

A glimpse on the Reception of Tagore in the Arabic Literature

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a polymath and one of the most versatile and accomplished writers of his age. His fame transcended the national boundaries, especially after he had been conferred the prestigious ‘Nobel Prize’ in 1913 for his masterpiece “Gitanjali”. So, the Arabic-Speaking World was not supposed to be isolated in this regard. Subsequently, when Tagore received the Nobel Prize on 13th November 1913, the Arab World came forward to welcome and celebrate the news wholeheartedly because Tagore was not only the first Indian but the first Asian to receive the prestigious award. So, daily newspapers of several Arab countries expressed their excitement and enthusiasm soon after the Nobel Committee announced that Tagore had won the Nobel Prize and Egypt was in the forefront as we find that several reputed dailies and journals published the news such as the daily al-Ahram and the journals Saut al-Sharq, al-Hilal, al-Jinan and al-Muqtataf etc. Later, many Arabic writers and translators paid their special attention to his literary works. And many books, research papers and articles were written discussing his life, literature, philosophy and spirituality. As he was a renowned personality all over the world, much has been written and being written about him. His diversified works of literature are studied and researched. Journal articles and conference papers are written and presented nationally and internationally. Hence, I don’t intend to take up any of these aspects to discuss in this concise paper. As it’s clear from the title of the article, I would try to discuss and highlight how he has been received, read and revered in the Arab World through Arabic writings and translations of Tagoreana.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Tagoreana, Literature, Bengali, Arabic, spirituality, Gitanjali

Introduction:

Tagore’s global vision and its proliferation in the world:

Tagore envisioned a world community with global citizenship. He founded Viswa-Bharati University with international goals and a curriculum in Santiniketan in 1921. And later, he established Cheena Bhavana in 1937 for international studies. He was undogmatic in his views, curious about diverse cultures and tried to embrace the best of both East and West. So, he tried to create a close relationship between East and West on mutual respect. On the other hand, he criticised militarisation, nationalism, and colonisation, considering them as a menace to the ideal global community (Roy).

Tagore visited more than 30 countries on five continents between 1878 and 1932. Everywhere, he tried to convey his message of pluralistic and transcendent world view. On the occasion of celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore at a conference in London in 2011, a book has been compiled, namely “Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception”, which talks about the proliferation of his views, ideas and philosophy in the world. It is also interesting to note that Tagore had already been reviewed and discussed in many countries before the Nobel Prize was awarded to him. But his reception and reading got momentum soon after he won the prestigious prize. The non-western cultures accommodated him on their own terms and likened him to Buddhist or Sufis and considered him the representative of Eastern philosophy and spirituality (Mandal).

Tagore and the Arab World:

The Arab world explored Tagore early and read him and his writings, first in English and French languages and later in Arabic. Some researchers are of the view that Tagore’s reception in the Arabic-speaking world can be divided into two periods. First is the period of influence; during the interwar years, Tagore remained an ideal and fascinating personality in the Arab world because this was the period that witnessed the ideological and literary movements which tried to change the Arabic literature in terms of form and content. So, the personality of Tagore, being from the East, seemed to be a source of inspiration in literature to fight against the West and Western culture. Second is the period of literary production; after Second World War, Tagore’s experience and the particular world ceased to be relevant in the Arabic literature due to the new literary trends. But production of literature about him and his works continued to be published and well received by readers (Awad 173). So, we noticed that many books and articles had been written and most of his books, including prose and poetry have been translated into Arabic.

The interest of Arab writers in Tagoreana:

Probably, Wadi al-Bustani was the first Arabic writer and translator to meet Tagore in Kolkata after he had won the prize. He had spent two days as a Tagore’s guest who had later written an interesting article about him in Arabic, published in the reputed journal *Al-Hilal* in 1916. In the article, he discussed his depth of knowledge, simplicity of nature, the beauty of poetry. He also talked about his masterpiece “Gitanjali”. And he was so fascinated by Gitanjali after reading it in English that he translated the same into Arabic (Sengupta).

All this shows that Tagore was a well-known figure to and respected by the educated personalities and renowned writers of the Arab world, which was evidenced by his warm reception during his visit to Egypt in 1926. The towering literary and political figures of the time, including Ahmed Shauqi, Hafiz Ibrahim, Saad Zaghloul, Ahmad Lutfi and Mohammad Hussain Haikal, had met him. It is noteworthy here that due to his visit, Egyptian parliamentary sessions had been postponed, which had been widely covered by the daily newspapers at that time. During this visit, Tagore had delivered two lectures; one in al-Hamra opera at Alexandria on 27 November 1926, during which he had talked about the existence of God in every living being, he gave the second lecture on 29 November of that year at Cairo's Hadiqa al-Uzbekiyya opera during which he discussed the differences between Western and Eastern philosophies (Awad 175). In 1932, Tagore had also visited Iraq and was warmly welcomed by the renowned Iraqi poets of that time, including Jameel Sidqi Al-Zahawi and Maruf Al-Rusafi.

After his visits, Arab writers' interest in Tagorean literature increased considerably. Taniyus Abduh was the first Arab writer to translate his book "The homeland and the world" with the Arabic title "Al-Bait wal-Alam" in 1925. After him, Wadi Al-Bustani translated selected parts of "The Gardener" with the Arabic title "Al-Bustani" in the late twenties of the last century. Later, Mohammad Habib translated the same book in poetic form in 1940. Yuhanna Qumayr translated drama and poetry with the Arabic title "Tagore: masrah wa sher", in which he mentioned that till that time, 15 books had been translated. Another renowned writer Tahir Al-Jablawi translated several books such as "Sadhna" with the Arabic title "Tahqiqul-Hayat" in 1947, "The Crescent Moon" with Arabic title "Al-Hilal" in 1955 and the "The Post Office" with Arabic title "Maktab al-Barid" in 1957. Similarly, Badi Haqqi translated a few books such as The Gardener (Al-Bustani), Chitra, Fruit-Gathering (Jana al-Themar), Fireflies (Al-Yara'at), Masterpieces of Drama and Poetry (Rawaye fil Masrahwa al-sher) and The Cycle of Spring (Daurat al-Rabi). These are some examples of Arabic translations and literatures produced about Tagore. Most of Tagore's works have been translated into Arabic even some books have been translated by more than one writer.

Tagore as an Ideal:

We got a glimpse of how Tagore was received, celebrated and respected by the Arab writers, and now I would like to highlight how he has been read and in what way he inspired the Arab writers. It is noteworthy that in the fifties and sixties, writers paid considerable attention to go into the depth of Tagore's intellectual and artistic world. The famous Arab critic Yahya Al-Khashab writes that the Arab world was aspiring for some new philosophy which they found in the works of Tagore and he went further to compare him with Aristotle. He also tried to find similarities between Tagore and the Arabic culture with the possibility that Tagore may have been influenced by the Arab mystics (Sufis) like Hafiz Shirazi and Jalaluddin al-Rumi (Awad 178). We find another Egyptian critic Ali Shalash who says that the reason for Tagore's popularity in the Arab world is that there is a similarity between his poetry and Arabic poetry in meaning and content, such as sublimity of meaning, purity of thought and depth of ideas. According to him, Tagore is a poet of love and wisdom, which he tried to justify by citing from his poems and dramas (Awad 179).

And Lebanese writer Fahad Jabur writes about Tagore that he was an enthusiastic nationalist, but his nationalist feelings were humane. Thus he tried to globalise his ideas and feelings while an Iraqi writer Harith Taha describes Tagore as a nationalist figure revolting against British occupation. He also uses many honorary titles and attributes for him after his visit to Iraq, such as *Messenger of culture, Poet of wisdom and beauty, Great Poet of East, Great Guest of Iraq, Unique Philosopher, Flag-bearer of justice and humanity* etc. The Syrian writer Dr Badi al-Kasm describes him as a *distinguished philosopher*, while Ahmed Faris depicts him in his article as a *Fighting Voice* against the British occupation. We find that most of his studies revolve around the call for rebellion against the coloniser because the Arab world in the fifties and sixties was reeling under the foreign, English or French occupation. So, he tried to read and present Tagore from that perspective (Awad 180).

From what I mentioned above, we can infer that most of the writings tried to depict Tagore as a *genius from the East* or a *mystic poet* or a *romantic writer* or a *philosopher*. However, there was some stagnation in the production of Tagorean literature to some extent in the seventies and eighties, except for some translations which were republished. But in the

nineties, he regains considerable attention. So, we come across the Saudi writer and diplomat Ghazi Abdur Rahman al-Gosaib, who translated Tagore's selected poetry with the title "*Jaula fi Afkare Tagore*" (A tour into the ideas of Tagore). Similarly, the critic Mohammad Shukri Ayyad got published a comprehensive critical study about Tagore's works, including prose and poetry. To be noted here is that he had written a number of books prior to this one, which is mentioned in the list of books given below. In addition, we find a number of books, translations, research articles, reviews etc., published in this decade which idealise Tagore as an ideal personality and source of inspiration for many Arab writers.

A cursory review of Tagoreana in Arabic:

In the 21st century, we can see that considerable literature about Tagore has been produced in different countries of the Arab World, especially Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. And the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore in 2011 also generated some renewed interest in the writer and his literary works that every now and then, we can see the proliferation of Tagoreana in different forms of literature and culture. Apart from the translation of Tagore's works, many books, research papers and articles have been written and being written. It is impossible to discuss and mention all those works in this concise paper. So, I am enlisting below some Arabic translations of Arabic books on Tagore which have not been discussed in the paper.

Arabic Translations of Tagore's works:

- Mukhtarat min ash'ar gharamiyah li-Rabindaranat Taghur (Selections from the love poetry of Rabindranath Tagore), translated by Wadi' al-Bustani, Cairo, 1920.
- Qurban al-aghani (Songs' Offerings), translated by Yuhanna Qumayr, Lebanon, 1948.
- Al-Zanabiq al-humr (Red Lilies), translated by Ahmad 'Abd al-Ghafur 'Attar, Cairo, 1952.
- Sullat al-Fakihah (Fruit Basket), translated by Father Ayyub Falluh, Beirut, 1958.
- Al-Shi'r wa al-masrah (Poetry and Theatre), translated by Badi Haqqi, Beirut, 1972.
- Min al-masrah al-'alimi (From the World Stage), Kuwait.
- Hakadha ghanna Taghur (Thus Sang Tagore), translated by Khalifa Muhammad, Libya 1989.
- Aghani wa ash'ar (Songs and Poems), translated by Abdul Wahid Lu'lua, Abu Dhabi, 1995.
- Dhikrayati (My Reminiscences), translated by Salah Salah, Abu Dhabi, 1995.
- Min rawai' ash-sha'ir al-hindi: Taghur (From the Wonders of Indian Poet Tagore), translated by Hazim Nazim Fadil, Abu Dhabi 1995.
- Al-Qasida al-akhira (The Last Poem), translated by Farid al-Shahf, Damascus, 2006.
- Qulub ḍallah (Misguided/Lost Hearts), Dar al-Bashir, Beirut.
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- Diyanatush sha'ir (The Religion of a Poet), by Musa al-Khuri & Ghassan al-Khuri, Damascus, 1988.
- Fi 'alam Taghur: Taghur sha'ir al-hubbwa al- salam (In the world of Tagore, Tagore The Poet of Love and Peace), by Muhammad Shukri Ayyad, Cairo, 2000.
- Aghani wa ash'ar Rabindranat Taghur [Songs and poems of Tagore], by Abdurl Wahed Lu'lua, Abu Dhabi, 1995.

- Mukhtarat min Taghur (Selections from Tagore), by Muhammad Tahir al-Jablawi, Cairo, 1961.

Arabic books on Tagore:

- Taghur, by Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib,.
- Taghur: al-wahdah al-ruhiya (Tagore: Spiritual Unity), by Muhammad Al-Mabkhoori.
- Taghur: Sha'ir al hubbwa al-salam (Taghur: Poet of Love and Peace), by Muhammad Ayyad,
- Taghur: al-janib al-imani (Tagore: From the Aspect of Belief & Faith), by Suhaila al-Husaini.
- Dhikra Tajur (Tagore anniversary), by Muhammad Tahir al-Jabalawi.
- Taghur: fi al-dhikra al-mi'awiyah li miladih (The Hundredth Birth Anniversary of Tagore).
- Taghur al-mu'allim al-insan (Tagore: the Teacher of Man), by Mishal Ubri.
- Bayn al-falsafah wa al-naqd (Between Philosophy and Criticism), by Muhammad Ayyad.
- Taghur wa aakharun: shu'araul hind (Tagore and Others: Indian Poets), by Adnan Baghjati.
- Taghur: failasuful hind wa hakimuha (Tagore: The Philosopher of India and its Sagacious Man), by Najib Zabib.
- Taghur: Sha'ir al-Hind al-mulhim (Tagore, the Inspiring Indian Poet), by Muhammad Sayyid al-Tahiri.

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