under imperial rule as well as specificities arising out of particular spiritual frames of reference. The study also explores the contemporary relevance of the poetics of Iqbal and Tagore as a critique of neo imperial world order.

Keywords: Self, Identity, Culture, Spirituality, Education, Neo-imperialism

The issue of self and identity is a major preoccupation of postcolonial writers, theorists and comparatists in the wake of colonial representation of history and culture of the colonized societies. Postcolonial writers strive to bring their people out of the abyss of ignorance and tyranny onto the path of freedom and collective hope. They raise voice against imperial discourse and socio-political cultural injustices and oppression. “The native is not just fighting for or appealing for inclusion in the

colonial system; he is, rather, offering his own philosophical and political system as a solution to the problems of the colonial masters” (Raja, 2008, p.49). Comparative literature which is on a fast decline in its Eurocentric form has become one of the most important fields of literary activity in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial comparative model provides opportunity to evaluate cultural and historical significance of the works of postcolonial writers, their ability to change and shape the perceptions of their people, their strength to kindle dignity and self in them and their timeless influence to guide them in future. “Comparative literature from this perspective is a political activity, part of the process of reconstructing and reasserting cultural and national identity in the postcolonial period” (Bassnett, 1998, p.39).

Dr. Muhammad Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore have left indelible prints on the life, culture, thought, philosophy and history of the people of the Subcontinent. They aestheticized their political and ideological philosophies to galvanize people for resistance and to embrace their tarnished legacy for self-subsistent future. The poetics of Iqbal and Tagore works to restore the identity and self of ‘doubly marginalized’ people who not only faced foreign subjugation but also endured the obsolete customs of their cultures.

Iqbal and Tagore were well aware of colonial conspiracy of tarnishing Indian identity. So, both the writers have featured this concern in their poetic responses to the socio-political conditions of the society. Tagore is a cultural representation of Hindus in subcontinent whereas Iqbal represents Muslim culture and consciousness. Both the writers use indigenous themes and techniques to motivate their masses to work for cultural resurgence. Iqbal and Tagore bolster self through spirituality - an earmark of East which is always delineated with its spiritualism by West. In fact Tagore is always “viewed in the West as the embodiment of Eastern mystical wisdom” (Reisman, 2012, p.143). Subcontinent is a place of many religions which form different cultures. Spirituality is a cultural aspect of its people. The rituals and traditions of religions being practiced here have many similarities. Iqbal and Tagore though belong to different religions yet they share spiritual value of their religions for their

people. They use spiritual identity of their people to bolster their cultural identity. Iqbal says:

And there at every sunrise let our sweet
chanting move

The hearts of all who worship, pouring
them wine of love:

Firm strength, calm peace, shall blend in
the hymns the votary sings_

For from love comes salvation to all
earth's living things.

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.20)

Both the poets are equally critical of the unprogressive traditions and attitudes existing in their society which helped the colonizers to subdue them. They remind their people of their past glory and cultural heritage. Iqbal recalls the great Muslim history embedded in Indian culture to galvanize Muslims of India to struggle against oppression and to attain self-reliance. Similarly, Tagore revisits Hindu traditions and history. He evokes contumacy and awareness in his people as their culture and traditions were hijacked by the imperialists. Tagore expresses his optimism about the revival of pre-imperial cultural values. The poet says:

And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies
break forth from the heart;

and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed
with its wonders.

(Tagore, 2002, p.53)

Keeping in view the above mentioned perspective of the poetry of Iqbal and Tagore, this article invokes comparative study of poetics of self in the light of the following questions.

1: For how long are the two poets Iqbal and Tagore similar or otherwise in challenging imperial narrative and representation of native histories and identities through their poetics of spiritual and cultural self?

2: To what extent is the poetics of cultural and spiritual identity of Iqbal and Tagore relevant in mounting critique of neo-imperialism?

Spiritual and Cultural Self in Iqbal and Tagore:

Iqbal and Tagore are socially-committed poets of subcontinent. They reject the notion of 'art for art's sake' as well as the myth of universality of text. They affirm that literature maintains roots in its culture by recreating it in literary expressions. Poetry is a cultural product which attracts mass participation. It works as a unifying bond for faith, culture and history. Poet has potential to express people's sentiments which they feel but cannot articulate. Iqbal condemns artists who present superficial ideas in their art instead of guiding society. In *India's Artists* the poet says:

Their fantasy, death-bed of love and
passion;

Their sunless minds the burials-vaults of
nations;

In their idolatrous halls Death's portrait
hangs,

Their art, like a priest's soul, sickens of
life;

(tr Kiernan, 2003, p.200)

Similarly, Tagore believes that writers should use their art to promote progressive ideas in readers. He condemns ambiguity and obscurity of expression in the works of authors. In his poem *The Authorship* he criticizes equivocal writings through a child who complains his mother for not understanding his father's ambivalent and doublespeak writings. Tagore says:

You say that father writes a lot of books,
but what he writes I don't understand.

He was reading to you all the evening, but
could you really make out what he meant?

What a nice stories, mother, you can tell
us! Why can't father write like that, I
wonder?

(Tagore, 2013, p.146)

Iqbal and Tagore were well aware of their nation's spiritual and intellectual enervation. They chiseled solutions to this miserable situation by challenging the backwardness and anti-intellectual behavior of people. They used their art for intellectual and cultural reawakening of their people from their centuries' old intellectual and social apathy. Iqbal blames obscurantist Mullahs¹ for misleading people and filling the house of Almighty with idols of suspicion, superstition and dogmatism. Pharisees and charlatan involved their followers in rituals rather than understanding the message of God. They presented Quran not as a guidance for human beings to explore the secrets of universe and to know the real strength and status of man but to be a book for Phylactaxy. In *God Addressing the Angels* Iqbal says:

Why these curtains draped between the
Creator and his creatures.

Drive out of my Church these elders of the
Church!

(In Majeed, 2005, p.166)

Similarly, Tagore also questions number of religious customs and rituals which generated moral degradation and social discrimination in society. He revolutionizes Bengali literature and art to shed the backwardness from it. He criticizes discrimination of people on the basis of caste as untouchable were not allowed to visit temples. They are not considered able enough to contact God, spiritual purification is also constrained to

the high classes. He speaks against the social subjugation of dalits² and women. Tagore bravely spoke against the cruel policies of British government in India. He was the first one to return his knighthood to the Government to protest against the massacre of innocent people at Jalianwala Bagh³ by British police. By renouncing the award he showed his solidarity with the common man of his land whose life was of no worth to the rulers. Tagore rejects all the existing socio-political and cultural barriers in order to restore the pre-imperial and pre-feudal freedom and heritage of his land. He donated all his Nobel Prize (1913) money and the royalty of his book *Gitanjali* (1910) to his educational institute which he established to teach natives their real worth and status in society. Tagore's distinctive poetic content won international recognition. "Tagore's writings were centered on the cosmology of the Indian race; he became a personification of India—a kind of spiritual envoy" (In Tagore, 2013, ix).

For Iqbal and Tagore aesthetics and politics are inseparable. They believe that philosophies are formed to improve the vision and action of society. Thoughts, vision and actions of people should be connected so that individual and social character of societies could be modified. Iqbal and Tagore find solution of prevailing anxiety and anger in society in their religious faiths. Their specific religious beliefs have commonalities as both are rooted in Eastern spiritualism. The two writers mobilized natives against the colonial rule, social elites as well as against obsolete customs. In *Song Offerings* Tagore sings for freedom:

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 the mind is led forward by thee into
ever-widening thought and action-

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let
my country awake.

(Tagore, 2002, p.51)

Iqbal castigates his people for their resignation and reminds them of their real strength and glory. The poet says:

Why for one lost home mourn, when grief
Can find so many a lodging-place?
You are a falcon born to soar,
Still with your wings new heavens keep
pace;

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.90)

Iqbal and Tagore affirm that spiritual strength of an individual lies in humanism. They believe that God lives not only among masses but also within man. God is near to man's heart and no need to search him in skies and secluded meditations. Tagore asks people who spend time in temples, 'chanting and singing' (Tagore, 2002, p.27) to attain the essence of God in every object of universe through communion with nature. "Tagore's realism is free from crude materialism. He rejects alienation from common humanity" (Muthukumar, 2013, p.460). He presents the vision of God who doesn't sit at high throne but moves among the laborers and toilers. The poet says:

He is there where the triller is tilling the
hard ground and where the path maker is
breaking the stones.

Put off thy holy mantle and even like him
come down the dusty soil!

(Tagore, 2002, p.27)

Iqbal argues that if a person wants to raise his self he should develop Divine qualities in his personality which enables him to act as Vicegerent of God in this world. This completes man and turns him into 'Murd-e-

Kamil'⁴ (the perfect man) of Iqbal. He becomes the embodiment of truth, morality and chivalry. "For him poetry, like all fine arts, is genuine and insignificant only when it impinges dynamically on life, deepening its appreciation, quickening its pulse, and illuminating its fundamental purpose with insight"(Saiyidain, 1992,p.2). Iqbal claims that his philosophical ideas revolve around Quaranic teachings. In *Israr-i-Ramoz*(1915) he elaborates that his vision and thoughts are rooted in the teachings of Quran.He seeks guidance from Almighty and the messenger of Allah. He considers Prophet (P.B.U.H) as the real vanguard or a Saki for Uma⁵. So, he seeks invocation from the prophet in *Gabriel's Wing* in the following words:

Set out once more that cup, that
wine, oh Saqi-

Let my true place at last be mine,
oh Saqi!

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.66)

Tagore's spiritual force is common man. He believes that God's attention can be attained by having relationship with his creatures. He is a true man of his land who tries to raise the lost self of his people which is faded in the daily pressures and hardships of life. He motivates the masses to rise and speak against social atrocities as God is on their side. The strength of God can bring confidence and courage to the people. The poet says:

Give me the strength never to disown the
poor or bend my knees before insolent
might.

Give me the strength to raise my mind high
above daily trifles.

And give me the strength to surrender my
strength to thy will with love.

(Tagore, 2002, p.52)

For him as God lives among masses, so his presence is revealed in their actions. It is his presence which keeps us away from all sins and evils. For him deity is guide and guru who shows right path to man and uplifts him to move further to face the tribulations of life. Trials and misfortunes gear up man for more wisdom and enlightenment. Distress and adversity brings man near to God. Tagore expresses his gratitude for being rejected. The poet says:

Day by day thou art making me worthy of
thy full
acceptance by refusing me ever and anon,
saving me
from perils of weak, uncertain desire.

(Tagore, 2002, p.30)

Known for his spiritualism in West, Tagore is not a Theist. His religion is the religion of man. "Tagore believed in the Religion of Man, seeing the divine in man's inner soul. His God is in man, in nature, in the soul of the seasons, in innocence, in beauty-- in the very cycle of existence" (Ghosh, 2012, p.2). Indian culture is deeply embedded in spiritual values of its people and helps discover the relationship between soul and God. Iqbal and Tagore both take nature as a teacher and guide. Everything around the world symbolizes God's reflection. They believe that nature endows every person with certain abilities and qualities which distinguish him from others. Man's relation with nature revitalizes his potentials. Iqbal and Tagore reinvigorate the relationship between culture and nature in their poetry by using influential cultural and natural symbols, images, metaphors and diction. Their culture specific poetic devices and techniques strengthen their aim of restoring national self and identity. Iqbal is an indigenous poet in its true sense. For him "understanding of the nature of self is essential for understanding of the nature of culture and the principle of its growth. Iqbal regarded self as the basis of the entire organization of life" (Rahim, 2015, p.725). Iqbal's *Man and Nature* is replete with cultural and Eastern smiles, metaphors, images and diction. The use of metaphor of 'Sora Shams'⁶ is purely

Islamic. The diction of this poem is rich in novel and unique Urdu words. Iqbal complains that he is also a part of this vast and sublime universe but why is he leading a life of slavery and disgrace? Nature answers back to man with a great message which is essence of Iqbal's whole philosophy. Nature replies:

You are creation's gardener, flowers live
only in your seeing,

By your light hangs my being or not-being;

.....

If you would weigh your worth at its true
rate,

No longer would ill-faring or ill-doing be
your fate!

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.8)

Iqbal creates parables in verse to motivate his people to rise against their miserable and pathetic condition. His 'Children poems' i.e 'A Mother's Dream', 'A Cow and a Goat', 'A Spider and a Fly' are clear instances of his poetic parables which provide cognitive enlightenment to children, youth and elders equally.

Tagore belongs to Bengal region which is known for its rains, forests and rivers. So, boats, waves, colors, leaves are his assets for conveying his sadness and emptiness. His Bengali identity is prominent in his expressions. He sees happiness and pleasure in the natural objects of his surroundings. The winds which bring freshness to his mind are seasonal winds of his land which have strength to fly away his sadness. As he says:

I started up from my dream and felt a
sweet trace of a strange fragrance in the
south wind.

(Tagore, 2002, p.36)

He expresses his sadness on missing an enjoyable moment.

On the day when the lotus bloomed, alas,
my mind was straying, and I knew it not.
My basket was empty and the flower
remained unheeded

(Tagore, 2002, p. 36)

The image of 'lotus' is purely Hindu and Eastern. Lotus flower is a sacred symbol in Hindu religion. It is found in all religious scriptures of Hinduism. In fact the holy Gods like Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahma are always depicted as sitting on this holy flower. It is a spiritual symbol which reflects divinity and spiritual wisdom. Its buds contain Divine potential as it blossoms through dirty water but it maintains its purity and beauty uncontaminated. Its gradual development is related with man's development in the realm of spirituality. Bengal is known for its rainy seasons. The arrival of Monsoon brings life and bliss for people. Summer in East is ripening time of crops which brings happiness and pleasure to people. However, it is unbearable heat which makes life hard. It is the longest season of the year in East. So, people often relate their inner feelings of wait and anxiety with it. Tagore's rich cultural imagery in the following lines expresses the activities of Summer. The poet says:

Today the summer has come at my
window with its sighs and murmurs;

and the bees are plying their minstrelsy at
the court of the flowering grove.

(Tagore, 2002, p.21)

The music of subcontinent revolves around the rainy season. Music and songs are part of Bengali culture in particular and of Indian culture in general. Music and musical instruments are part and parcel of Indian religious activities. In Hinduism Bhajan and Kirtan are common musical forms for expressing devotion to the Divine power. In Sikhism Shabad Kirtan is form of Hymns and in Buddhism Honkyoku is a form of music played by monks. Similarly, the images of 'wealth of gold', 'banyan

tree', doves etc instantly give a feel of Hindu culture and Indian environment. Even Islam which is not originated in India also adopted a musical hymn in form of Qwali. So, cultural and spiritual imagery is the most vital poetic tool in the poetry of Iqbal and Tagore.

Education a Tool to Restore Indigenous Self:

Iqbal and Tagore are educationists. They consider education system a powerful and productive tool to form a vibrant society. A well designed education system can inculcate selfhood and dignity in students. For Iqbal and Tagore, economic, political and cultural decolonization in the oppressed societies can be achieved through proper education. Iqbal and Tagore's philosophy of education forms an important part of their poetry and also consists of their lectures. Both the poets exhort upon the academia to provide opportunities to students to inculcate self-assurance and self-assistance in them. Teachers should awake fighting spirit in pupils against oppression in society. Students should be able enough to critically observe their political and social conditions. In *Gabriel's Wing* Iqbal says:

The empire of To-day on him who fishes
To-morrow's pearl up from Time's
undertow.

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.78)

Academic system of any society should reflect clearly its aims and ideology. It should groom students to be responsible and progressive members of society. "These traits are continuous struggle, strength to face hardships of life with courage and clear perception" (Iqbal, 2015). Educational institutions should eliminate fear, deceitfulness, treachery and hypocrisy from students. In '*Rumuz-i-Bekhudi*' (1918) Iqbal says that all evils breed in coward heart. In the poem *The Schools* poet criticizes modern schools which are making students cramming machines and robots. Iqbal says:

A falcon's eye were yours by nature's
right,

Slavishness left them only a poor wren's
sight,

And the schools hid from them those
mysteries

That yield to hill's and desert's still assize.

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p.190)

The focus of Tagore's philosophy of education is moral and spiritual upbringing of children. He argues that every child is an asset of society and he should be provided appropriate environment for exploring his inner self. For him, education is perfection. Commenting on Tagore's philosophy of education Pushpanathan says, "Perfection here implies that the students must try to develop every aspect of his personality and all the abilities and power with which he has been endowed by nature" (2013, p.43). Tagore established a university in Bengal at his native place called Santiniketan. The school was started with five students only but gradually it rose to a status of Visva-Bharati University. The purpose of this institution was to utilize the rural environment for the promotion of education because of its proximity with nature. Tagore believes that learning in open air with nature is more effective and fruitful. He rejects walled institutions because they restrain thoughts and observation of students. Tagore expresses his frustration over the restricted atmosphere of schools in *The Flower-School*. He uses metaphor of a 'flower' for children which bloom occasionally in rainy season and do not remain on earth throughout the year. A child in the poem says to his mother:

Mother, I really think the flowers go to school
underground.

They do their lessons with doors shut, and if they
want to come to play before it is time, their
master makes them stand in a corner.

(Tagore, 2013, p.141)

Tagore is against restricted time for learning. He feels that man should be free to enjoy his task as long as he wants to. In Viswa-Bharati University he introduced a method of teaching and learning in which students and teachers are free to learn and seek until they are satisfied. In a poem *Vocationa* child admires different professions in which people do things of their own choice without restriction of time. A child says to his mother:

When the gong sounds ten in the morning
and I walk to school by our lane,

Every day I meet the hawker crying,
“Bangles, crystal bangles!”

There is nothing to hurry him on, there is
no road he must take, no place he must go
to, no time when he must come home.

(Tagore, 2013, p.143)

Tagore envisions his children to be brave, courageous, open minded, self-critical and self-reliant. He wants them to be explorative, curious, and wise in understanding worldly and spiritual matters. He desires to see them fully rooted in their Indian culture and traditions.

Iqbal and Tagore envision an education system which enjoins upon moral and spiritual growth of students based on interaction between mind and matter.

Relevance of Iqbal and Tagore’s Poetics in Neocolonial World:

In neocolonial world, West is still ruling in form of cultural and economic hegemony. Traditional colonialism was involved only in political domination over oppressed nations whereas this “neocolonialism is partly a planned policy of advanced nations to maintain their influence in developing countries, but it is also simply a continuation of past practices....” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2003, p. 452). Decolonization provided an opportunity to the once colonized societies to decolonize their pre-imperial cultural heritage but the

economic hegemony of Europe has hampered this process. Iqbal condemns Western 'Charters and Bills of Rights' (Kiernan, 2004, p.52) and calls them rhetoric of a capitalist in order to deceive consumers. Iqbal awakes his people that the Western system and progress which is so fascinating and tempting is actually a way towards eternal slavery. Iqbal predicts continuation of colonial capitalistic dominance in future. The poet says:

This paint and perfume, this mirage,
A garden's blooming face
You thought, simpleton, and your cage
A downy nesting-place.

(tr Kiernan, 2004, p. 52)

Tagore also expresses similar feelings regarding continuation of imperial mindset. He says:

The song that I came to sing remains
unsung to this day.
I have spent my days in stringing and in
unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words
have not been rightly set;
only there is the agony of wishing in my
heart.
The blossom has not opened; only the wind
is sighing by.

(Tagore, 2002, p.29)

Iqbal and Tagore encourage people to follow paths of success measured in their culture, traditions and needs rather than following oppressor's ways of economic and cultural dependency. They foresaw the capitalistic intentions of divide and rule. The existing globalized culture is pushing

back the individual identity of nations and perpetuating the capitalistic influence everywhere. The material strength is controlling all systems of world. In this scenario, Iqbal and Tagore's poetics of self and identity remains relevant as a critique of corporate imperialism.

Conclusion:

To sum up the comparative analysis of the poetics of Iqbal and Tagore, It is concluded that the two poets have used pre-imperial spiritual and cultural heritage of their societies to counter colonial representation of their cultural and historical identity as well as to motivate their societies to regain it. However, the poetic responses of the two poets to the then prevailing socio-political conditions of their societies are contextualized in their particular frames of difference as the two poets have two different religious identities. In Post-partition era, both in Pakistan and India indigenous political descendants of colonizers have established their political and cultural hegemony on the basis of elite culture patronized by the imperial powers. So, the poetics of Iqbal and Tagore retains its appeal as a redemptive literature to decolonize minds and cultures of postcolonial societies.

Notes:

- 1: Mullah: It is a title for Muslim religious cleric who supervises a mosque and also provides religious information to followers.
- 2: Dalits: It is a lowest caste in Hindu community. Dalits are considered untouchables and are not allowed to attend temples.
- 3: Jalianwala Bagh: It is a place in Punjab where a ruthless massacre of innocent people was done by British police. These people were celebrating New Year of Punjabi calendar.
- 4: Murd-e-Kamil: It means a guide and vanguard. Iqbal considers Holy prophet (P.B.U.H) a murd-e-kamil. Following the teachings of prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) turns a common man into a murd-e-kamil.
- 5: Uma: It means that the whole Muslim society is a nation.
- 6: Sora Shams: It is a chapter in Quran.

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