

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Reading Tagore: Lockdown Afternoons with My Mum

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My mum and I are imaginatively and emotionally traveling across intimate temporal and spatial distance while the country is in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am sitting on the landing outside the front door of my 94-year-old mum's second floor flat; she is ensconced in her chair, two metres away, in her hallway. I have spent a period of time self-isolating, and after waiting until it seemed safe for me to see her, I have recently begun to spend more time with my mum while maintaining 'social distance'. As the sun pours into her flat, we spend these long, hot afternoons during lockdown with me on the landing, her in the hallway. We drink masala tea, catch up on news of family and friends, and spend many hours reading the poems, letters and stories of Rabindranath Tagore. Despite the current restrictions, the atmosphere of fear and instability, these days are magical, strengthening our deep connection as she shares memories aroused by re-reading the works of her favourite poet. As she recites Tagore's poems, I relish the exquisite, forgotten pleasures of being read to aloud. The afternoons pass quickly; mum is a wonderful storyteller, and I am captivated by the timbre of her voice. And, more than that, she is acutely attuned to the presence of the listener, and so when she tells you a story, you feel that it is being recounted especially and exclusively for you.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Bengal, India in 1861 and died in 1941; he was a poet, writer, music composer and painter. A highly influential figure in Indian literature and politics, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, an award granted, according to the committee, 'because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate

skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West' (<https://www.nobelprize.org/>). A humanist and internationalist, Tagore was involved in the Indian independence movement and renounced his knighthood in 1919 as a protest against the notorious Amritsar Massacre, when British troops fired on a large crowd of unarmed Indians, killing several hundred. Tagore travelled widely and visited England on a number of occasions. As an active anti-colonial nationalist herself, mum expresses great pride in Tagore's status as the first non-European to win the Nobel prize for literature, and even greater gratification towards his relinquishing of his knighthood in opposition to the violence of British colonialism.

For my mum, reading Tagore's poetry conjures up other places, people and the past, connections that have become freighted with heightened intensity in this present time of disruption and disassociation. His writings bring back long forgotten memories of her childhood in India, her deep love for my father and her relationship with nature. Hanif Kureishi writes that when he re-reads novels from his youth, he begins to 'reinhabit the worlds' (2004: 1) in which he first read them. Similarly, for my mum, she recalls the impact that Tagore's poetry made in her head and heart when she first read it, and re-reading these works now initiates a process of re-identifying herself in them. And so we spend long afternoons in this intimate yet distanced space, as the past runs alongside the present, engendering contemplative thoughts about the different contexts in which the earlier reading and the re-reading takes place. The multiple historical and affective associations that emerge as we mull over Tagore's writing resonate profoundly with Sheila Hones' notion of 'text-as-spatial-event' (2008; 2014). Confounding the spatial confinements and social distancing imposed by lockdown, reading Tagore brings together 'a broad array of people, places, times, contexts, networks, and communities' (Hones 2008: 1301) that swirl through the space we share between the landing and mum's flat. Indeed, as we read Tagore, I am conscious of the many real and imaginary geographies that his work provokes in us. It ignites feelings of belonging to multiple places, revealing varied geographical connections and encounters. Through reading the literature of Tagore, mum recalls a childhood at home in Gujarat, India and personal and political entanglements between Britain and India wrought out of a colonial geography. The work also conjures up arboreal and pastoral scenes from diverse locations across the world. Furthermore, though she is reading the work of an Indian nationalist, she feels a renewed sense of belonging to London, a place where she has lived most of her life and to which she feels a deep attachment and affection.

Mum cannot remember a time when Tagore was not a part of her life. One afternoon she recalled her time studying microbiology at St Xavier's College in Bombay in 1946. At 2pm each day, she would rush out of the science lab, run down the corridor and up the stairs to sit in the back of the classroom to listen to Dr Bhatt, the language lecturer, reading Tagore out loud to his students in his euphonious voice. Though she felt compelled to study science, her heart was in literature. Listening to this elderly woman, confined to her flat and unable to walk without the aid of a stick, the image of her as a student, racing along the corridor with purpose and passion reminded us both of her once youthful energies. This invocation of youthfulness chimes with our reading of Tagore's *Glimpses of Bengal: selected from the letters of Sir Rabindranath*

Tagore (1920). In the foreword to the collection he writes, ‘Youth being exuberant and leisure ample, I felt the writing of letters other than business ones to be a delightful necessity. This is a form of literary extravagance only possible when a surplus of thought and emotion accumulates’ (1). Youth then is not only present in physical energies, but in passions, aspirations and connections.

Reading Tagore together thus conjured up visions of my mother as a young woman. Her most profound sensory memories from this time are replete with tenderness, affection and friendship. On many occasions, she referred to how Tagore’s writings were a potent medium through which she could express her love for my father. He had been wholly brought up in the British colonial education system and so, while he could recite Byron and Shakespeare by heart, he had almost no knowledge of the writings of Indian poets and novelists. She considered that if she shared the delights of Tagore’s poetry with my father, she would be able to demonstrate her love for him and as a consequence, she explained to me, the *Lover’s Gift and Crossing* poems (Tagore 1918) became an especially shared reference point, central to their burgeoning relationship and enduring throughout their life together. As she tells me of these connections between love and Tagore, I glimpse the poem *Peace, My Heart*, from the collection *The Gardener*, framed on the wall behind her. This was the poem that we read at my father’s memorial service.

Peace, my heart
 Peace, my heart, let the time for the parting be sweet.
 Let it not be a death but completeness.
 Let love melt into memory and pain into songs.
 Let the flight through the sky end in the folding of the wings over the nest.
 Let the last touch of your hands be gentle like the flower of the night.
 Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment, and say your last words in silence.
 I bow to you and hold up my lamp to light you on your way.

(Tagore 1913)

I sense that she wants to speak more of love and grief but she acknowledges the difficulty of communicating such emotions, asking ‘how can you tell a daughter about the love that you had for her father?’ So, instead of directly recounting her own emotions, she reads sections of *Gitanjali* (1912), and tells me how Tagore wrote these *Song Offerings* to express the sadness he suffered following the death of his wife. And so, many decades on, Tagore continues to be the medium through which she expresses love, but this now also accompanies feelings of loss and longing. Yet, not one to linger over gloomy thoughts, she quickly laughs, remembering how dad never really understood the nuances of Tagore’s writing and yet would pretend to be in deep contemplation as mum recited his poems, all the while, she guessed, wishing they were discussing cricket instead.

Mum continues to find much pleasure and solace in other themes addressed in Tagore’s writing. She is especially stirred by his focus on the centrality of the relationship between

people and nature as he attempted to convey ‘the peace of the soul in harmony with nature’ (Sen Gupta 2005: 2). Indeed, it was this connection with nature that initially drew her to Tagore. Her affinity with the natural world leads her to concur with Tagore’s sentiments that ‘(N)ature is obviously the more important thing. The sky is free, the fields limitless; and the sun merges them into one blazing whole. In the midst of this, man (sic) seems so trivial’ (Tagore 1920: 11). These considerations resonate even more profoundly as she is confined to her central London flat, forcibly distanced from the natural environment in which she has spent so much time. Yet they also offer a powerful stimulus to memories. For instance, she contends that ‘you can never be sad when you are in a forest, surrounded by trees’. Though I was anxious that her confinement might induce feelings of dejection during lockdown, impeding her desires to feel the fresh air on her face or walk along the nearby canal, in reading Tagore she finds a way to reconnect with nature, to transcend geographical confines through literature. One day when I arrived, intuiting my concern for her well-being, she said, ‘every morning I wake up and look out of the window at that big tree and as I see the sun kissing its leaves it fills me with joy’. She had been reading *Glimpses of Bengal* the night before. Subsequently, reinforcing the resonance between her appreciation for nature and that of Tagore, she turns to a bookmarked page and reads ‘I awoke amidst fresh breeze and light, new leaf and flower’ (2).

Reading Tagore, the space that she inhabits expands as she is transported beyond the confines of her flat where she has been sequestered for the past few months. In particular, reading his letters (1920) she imagines herself in a different landscape, sitting under a tree, resting her head against its trunk, feeling the sun on her face and the trees rising above her, listening to the birds and looking up at the sky. In revisiting these intense youthful experiences of arboreal settings, like Tagore, she feels that ‘Nature becomes really and truly intimate in strange and lonely places’ (17).

Tagore’s descriptions of landscapes in Bengal also catapult her back to scenes from her childhood, her vivid imagination summoning up rich, intense visions of the places depicted in his stories that she transposes onto familiar environments. Some days, she imagines herself in the house she grew up in, at the bottom of the lane under the bridge beside the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad. Rivers, real and metaphorical, feature heavily in Tagore’s writings and remind her of the sensory qualities of a childhood lived beside these flowing waters. She begins to re-imagine these environments, affective places produced by the text – but also beyond it (Thurgill and Lovell 2019). This affective, temporal and spatial shifting resonates again with Sheila Honess’ notion of ‘text-as-spatial- event’ in which reading stimulates memories of ‘actual-world geographies’ (2008) once inhabited and now remembered. Mum also finds beauty in the connections Tagore makes between the river and poetry: ‘Just as the banks give each river a distinct personality, so does rhythm make each poem an individual creation...The river ceaselessly babbles; so the words of the poem sing’ (Tagore 1920: 30). Before lockdown I would often take mum to sit on a bench by the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park in London. Sitting by the side of the lake she would be reminded of the rhythms of Tagore’s poems; now, it is his poems that allow her to imagine that she is by the water.

Besides envisaging herself beyond her flat, spending this extended period of time confined within its walls cause her to re-assess the interior of her home and the objects it contains. Sometimes, upon my arrival, she is holding an artefact from India, having spent the morning mulling over its familial history and the provenance of the other various ornaments that adorn her mantelpiece and shelves. These items spark a memory of an incident, a person or place that she is waiting to share with me. Indeed, the writings of Tagore make her feel simultaneously at home but also outside, in the world - and not only in this material, geographical sense. While unpacking boxes during lockdown, I found an old copy of *Ghare-Baire* (1916) (translated into English as *The Home and the World*). I took it to mum and while we re-read the book, it inspired a host of conversational topics as we reflected on our own relationship. In the novel, Tagore explores intersections and conflicts between the home, the nation and the world beyond, engaging with ideas about tradition and modernity. These tensions also marked our lives as my migrant parents adapted to living in Britain with three daughters born in London whose aspirations and attitudes often diverged from their own. Additionally, life in England was initially difficult as they had to negotiate unfamiliar social conventions and become accustomed to spaces that were very different to those with which they had been conversant. In attempting to detail how she experienced these struggles in the early days of their move to England, mum draws on a particular passage from Tagore:

Curiously enough, my greatest fear is lest I should be reborn in Europe! For there one cannot recline like this with one's whole being laid open to the infinite above one is liable, I am afraid, to be soundly rated for lying down at all. I should probably have been hustling strenuously in some factory or bank, or Parliament. Like the roads there, one's mind has to be stone metalled for heavy traffic geometrically laid out, and kept clear and regulated. (1920: 20)

And so it was that mum and I spent lockdown re-reading Tagore and recounting the numerous stories that this aroused. While Tagore's writing solicited a wealth of memories and ideas about place, it also created an affective, intimate relational space between us, beyond the text. When lockdown restrictions finally eased, we shifted our reading to inside her flat, in the sitting room. Despite this changed geography, our conversations were no less affective than those that took place when we sat across the threshold of her flat. However, no longer cocooned and segregated in the same way, the outside world seeped into the intimate space that we had created on each visit. Yet, the opening up of our access to the wider world with the further easing of lockdown restrictions was also welcome. At this point, to mark our time reading Tagore, I took mum out for a drive to no. 3 Villas in the Vale of Health, Hampstead, the house where the author resided when he visited London in 1912. As we stood outside, craning our necks to see the blue plaque that was affixed to the façade in 1961 by London County Council to commemorate his visit and that was now half shrouded in Wisteria, mum recalled that Tagore had died on the same day as our outing, the 7 August, in 1941.

It has now been almost six months since we began reading together but still, every evening as she reads Tagore on her own in her flat, she places a bookmark in a page to remind herself of what she will recite to me the following afternoon.

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