

PAINTED VEIL: THE ART OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE MANJULIKA GHOSH

It is so many years ago and yet it appears as if it is the other day. In the onrush of memories I still remember the winter afternoon when my colleague, Chinmoy Goswami (alas! He is no more) ushered a tall and lean young man in my room and introduced him as Raghunath Ghosh, who, Chinmoy told me, had just joined the Department as a lecturer. The cursory acquaintance was slow to develop into a friendship - slowness, as Helen Cixous saw it, is the very essence of friendship. Yet, once developed, it is cherished and valued till today. Meanwhile Raghunath has distinguished himself as a scholar in Classical Indian Philosophy within India and abroad. Not only that, he has also proved his mettle as an administrator, as the Dean of the Faculties of Arts, Commerce and Law and as Director of Centers. Yet, academics was always his first love, the indefatigable scholar that he was and I believe he felt the most at ease in it. Looking back, I recall many occasions of critical, academic discussions with him as well as amused moments of jokes, humours and teasing sentences interchanged over a cup of tea. What becomes all the more remarkable is that despite his erudition, he hardly donned the mantle of a grave and stern "pundit" and was open to all that is good, beautiful and joyous in life. I wish Raghunath will keep that up in the years to come. Keeping in mind Raghunath's interests in art and aesthetics I have chosen to contribute an extract from a paper read in the XVIth International Conference in Aesthetics held in the University of Tokyo in the year 2002. Raghunath was a fellow participant in the same Conference.

I

"Painting is not my forte. Had it been so I could have shown what I could do", so wrote Rabindranath to daughter Mira from Japan.¹ This remark was prompted by a sense of despair and exasperation when he viewed the artistic works of the best contemporary Japanese artists which perhaps suggested a comparison with the delicate and sentimental works and style of the Bengal School of art, the forerunner of which was his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore.

The poet did dabble with pen and ink in his adolescence and youth but it was not, in the poet's own words, "any serious endeavour." It has been observed that Rabindranath's emergence as a painter is not at all accidental but is the culmination of a long period of preparation.² In his reminiscences he mentions his habit in his youth of sitting on a mattress in a corner of his room in the afternoon and whiling away his time sketching on an exercise book.³ Perhaps he prefers to look at them as juvenilia. There are also the three sketches of his wife, Mrinalini Devi, in her state of pregnancy, reclining against a pillow. The year could be 1986. He also drew and

painted during his stay at Shelaidah, the Tagore's family estate. But he had no illusion of his limitations and did not continue his early efforts as serious and worthwhile. This is evident from his letter to Jagadish Chandra Bose from Shelaidah in 1900.⁴ Hence, when Rabindranath, in the Introduction to the albums of his own paintings seeks to trace the origins of his paintings to his doodles he was not creating a myth about himself. Actually in those days he hardly painted; he made some sketches and drawings mostly. Further, we do not identify there any preoccupations with the themes that occur in his mature works.

It was around 1924 that Rabindranath turned to painting seriously. Why is it that Rabindranath with his unquestioned eminence as a poet, novelist, essayist and lyricist took up painting? Perhaps he was bound to acknowledge the creative urge felt within, an urge which he was not able to give adequate expression to through words – prose or verse. And this urge manifested quite capriciously – out of the crossing out and filling up lines in the pages of his manuscripts.(Figure1) After a pause, the pretext of erasure – criss-crossing and overlapping lines of his voyaging pen - was abandoned, and closed, self-contained, resilient shapes devoid of gestures began to appear, dominated by an original, pure, liquid calligraphy. By 1930, rhythmic vitality came to be increasingly overlaid with uninhibited, indiscreet emergence of recollected images. This strangely-characterized phantasmagoria revealed an astonishingly capricious private world in the very process of taking on shape and substance. There started a ceaseless stream of abundant creation as if the artist's creative potentiality was ready to erupt "like volcanic lava", to borrow the words of Abanindranath.

His contemporaries misunderstood his art and jeered at it in private. This was not at all surprising as the artist stood apart from the accepted canons and tastes of his time; from the declared values, codes and conventions of art. His art may as well be seen as a critique of conventions of art based on the rational code of constituted rules and techniques, in vogue in India and the West. His works have been linked with those of German expressionists.⁵ It is true that Rabindranath had the opportunity to view the works of the expressionists during his visit to Europe. Sometimes in 1924 he was instrumental in organizing an exhibition of the paintings of expressionists, Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Nolde, etc. at Calcutta. But whether he was consciously

influenced by the expressionist art form is difficult to say. To dub his art as expressionist *simpliciter* will be hazarding a hasty generalization. Again, his artistic creations are likened to primitive art. Ratan Parimoo says:

The heads of the creatures in a page of the *Purabi* manuscript resemble very closely the fish-headed idols from Easter Island. Another pair of comparison of the similar kind is the page of *Raktakarabi* and that from British Columbian carving.⁶

However, his art cannot be described as primitive art either although it contains elements of it. He was completely self-tutored, following his own artistic intuition and evolving a style solely his own. He walked his own path. It is, perhaps, because of this that there is no school of *Rabindric* art although he had opened up liberating doors for a lot of people. There are instances of literary persons turning to painting as did Victor Hugo, Goethe, Baudelaire and William Blake. Excepting Blake, the works of none of the others bear a stamp of originality. The merit of their creations appears commonplace compared to their literary genius. Rabindranath's paintings deserve attention independently of his literary work. They are, by any standard, remarkable.

Rabindranath has produced about twenty-five hundred paintings of various sizes, in various mediums, on papers, bamboo, plywood, rejected window panes, panels of almirahs and on earthen pots, in other words, whatever he could lay his hands on. And this was accomplished within a period of sixteen years, between 1924-1941, a period, when the poet was aging, intermittently sick, had various obligations and commitments at his Santiniketan Ashram and above all, when he was ceaselessly prolific with his pen. His visual creations are aptly called "The Last Harvest".

Rabindranath's visual creations laid bare strange, non-chalant, linear rhythms and assertive, disquieting, fantastic images. The phenomenon was apparently an eruptive rebellion contradistinguished from all the profound and serene values carefully tended and developed through time. There appeared in terms of two thousand and several hundred paintings (almost of the same number as his songs) the irresistible onrush of a variegated aggression of projected images: unfurling, animated ribbons; composite flower-birds; nameless, archaistic beastliness; ambiguous, sardonic imps; contorting primitive reptiles; proliferating monster-vessels, oddly sensuous nudes on extravagant furniture; improbable protagonists in a mysterious melodrama, distraught angular pilgrims on an unreal quest eternal; romantic dream

houses; illustration to lost stories; lovers silhouetted; incandescent evening landscapes; murderous enactments; characters and portraits; masks of sarcasm, masks of terror; delicate oval faces of silent lips – all freshly formed, rampant and iridescent. Categorical frontiers are dissolved, and the nascent inner world came to be populated with self-generating entities belonging as much to the state of awakening as to that of dreaming.

Rabindranath's art works can be broadly grouped into (1) figures of animals, (2) study of faces including self-portraits and (3) landscapes.

1. Animals are quite prominent in the first phase of Tagore's paintings. Creatures of the earth, water and reptiles as well as creatures of the underworld have found their way in his creations. We can only identify a few of them anatomically, for example, as a goat, a crocodile, a cock, a donkey and fox and crane from the fable. The rest is a mixture and arouses the sense of the grotesque. The forms of the strange birds and animals appear as if they come from another planet (figure 2). Many of these strange and fantastic creatures are infused with life and animation. The dynamism and life-force make them realistic if not real. Clearly, the poet's aim was not to represent facts but to seek his version of truth by his own means.
2. Among his study of human faces particularly memorable is a group of female faces whose form and pallor impart a peculiar mystery to them. Indeed, these paintings of the later phase are revelations of the unending mystique that he ever found in women. Their faces are often dark, not easily readable, with smiles half-hidden and half-suggested. The profound mystery they convey is heightened by a sense of silence, vibrant with drama. The faces are serene and yet melancholy, their dramatic sense enhanced by their being encircled by braids of hair encircling the faces or by veils covering a large part of the faces – oval or cylindrical in shape. The eyes often have contemplative, amusing yet piercing looks, the lips holding evaporating smiles (figure 3). Right in the midst of this second world of paintings and dominating it quite stridently stands the "Dark Lady" of this cluster.⁷ It is not one lady's face, in point of likeness, but many, variations of the same, creations of the original, or the archetype of the many moods and expressions. The portraits

are not really beautiful in the conventional sense. Yet they are arresting, and engage us in a way that makes it impossible for us not to notice them. It is futile to argue whom the archetype designates. It is more urgent to note here the expression of the moods, the passions and contemplation of the human condition.

Among his study of faces must be classed his self-portraits. All of us are familiar with this or that pictorial representation of the poet, his Aryan countenance. In some of the self-portraits we encounter a twisted, almost tormented expression in harsh, restless lines, acknowledging in art a life not susceptible to harmony and rhythm, rather expressing the inner recess of the psyche. In at least some self portraits of the later years can be detected a mingling of distrust, anger and hurt feeling, the poet's Sun-god-like appearance disfigured by being mercilessly scratched in deep, dark lines, covering the face and coming straight down to the chest, as if the artist is struggling to express in darkness and layers of shadow, his real self behind the apparent one (figure 4). A problem of personal identity is in order here. Some others betray a retreating and at the same time an agitated look or an intense urge to keep the agitation completely under control. Rabindranath's self-portraits are not many in number. Yet in at least ten self-portraits of his last years, one can detect this building up of the dramatic pressure between the opposition and the intensity. This is how Sankha Ghosh has preferred to evaluate them.⁸

There are many instances of artists indulging in self-portraits. We may mention Van Gogh and Rembrandt. Near at hand there is also the deeply moving self-portrait of Jyotirindranath, Rabindranath's elder brother, done during his solitary stay at Ranchi. But none contains the anguished look of Rabindranath's self-portraits.

3. In the paintings of **landscapes** the use of dark colours – black, brown, yellow-ochre – in silhouetted trees and hills and cloud- and- waterscape is immediately noticeable. The only bright colours used are yellow and orange for shading the sky in the fading light and darkening shadow of twilight (figure5). Nature is immersed in the darkness of either early daybreak or of

twilight. The poet's dear nature loses its brightness and joyousness in bleak uneasiness. The colours and the shadows that emerge from the technique of use of the colours are described as "surreal", bringing out what nature ordinarily fails to yield. His nature paintings are not mirror-images of nature.

II

The poet of light, when painting, has black as his favourite colour. Humans, animals, trees, flowers, creepers, everything is soaked in black. The dark and disturbing features of Rabindranath's paintings have led some critics and commentators to link them to the inner universe that the artist held in his unconscious depths. In his Foreword to the Catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition of Rabindranath's paintings in America, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the noted art historian, characterized them as "modern". He wrote with great sensitiveness about Rabindranath's paintings and long before William Archer ⁹ and following him, Sibnarayan Roy ¹⁰ has detected anything "libidinous" in those disturbing series of paintings, Coomaraswamy said that Tagore's painting was "comparable to the publication of a private correspondence." Indeed, the drawings and paintings of Rabindranath richly trace the extraordinary inner, even at times, libidinous (*pace* Archer and Sibnarayan Roy) journey of a complex individual through the ecstatic affirmation of existence, manifest as rhythm - articulate, inherent in form, self-referent – towards the convinced cognition of individuated imagery as dramatic characterization of concepts and associations, being the total fantasy of the emotional world.

The question may be raised as to whether Rabindranath's paintings can be described as "beautiful". Ratan Parimoo, whom we have quoted before, says:

It was not the case that he was not interested in a beautiful face. But on the whole it can be said that he was not primarily interested in the beautiful but in the grotesque.¹¹

What we are rather inclined to say is that Rabindranath's art effectively undermines the placidity and repose that often typify beauty. In other words, he was, perhaps, trying to show the connection between beauty's surface and deep structures – the deep having elements that often appear to be inimical to beauty at the surface level. Beauty is one among many features that art works may have – such negative aesthetic qualities as shocking and grotesque being among them. His paintings are not

beautiful in the conventional sense, neither are they ugly or disgusting. They are fantastic, whimsical and as such disquieting and even disturbing.

In the West, the separation of beauty and aesthetics in the sense of a challenge to beauty's hold upon art took the shape of a movement of the post-First World War, Dadaism and Surrealism, e.g. Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*. The former signifies anti-aesthetic creations and war-resisting protest movements. Perhaps the most famous and controversial Dada artwork of all was Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* which consisted of a urinal put upside down. It powerfully affected conventional artistic standards. The second means *An Andalusian Dog*. It is a silent short film of 17 minutes by the Spanish director Luis Bunuel and artist Salvador Dali. Some parts of the film are grotesque and shocking. Obsessed with death, decay and violence, the film assaults the old and unconscious habits of movie-making and irrevocably alters the aesthetics of film.

It would be too rash to say that Rabindranath was consciously or wilfully motivated by any such urge to preclude beauty from his drawings and paintings. His portrayals of "lady faces" are not wanting in gracefulness, though in a deviant way. There is, in his art, as Ratan Parimoo notes, "... vivacity yet combined with dignity", "the tremendous feeling for pattern, for rhythm and for colour matching."¹² Yet, such properties may not be suggestive of beauty. We wonder whether Rabindranath was sceptical of beautiful appearance, because they can be deceiving. Beauty in reality, beautiful objects at the base of artistic work is sensuous, and fails to express man's deeper experiences. His art also does not treat beauty as mere surface.¹³ It is related to the inner being of man which is mystically and philosophically addressed by Rabindranath as *Arup Ratan*, suggestive of a passage from the form to the formless. Perhaps his paintings suggest that art embraces all kinds of human meaning with no essential concept, beauty or sublime running through it. His paintings can be evaluated in another way, namely that Rabindranath was deeply concerned with the deep experiential issues relating to the socio-historical-cultural space of his time, and with how far his paintings could express these issues. Straying back to primitivism, to the elemental, though not in a conscious way, could be a signal of art free of beauty.

To summarize then: We have followed the background of the genesis of Rabindranath's paintings and attempted to understand, in several different ways, what could be his treatment of beauty in the content of his art. We surmise that an explanation of the internal tension in it is bound to remain conjectural and hence, unresolved, until further scrutiny regarding the purported "alienation" of art from the beautiful is undertaken. That would require an answer to the primary question; "what is art?" To work that out, however, remains the subject matter of another project.

Notes and References:

1. Rabindranath Tagore, *Japanyatri* Somendranath Bandopadhyaya, *Rabindra Chitrakala: Rabindra Sahityer Patabhumika* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Dey's Publication, 2009 (originally published in 1972).
2. *Ibid*, p. 34.
3. *Ibid*. p.28.
4. Expressionism is a term of wide meaning. In a general sense it described the form of art which conveys something of the personal mood of the artist – an excitement, a disturbance or agitation of mind and may be detected in the distortion of form or violence of colour which results from the state of tension.
5. Ratan Parimoo, "The Sources and Development of Rabindranath's Paintings" in Ratan Parimoo, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore*, New Delhi: Lait- Kala academy, 1989, pp. 21-97.
6. Asok Mitra, "the Dark Lady of Tagore's Paintings", *The Statesman*, May 9, 1983.
7. Sankha Ghosh, *Nirman ar Sristi* (in Bengali), Visva-Bharati, Bengali Era, 1389.
8. Archer met among other artists, Rabindranath when he visited India and was captivated by Rabindranath's paintings. According to him, " many of his pictures glowed with subtle colours but none of them had conscious subjects and all had sprung up from some hidden source of inspiration." William G. Archer and Mildred Archer, *India Served and Observed*, London: 1994 reprint, p. 30. Archer also realized that his art "was spontaneous and unconscious – the product of forces beyond rational control." *Ibid*.
9. Shibnarayan Roy, *Rabindranath, Shakespeare O Nakshtrasanket* (in Bengali), Papyrus, Calcutta, 1987.
10. Ratan Parimoo, "The Sources and Development of Rabindranath's Paintings", *op.cit*.
11. Many of Rabindranath's songs seek to bracket beauty's allurements. We may also mention his dance-dramas, *Shapmocana* and *Chitrangada*. The theme of *Chitrangada* is the short-lived electric charms of physical beauty and the weariness beauty's charm produces in Arjuna.