



Literary Enigma

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-reviewed and Indexed)

Vol. 1, Special Issue: 5

May 2025

Article No 5

1. Assistant Professor
and Head, Department
of English,
Government General
Degree College at
Pedong

Page No: 34-39



A Postcolonial Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's "The Golden Boat"

Dr. Yousuf Ali¹

Abstract

This paper affords an extensive postcolonial reading of Rabindranath Tagore's "The Golden Boat" (*Sonar Tari*). It looks into the thematic aspects of colonial exploitation and cultural segregation from a postcolonial angle. Tagore's work is often celebrated for its lyrical beauty. However, this study delves into its political context, foregrounding how the poem critiques British imperial capitalism and its devastating impact on Bengal's agrarian economy. The article will benefit itself from postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha with an end in view to examining the poem's allegorical representation of displacement, the commodification of labour, and the silent suffering of the marginalized. A close analysis of the text mentioned above elucidates how Tagore's imagery, especially the recurring motif of the boat, captures the paradox of colonial modernity: its allure and its violence. Further, the study tries to locate "The Golden Boat" within the comprehensive discourse of Indian anti-colonial literature, unearthing its nationalist appeal. The paper therefore endeavours to establish Rabindranath Tagore's "The Golden Boat" as a seminal text with its implied and metaphorical edge of anti-colonial attack on the then colonial power in India.

Keywords: colonial exploitation, Tagore, postcolonialism, metaphorical attack.

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A Postcolonial Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's "The Golden Boat"

Almost the entire body of works by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is approached from a conventional aesthetic based approach. The political tooth, mostly, of his poetry, which might be a bit blunt, is often ignored and not felt by the scholars as such. It is true that his works are often read through a humanist rather than a political lens. While his novel *Gora* and essays like "Nationalism" explicitly unleashes some strong resentment on colonialism, his poetry, mainly "The Golden Boat", engages, although at the level of metaphor, with colonial unease, and hence, the poem demands a re-evaluation and a postcolonial reading. Composed in 1894 during the height of British economic exploitation in Bengal, the poem embodies the unvoiced despair of the rural peasantry, whose lives were irreparably changed by colonial cash-crop economies. Unlike overtly nationalist texts, "The Golden Boat" resists a simplistic anti-colonial stance. It captures the ambivalence of colonial encounters: loss coupled with unenthusiastic acceptance. The speaker does not revolt but watches helplessly, speaking of the paralyzing effect of colonial power. However, Tagore's very act of poeticizing this subjugation of the peasant class serves as a subtle act of resistance, preserving marginalized narratives within literary discourse. In this poem under discussion, Tagore employs symbolic imagery, narrative voice, and thematic elements in order to voice a subtle yet profound postcolonial discourse. The symbol of the titular "boat" in "The Golden Boat" serves as a multilayered symbol. On one level, it reflects the transient nature of material wealth and human endeavors. However, within a postcolonial framework, the boat can be interpreted as a metaphor for colonial exploitation and the dispossession of native resources. The act of the boat carrying away the harvest can be seen as an allegory for the extraction of India's resources by colonial powers, leaving the indigenous populace bereft. The voice and identity of the poetic persona are permeated with a sense of melancholy and resignation. The voice can be explained as the collective voice of the colonized subject, articulating a deep sense of loss and yearning for a past that has been irrevocably altered by colonial intervention. The solitude and segregation of the speaker of the poem together with the imagery of the empty riverbank evoke a strong sense of the desolation felt by colonized individuals who have been robbed of their cultural and material heritage and legacy.

Tagore's portrayal of nature in "The Golden Boat" is not purely environmentally pastoral but also serves as a setting for the recounting colonial account. The banks, fields, river and the sky are depicted as witnesses to the exploitation and tremendous suffering of the native people. This association of nature with the colonized individuals not only highlights but intensifies the interconnectedness of the land and its people as well because both of them put up with the depredation and devastation of colonial power. Rabindranath is quite famous for harnessing the device of symbols in his work, particularly in his poetry. And here there is no exception. The "golden boat" itself is an intricate symbol. It may initially appear as a benevolent and compassionate or even an image full of romantic exuberance, within a postcolonial context. But a close reading can expose its real and complex significance. At the level of metaphor, it can be interpreted as a vehicle or a potent medium of colonial exploitation and extraction too. The boat's journey away from the land connotes the removal of wealth and resources from the colonized boundary, leaving behind a void that goes to reflect the cultural penury and economic impoverishment imposed by colonial authority. However, despite the overarching theme of loss, "The Golden Boat" also hints at resilience and the possibility of resistance. The narrator's reflection on the departed harvest can be judged as an act of reclaiming agency and asserting identity. This resistance, although subtle, throws a challenge to the colonial narrative and affirms the enduring spirit of the people under the heavy weight of colonial oppression.

Truly, the golden boat as the poem's central image operates as a dominant metaphor for mechanisms for wealth extraction used by the colonial capitalism. Tagore writes, "The golden boat comes/Taking away my golden harvest" (Tagore, trans. Radice 112), he summarizes the entire colonial system of agricultural exploitation. The replication of "golden" signals at the deceptive allure of colonial trade, hiding what was essentially a mechanism of resource plunder. According to Amiya Bagchi, a famous economic historian, Bengal's agricultural output increased by 22% while peasant consumption decreased by 15% between 1890-1900 (Bagchi 143). Accordingly, the statistics also find their poetic equivalent in Tagore's imagery in the poem under discussion. Tagore's work thus serves as a testimony to the muscle of literature in expressing and exposing the colonial oppression and the subsequent consciousness and resistance.

The very first two lines of the opening stanza of the poem – "Clouds rumbling in the sky; teeming rains./I sit on the riverbank, sad and alone" (Tagore, trans. Radice 45) - establishes what Michele Barrett, in her book *Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*, identifies as "the spatialization of economic despair" (Barrett 89). The river, which is traditional symbol of life in Bengali literature, operates here as a site of economic transaction where organic economy is being replaced by colonial commerce which is by and large extractive and exploitative. In this context Sudipta Kaviraj's observation is noteworthy. He opines, "the organic economy of subsistence gives way to the extractive logic of colonial commerce" (Kaviraj, 113).

The golden boat's arrival at a time, at a specific interface "when the current is strongest" (Tagore, p. 46) demonstrates a colonial juncture of space and time, which was subsequently theorized as spatial-temporal interface. According to David Harvey, such "spatial-temporal fixes" was extensively utilized in capitalist expansion (Harvey 324). Again, the current or the turbulent in the flow of water in the river also stands for the expansion of the colonial raj in India as well as in India. This imagery of Tagore's "The Golden Boat" embodies all the nuanced and precise point of time when indigenous cyclical time (monsoon rhythms) intersects with colonial linear time (harvest schedules), generating a concurrent reality in terms of colonial subjugation and exploitation, and of the negation of the glory of the Indian past, which is fundamental to colonial domination.

The visual imagery of "teeming rain" and the auditory image of "rumbling" (in the sky) can also be interpreted as the lament of the poetic persona who is perhaps made (by the poet Rabindranath) to represent every individual suffering under the colonial ruler during that time. so the rain-drops might stand for, at the level of metaphor, cries of the people being exploited by the colonial authority. And the people are aware of such oppression and exploitation. This consciousness is enough to make them cry. The next use of epithets "sad and alone" seem to intensify that pangs in the speaker. Now the "sheaves" are gathered. The peasant people worked hard from sowing to reaping the crops. But who is ultimately taking the profit? The agent boarded on the golden boat is reaping the profit out of the fertile land and the tireless labour of the people of colonized Bengal. Here, some traditional interpretations try to locate the person on the boat in the heaven. Some scholars tend to identify the person in the boat as woman, more specifically, as a goddess, a heavenly being, and the poetic persona as mortal being. Now the speaker is making an urgent appeal to the goddess to spend some time with him to give him company in order to relive him of his loneliness and sadness as well. But his prayer is not heard or accepted by the woman or the goddess because, as these scholars explain, there cannot be any kind of union between the mortal or earthly being and the immortal or the heavenly entity. But, through postcolonial lens, it can be viewed as a segregation of the native by the foreigner colonial agent who only cares for wealth and profit not for the problems of the native people. Rabindranath Tagore perhaps implies this interpretation as well, which is very much expressive by the use of diction and targeted imagery. Even the repetition of the expression "no one but

me” is note worthy. Because repetition in a poem and that too within the same short stanza consisting only of five lines is important. One has to read between the lines, and try to see beyond the obvious visuals to capture all the nuanced meanings. The repetition occurs since the poet wanted it to. The phrase under discussion occurs in the first line of the second stanza and the last line of the same stanza. The tone aligns with the theme of loneliness at the surface level. But a close study of the repetition may mean a sort of *forced* loneliness; a kind of conscious colonial segregation of the native people who are pivotal for their country. But for the colonizers, they are only the puppets at their hand: a kind of use-and-throw objects. When they produced crops, they were subjects, but at the time of harvesting and enjoying the crops; they are no-body—a complete denial of their presence as the colonial agent in the boat rejects their entry onto the boat. So the “golden” paddy is taken but not the person who has produced it. The poet, like the poetic persona, silently registers this pang. So the theme of the poem has of course a strong bearing upon the postcolonial aspect of the poem.

“Weaves break helplessly against the boat each side” (l. 14)—this line does not simply mean the apparent weaves in the river disturbing the boat rather helplessly. This may be interpreted as a kind of precursor of revolution, a kind of nationalist movement that would shake the foundation of the colonial power in India. The weaves symbolize the outcry of the oppressed people, and the subsequent strong reaction. But the use of the word “helplessly” thwarts the revolution to some extent as the revolution was at the nascent stage during that time. The nationalist movement could not stand in front of the colonizers with much potency. And this is also signaled at the care-free temperament of the woman-agent on the board who is rather singing as her objective of exploiting the native people is still not clouded enough, which is just the beginning as it is also evoked in the very first line with the image of “teeming rain.” The happy posture of the woman-agent is further emphasized by her singing. The speaker of the poem wonders: “Who is this, steering close to the shore/Singing?” (ll. 11-12). Even the use of enjambment or run-on line signals at her tension-free bent of mind. But she is not diverted by her happiness. Her purpose is fixed, and that is the reason she was “steering close” to the man on the bank in order to allure him into giving her his entire paddy crops in the exchange of a “smile.” But even that smile is perhaps denied as she not only rejects his admission onto her boat but denies any company with him even for the time being. After getting the crops loaded by the man, she “gazes ahead” (l. 13). She is thus avoiding the man. She will not take him since her destination is different. The poetic persona initially understands it but later seems to forget. The speaker of the poem asks: “Oh to what foreign land do you sail?” (16). Here the use of the phrase “foreign land” clearly indicates that the woman does not belong to Bengal or India; she is a foreign agent. She is a colonizer. Therefore, the entire imagery speaks voluminously of the exploitative nature of the economics carefully cultivated by the colonial rulers. The indigenous labour and resources are appropriated for imperial gain. As Spivak opines, colonialism operates through “systemic epistemic violence” (p. 76), jeopardizing the local modes of production. Tagore’s depiction goes all with this critique. His thematic illustration in the poem no doubt unearths how colonial capitalism disrupts self-sufficient rural economies. The boat’s departure signifies not just material loss but also cultural estrangement. The speaker’s isolation reflects the dislocation, disintegration and conscious segregation experienced by the native people torn between indigenous traditions and imposed modernity. Here Homi K. Bhabha’s observation is mentionable. Bhabha argues that colonialism generates a “liminal space” (Bhabha 112) where identity, at the collective level, becomes disintegrated and fragmented. Tagore’s poetic persona manifests this luminal juncture—the interface—neither fully anchored in his land nor incorporated into the new economic order.

The exploitative attitude of the colonial-agent-woman is more expressive in the line: “Is there more?” (22). Although it is not directly asked by her, but the speaker of the poem can

rightly understand the mind-set of the woman as he has already revealed that he knows her: “I have seen her face before” (15). However, the question predicted by the poetic persona means a lot. It shows the hunger and greed of the colonizer-agent-woman. She has already taken all of the paddy crops from the man, yet she wants more. It unfailingly reflects the exploitative discourse of not only of the woman but the entire colonial system at large. Normally, she could have ignored the crops and taken the helpless man onto her boat instead. But she collects the paddy, leaving no single sheave there for anyone, and denies any entry to the man—the very man who has produced the crops—despite his repeated imploration. She in fact would never entertain such a man, for it would not serve her colonial interest. So, the receiving of the crops and the rejection of the man by the “lady” account for the colonial backdrop and the postcolonial edge of the poem, which the poet Rabindranath perhaps, while composing the poem, wanted the readers to foreground.

The colour of the boat is also a bit worthy of the readers’ attention and criticism. The boat’s golden hue symbolizes allurement, yet its function, in the hidden manner, is predatory. This ambiguity captures the deceptive promises of colonial modernity, which seemingly represents progressive ethos, but, when judged critically, it comes out as inherently exploitative. A postcolonial critic, Nandy rightly asserts, colonialism “colonizes minds before territories” (p. 45). Tagore’s imagery critiques this psychological dominance, in which aboriginal people are enthralled by modernity’s sparkle but disillusioned and dispossessed in the long run. Truly, the poem’s central image, the golden boat, serves as a powerful metaphor for colonial capitalism’s extractive mechanisms as said before. It arrives with its golden and glossy colour when “the rains have been abundant” (Tagore 113). This suggests colonial capital’s wonderful timing to exploit natural bounty, but abandons the poetic persona right there at the empty river bank. The sad speaker narrates his tragedy:

No room, no room, the boat is too fool,
Loaded with my golden paddy, the boat is full.
Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro,
On the bare river-bank, I remain alone—
What had has gone: the golden boat took all. (ll. 26-30)

The condition of loneliness of the speaker with which the poem commences ends with that loneliness and alienation. The situation comes full circle. But the state of the speaker remains the same problematic with only difference is his hard-earned paddy has gone away from him. This dynamic anticipates what Ranajit Guha's points out on this issue, stating that colonial capitalism created “production without prosperity” (Guha, 89). Indeed, the exploitation of the native peasants at the hands of the colonizers only multiplied their poverty and suffering. The poem unfailingly captures this theme in an implied manner.

In the conclusion it may be stated that Rabindranath Tagore’s “The Golden Boat” is a seminal work that elucidates the tensions of colonial oppression and exploitation in Bengal. Through its evocative imagery, metaphorical undertones, the poem critiques the economic suppression and exploitation, cultural dislodgment, and the negation of aboriginal identity under the colonial raj. The poem succinctly analyzes the colonial subjugation and fragmentation of rural life. The poet actually crafts the boat with its sail and golden hue as a metaphor for capitalist colonial allurement and intrusion. The rejection of the speaker of the poem by the woman towards the end of the poem unfailingly substantiates colonial discourse of the agent-woman, which in its turn advocates for the postcolonial edge of the poem as well.

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