

Vol. 7. No. 4. 2020.

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International Journal of Social Sciences Arts &amp; Humanities (ISSN: 2321-4147)(CIF: 3.625)



### Short Communication

## The Two Voyagers

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#### ARTICLE INFORMATION

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**Article history:**

Received: 20-09-2020

Revised: 30-09-2020

Accepted: 05-10-2020

Published: 09-10-2020

**Key words:**Ontological,  
metaphor, journey,  
ocean, tradition.

#### ABSTRACT

The paper takes two poems Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" and Rabindranath Tagore's "Samukheshantiparabar" (Ahead there the ocean of peace) and attempts a comparative study of the two poems thematically, modally and verbally to bring out not only the resemblances but also the differences that, the paper claims, stem from the two poet's disparate ontological growth. Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" is a very popular and much anthologized poem, and Tagore's "Samukheshantiparabar" is one of the best poems and songs of Bengalis. Even so, the two poems have not yet been critiqued comparatively. The paper discusses the thematic, verbal and modal similarities and dissimilarities between these two brief but beautiful poems. Both the poems were written towards the end of the poet's long lives and both deal with the theme of the journey from earthy life to journey beyond. Hence the paper's metaphorical title. The method used in the paper is one of comparative close analysis: some crucial words and lines of two poems have been juxtaposed and critically discussed. Relevant lines from Shakespeare Milton, Vaughan and Hopkins are also summoned with a view to reinforcing the comparative critique. The result obtained highlights the two poet's disparate ontological quests that color their poems and also offers a slice of difference between the West and the East. In conclusion, the paper briefly focuses on the possible reason(s) for the basic difference between the two poet's quests.

#### Introduction

A Bengali reader of English poetry might find it a joy to juxtapose Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" (Ricks, 313) and Rabindranath Tagore's "Samukheshantiparabar" (Ahead there the ocean of peace) (Tagore, 113) (all translations of Tagore's poem in this paper are by the authors) and to see how they resemble each other thematically, modally, and even sometimes, verbally. The resemblances however should not be allowed to blind us to a subtle but important difference between the two poems - a difference that probably stems from the two poets' disparate ontological quests.

One need not labour much to trace the extent to which the two poems run parallel. Both the poets are looking beyond their earthly existence that has almost come to a close, and the apparent and even dominant mood is one of tranquility unperturbed by such pale cast of thought or inner turmoil as the momentary 'I fondly ask' (Palgrave, 63) of Milton or the dubious 'Thou art indeed just, Lord' (Ferguson *et al*, 1172) of Hopkins. Their looking forward is dignifiedly and devotionally serene. To both the poets, what is called an end is actually a beginning; and the feelings of the poets are conveyed by a diction that is simple,

International Journal of Social Sciences Arts &amp; Humanities

sensuous and passionate. Structurally, the shortness of the poems gives to them a prayer-like quality, quite in keeping with the poets' mood. Besides, the leading images including the maritime metaphors - Tennyson's 'The Pilot' and Tagore's 'karnadhar' (Pilot) - are identical.

None can doubt the seriousness the two voyagers betray about their imminent voyages or their deep, patient longing for their respective destinations. But a fastidious listener to their valedictory monologues notices that the Occidental voyager is less confident than the Oriental as to what is to come - that the former cannot see the offing as clearly as the latter. If we are not carried away by the noiseless tenor of Tennyson's orison-like utterance, we catch a jarring note struck by two apparently unimportant words - 'dark' in the third stanza, and 'hope' in the fourth and final:

*Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark! (St. 3)*

and,

*I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar. (St.4) (Ricks, 313)*

Whatever might be the identity of the 'Pilot', he or his realm cannot be associated with darkness unless spoken of in ambiguous terms. Nor can we say that only the 'bar' is engulfed in darkness; for, in that case, we are to characterize the region as a kind of no man's land, and thereby to indulge in abstruseness. It is much more convincing to see 'the bar' as the tryst where the poet meets the 'Pilot'. For one thing, Tennyson is certainly starting for a sort of 'bright shoots of everlastingness'. Besides, 'dark' may suggest (as in the phrase 'in the dark') ignorance and fear due to ignorance. Even if it be fearless ignorance, the question remains: can ignorance create total submission to or acceptance of anything? The whole emotive movement of thought built up in the preceding lines unexpectedly dashes against the word 'dark' which, with its harsh consonants and the almost gaping vowel, gives to the voice a touch of skepticism, if not agnosticism. Might we say, then that "[...] the dread of [...]" The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns" ( Davis, 153 ) puzzles the will of poet? This sort of dubiety is a bar to such resignation as Dante's famous 'in a suavolontade e nostra pace' / . Seen in this way, the two exclamations – " And one clear call for me!" and "And after that the dark!" which Ricks calls "vibrant rather than exclamatory" ( 314 ) –do not seem to be of the same nature. Together they form only a contrapuntal movement.

Now, to turn to 'hope' in 'I hope to see my Pilot face to face'. How strong is 'hope'? Lexically, 'to hope' means to entertain expectation of something desired: to look (mentally) with expectation. Tennyson, we feel, 'waits' and has a strong wish, but his 'hope' does not reflect a strong belief. The promise of proximity in 'face to face' is belied by the rather stand-offish 'hope'.

The presence of the rather blasphemous 'dark' and the feeble 'hope' definitely makes the poem more human than Tagore's: It reinforces what Ricks calls "a progress outward which is yet a circling home"(314). But, then, this gain exhibits a kind of loss, too – a loss left unnoticed by Ricks: the want of solidity expected in the ultimate utterance of a soul that craves so much to see his 'Pilot face to face'. And it would perhaps be over-simplification to say that Tennyson's is "a vision that is also a simple sight" (Ricks,314). What happens in Tagore, then? The fight of the alone to the Alone is quite unambiguous here. The vision of warm welcome – of beatitude – implied in the expression "Viratviswavameliloy" (May the immense Sphere take me into its arms) (Tagore,113 ) neutralizes the elements of doubt and uncertainty that might otherwise be active in the compound 'Maha-ajanar' (of the Great Unknown) (113).

Then, there is no darkness anywhere in Tagore's way. He hails the holy light of the 'Dhruvatarakar'(Bright Star's) (113 ) that will illumine his course- " Ashimerpothayjwalibejyoti / Dhruvatarakar" (There'll be the brilliance of the Bright Star) (113) . This light is not the Tennysonian 'Twilight' but a revelation emanating from some deep conviction. And, by association, the reference to the 'Bright Star'ends stead fastness to the belief with which the Oriental voyager sets out.

Rabindranath Tagore has been studied against English poetic tradition by many scholars. Tagore has been studied as a romantic poet and also as mystic poet. Sometimes the last phase

of Tagore's life is considered as a modernist phase although by common consent modernism in Benglai literature began in the 1920s with a rebellion against the influences of Tagore. Tagore has been prominently compared with Walt Whitman. "A Quest for Idyllic Beauty in the Land of Mystery: A Comparative Discussion of Rabindranath Tagore's "Aimless Journey" ("Niruddesh Yatra") and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Sultana Jahan and Mohammad Kaosar Ahmed, or *Walt Whitman and Rabindranath Tagore: A Study in Comparison* by C.N. Sastry are such examples. But No other full length study seems to place these two poems and attempt a close comparative study of these.

### Conclusion

Tennyson the British poet laureate had an innate romanticism that loathed Victorian materialism and yet he could not ignore the huge progress of the sciences of his time. Hence a note of divided 'self' of doubt is always there to be found in his poetry and ontological quest. Tagore ,the first Asian Nobel laureate ,was forever steeped in the ideal if the Upanishads –ideals that lay at the core of his concept of "jeevan –debata" (god of life) which made his ontological quests free of, and immune to, any doubts whatsoever.

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