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Research Article



Nature and Imagination: Influence of the female poets of British Romanticism on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

This research article explores the profound influence of female poets from the British Romantic Canon, specifically Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) and Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793-1835), on the poetic works of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), focusing on their treatment of Nature and Imagination. While the Romantic Period traditionally emphasizes male poets, this study

contends that the contributions of female Romantic poets are equally significant in shaping literary discourse. Tagore, a renowned figure in Bengali and world literature, was deeply influenced by the poetic themes and stylistic innovations of British Romanticism. Smith and Hemans, through their exploration of nature as a source of sublime beauty and spiritual inspiration, introduced Tagore to a poetic sensibility that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries. Their emphasis on the emotional and imaginative response to natural landscapes resonated profoundly with Tagore's own philosophical and poetic outlook. This article employs a comparative analysis of selected works by Smith, Hemans, and Tagore to delineate the thematic and stylistic affinities between them. It examines how Tagore adapted and synthesized elements of Romantic poetics, particularly the celebration of nature's evocative power and the privileging of individual emotion and intuition. Moreover, it investigates how Tagore, drawing from his exposure to British Romanticism through translations and critical engagements, incorporated these influences into his own literary oeuvre, thereby enriching the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of his poetry. By reassessing the role of female Romantic poets in shaping Tagore's poetic imagination, this study contributes to a broader understanding of cross-cultural literary exchanges and the transcultural dynamics of literary influence. It underscores the transformative impact of transnational literary connections in fostering innovation and diversity within literary traditions. Ultimately, this research elucidates the enduring relevance of the British Romantic Canon and its female voices in global literary landscapes, highlighting their lasting impact on Tagore's literary legacy.

Keywords: Poetess, Nature, Imagination, Reader Response Theory, British Romanticism, Spiritualism, Landscape

Proposed Methodology: The discussion of this paper will progress following the Reader Response Theory. The theory was first heralded by Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005); subsequently, it was accepted and developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher. The framework of Husserl was promoted by Roman Ingarden (1893-1970), a Polish philosopher, and Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007), a German scholar. Afterward, Stanley Fish (1938), an American literary theorist established the reading process in a broader institutional perspective in his seminal essay 'Interpreting the Variorum' (1976). The Reader Response Theory is an analysis of the response of a reader to the text. It recognises the reader as an active agent who imparts real existence to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation. Reader response plays a vital role in this theory.

The Romantic period of British literature is divided into two generations. The first generation of Romantic poets is as follows— William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). The second generation of Romantic poets is as follows- Lord Byron (1778-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and John Keats (1795-1821). These Romantics have been considered the major Romantics in the British Romantic Canon. There are also notable female poets of the British Romantic Canon, such as Charlotte Smith, Felicia Dorothea Hemans, Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1843), and Mary Robinson (1757-1800). In this paper, Smith and Felicia Hemans have been included as Rabindranath has been

impacted by them. Furthermore, they have been included in the British Romantic Canon based on their excellence. The poetry of Smith and Hemans is not frivolous because, being women, they wrote poetry in the eighteenth century. From this point of view, their works demand a lot of praise in the present day.

Now, how and to what extent has Rabindranath been impacted by Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans is to be explored. First of all, the impact of Smith on the poetry of Rabindranath is to be explored concerning the conception of Nature and Imagination. The sonnet "To a Nightingale" (Sonnet III) by Smith was published in 1784. In this text, Smith has been charmed by the melancholy song of the Nightingale, and she addresses it as 'Sweet Sorrow'. The Nightingale has indeed been kith and keen to the poetess. In the text, the poetess uses the character Philomela whose life is full of weal and woe in accordance with Greek mythology. However, her suffering has been alleviated when she has been turned into a Nightingale. As a result, the Nightingale gets away in the 'Wild Woodland' as an escapist. Here, the description of Nature is very charming. In "To a Nightingale" the song of the Nightingale has been depicted as the 'Mournful Melody' such wise:

Poor melancholy bird, that all night long
Tell'st to the moon thy tale of tender woe:
From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,
And whence this mournful melody of song? (Smith 1-4).

On the other hand, Rabindranath depicts the same picture of a non-stop-singing bird in "Apeksha" (Wait) of 'Manasi' (Woman of the Mind, 1890):

Ekhanu ghughu dakichhe dale korun ektane. (Tagore 7-9).
The dove is calling on the branches in the pathetic tune.
Lazy due to the sorrow for a long time
Sat without coalescence,
Yet its ballad does not stop. [Translated by me]

Here, Rabindranath has been enchanted by the melancholy note of a dove. The bird is singing a song in a pathetic tune and unveiling the sorrow and suffering of human life. While there are resemblances between the above-mentioned texts, disparities are also found as usual. Smith, in her poetry, brings out the context of Greek mythological adherence, whereas Rabindranath does not bring out the same. Philomela is a mythological character, which is a fine example of an allusion concerning literary devices. On the contrary, the use of such allusion has not been found in Rabindranath's poetry. Moreover, the song of the Nightingale is the symbol of liberty in the sonnet of Smith, but the dove's song does not imply the same feeling in the poetry of Rabindranath. Above all, Rabindranath's poetry has principally been centred round the beauty of the indigenous rural area. A vivid description of Nature makes Rabindranath's text distinct from Smith's text.

Smith and Rabindranath, both poets, take into account the context of the storm in their poems. "On Passing over a Dreary Tract" (LXVII, 1784) by Smith and "Barshoshesh" (The End of the Year) of 'Kalpana' (Imagination, 1900) by Rabindranath- these two texts will have to be mentioned here in order to elaborate on the matter. The resemblance between "On Passing over a Dreary Tract" and "Barshoshesh" (The End of the Year) of the said anthology has been noticed

miraculously. At the very beginning of “On Passing over a Dreary Tract”, Smith portrays a vivid picture of the storm’s horrible and hostile activities. In Rabindranath’s text, like Smith, a vivid diagram of the terrified fauna and flora during the time of arrival of *Kalbaishakhi* (The Storm) has been portrayed. The text “*Barshoshesh*” (The End of the Year) of the said compilation is extraordinary for its theme, amplification of Imagination, spontaneity, poetic diction, lyricism, and quick motion. Let us quote from the poetry of Smith and Rabindranath in succession:

Swift fleet the billowy clouds along the sky,
 Earth seems to shudder at the storm aghast;
 While only beings as forlorn as I,
 Court the chill horrors of the howling blast.
 Even round yon crumbling walls, in search of food,
 The ravenous Owl foregoes his evening flight,
 And in his cave, within the deepest wood,
 The fox eludes the tempest of the night,
 But to my heart congenial is the gloom
 Which hides me from a world I wish to shun; (Smith 1-10).

Ishaner punjomegh andhobege dheye chole ase

Badhabandhohara (Tagore 1-12).

The mass of the northeast cloud rushes with the storm
 Free from bond
 The blue shadow spreads over the rural bamboo grove
 With heavy rain,
 The end of the year, the end of the day,
Chaitra comes to an end-
 The heart longs to sing the old tired year
 The last song,

- - -

The evening twilight glares through the isolated clouds
 With brownish eye-
 A flock of birds flies away to the blank
 Being frightened,

- - -

Profusely leap up my song like a lively storm
 In the endless sky
 Let’s fly away the faded and worn-out leaves
 With vast breaths of the storm, [Translated by me]

The hesitation, dilemma, and depression of the poet’s personal life are being shattered by the speed and hit of the storm in the text of Rabindranath. The text “On Passing over a Dreary Tract” by Smith ends in despair and dejection and there is no way to get rid of it. Hence, it must be said without any hesitation that the tone of Smith in this text is elegiac but Romantic. On the other hand, Rabindranath is an optimistic poet, so the tone of optimism is richly echoed throughout the poetry of Rabindranath. However, both poems glorify the tremendous force of

the storm. The storm has appeared with all its energy, force, passion, and indomitable power. In the text of Rabindranath, the old leaves and the heap of thoughts are blowing with the wind. Rabindranath bids farewell to the narrowness, superstition, and inertia of the past life with the storm. As a result, aged and old thoughts have been carried out by the storm. On the contrary, Smith has not been able to show the amplification of Imagination like Rabindranath. Hence, not only the similarities but also the dissimilarities between the above-mentioned texts have been noted. Both poets depict the pathos picture of the frightened bird during heavy storm. However, Rabindranath does not mention the name of the bird, whereas Smith mentions the name of the bird, the ravenous owl.

“The Night Flood Rakes” (LXVI) by Smith is also a sonnet included in the ‘Elegiac Sonnets’ (1784). Rabindranath wrote the poem “*Somudra*” (The Sea) of ‘*Korhi O Komal*’ (Sharps and Flats, 1886) in the fashion of Smith’s “The Night Flood Rakes”. At the very beginning of the sonnet by Smith, the sea is roaring fiercely to the tune of cries. It seems as if it is trying to express pain, grief, and suffering. The waves of the sea are trying to crush everything on the shore by hook or by crook. As a result, the entire harbour of the sea has been plagued by the hit of the waves. The intense sound of thunder is rumbling all around the broad beach on this gloomy night:

The night-flood rakes upon the stony shore;
 Along the rugged cliffs and chalky caves
 Mourns the hoarse ocean, seeming to deplore
 All that are buried in his restless waves-
 Mined by corrosive tides, the hollow rock
 Falls prone, and rushing from its turfy height,
 Shakes the broad beach with long resounding shock,
 Loud thundering on the ear of sullen night;
 Above the desolate and stormy deep,
 Gleams the wan moon, by floating mist opprest; (Smith 1-10)

In the present text, Smith uses personification, a figure of speech, such as- ‘Mourns the hoarse ocean’. It is the fine example of personification as a human characteristic has been applied to something non-human here. The same tone is heard in the poetry of Rabindranath, along with the use of personification. In “*Somudra*” (The Sea) of ‘*Korhi O Komal*’ (Sharps and Flats), it is observed that the great sea has become disturbed and agitated. The sea wants to break all the hindrances as the waves of the sea are swelling, always raging, and roaring. It seems that the sea is crying out to convey its unspoken words:

Kiser ashanti ei mohaparabare! (Tagore 1-22).
 What is the turmoil in this great sea?
 What bond always wants to break!
 To express the unspoken words
 The sea is crying like a child!
 Over the ages and miles away
 The turbulent excitement swells;
 Many restless souls are roaring,
 So the quiet sky is listening silently.

It wants to crush the whole heart
On the shore of the hard rocky earth
It wants to destroy itself in the tide
It wants to mix its water in the furnace

Taking away the words from the voice of the sea
I desire to express myself in human language;
I calm down that eternal anxiety,
The sea breeze always howls!
My day and night in a song
The sound of the music that will surround the earth and echo! [Translated by me]

Here it must be noted that Rabindranath has been able to apply personification just like Smith. The role of the moon has been crucial in the poetry of Smith, whereas in the poetry of Rabindranath, there is no role of the moon.

Felicia Dorothea Hemans, a female British Romantic, whose poetry has been fertilised by the elements of British Romanticism such as love of Nature and the amplification of Imagination. The creative power of Imagination has been affirmed by her like the male counterparts of the British Romantic Canon. Now, an attempt is to be made to look for the impact of Felicia Hemans in the poetry Rabindranath. The poem "Harvest Hymn" (1808) by Hemans takes into account the autumn season. The text "Harvest Hymn" is similar to the text "Utsarga" (Dedication) of 'Chaitali' (Poem of Late Spring, 1896) by Rabindranath. At the very beginning of the "Harvest Hymn", the poetess describes the prolific bounties of autumn. Autumn is the season of mellow fruits when ripe fruits, fertile grains, and flowers are visible in the environment. Really, this is a season of fruitfulness as well as joyousness and has a beauty of its own:

Now autumn strews on every plain,
His mellow fruits and fertile grain;
And laughing plenty, crown'd with sheaves,
With purple grapes and spreading leaves.
In rich profusion pours around
Her flowing treasures on the ground. (Hemans 1-6).

Similarly, in "Utsarga" (Dedication) of the same collection, Rabindranath illustrates Nature's gift e.g. ripe fruits:

Aji mor draksha kunjabane (Tagore 1-8).
My vineyard today
Is filled with clustered fruit

Bowed by the spring's wild gust,
Down to the earth subdued:
Unbearable ecstasy
Of juice-filled, clustered fruit! [Translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri]

During the time of close reading of the aforementioned texts, a sense of touch can be felt with great joy. Both Hemans and Rabindranath depict Nature image uniquely. Not only are the similarities visible, but also the dissimilarities between “Harvest Hymn” and “*Utsarga*” (Dedication) regarding the description of Nature. Felicia glorifies the autumn season, whereas Rabindranath glorifies the spring season in their poetry. Above all, Hemans focuses on the adherence of fertile grains, while Rabindranath does not refer to the same.

From this brief discussion, it must be said that Rabindranath has been impacted not only by male poets but also by female poets, such as Charlotte Smith and Felicia Dorothea Hemans of British Romanticism. During the discussion, it has been observed that in some cases there is a miraculous similarity between the poetry of Rabindranath and Smith, Rabindranath and Hemans. From this point of view, Rabindranath seems to have read the poetry of Smith and Hemans. Being influenced by the women poets of the British Romantic Canon, Rabindranath has been able to maintain his individuality in creating poetry.

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