

**PERIPHERALIZATION OF THE NATIVE- REFLECTION ON THAKUR'S  
ANTITHETICAL BINARIES**

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**ABSTRACT :** Poet Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941) of Bangla Literature is uniquely great for his ability to provide artistic excellence into his literature. On many occasions in his literary works, he is apparently seen as upholding indigenous ideas of India, humanity, anti-colonialism, opposition to child marriage etc. But immediately afterwards when minutely observed, binaries are formed when either his literary works themselves or his practical life provides more powerful ideas of him that contradict and cancel out each of Thakur's prior standpoints or ideas. Thus the formed binaries are resolved and Thakur emerges as a poetic figure to peripheralize his natives. This paper has the aim to explore how in his literature Thakur's antithetical binaries of contradictory ideas themselves merge into homogenous ideas of advocating indiscriminate assuming of Western ideas, negligence towards the cause of tortured humanity in the hand of colonialism, colonialism itself and indifference to the custom of *child-marriage*, and contribute to the peripheralization of the natives.

**KEYWORDS:** Thakur, Peripheralization, the Natives, Antithetical Binaries, Merge

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**INTRODUCTION**

Poet Rabindranath Thakur's contribution to Bangla literature is priceless. He belongs to Bengal of Indo-Pak sub-continent of British colonial rule. While his Bengal is under colonial regime (1757-1947), it predictably experiences terrible colonial torture. In this situation British cultural and intellectual hegemonies are materialized while the sub-continent has its thousand years' resourceful heritage of thought and culture dominated by the major religious traditions - Islam and Hinduism. Again, in custom, apart from the proper ones, if the malpractices are concerned, child-marriage is one.

In case of research on Thakur, we see researchers are divided on the issues of ideas, humanity, colonialism, social reform as available in the poet. On these issues scholars like Kabir Chowdhury, Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Fakrul Alam and Jyotirmoy Ghosh opine that Thakur fulfils the demand of humanity and his natives. On the other hand, Ahmed Shorif, Farhad Mazhar, Sadat Ullah Khan, Bhabani Sen and György Lukács view that

Thakur fails in his poetic commitment. Thus, we may say that each issue of concern generates a pair of antithetical or contradictory ideas that may be called a binary.

As epistemology is a must for the readers, the binaries or complexities must be resolved. In doing it, we see that each binary merges or resolves on its own when each pair of antithetical ideas are set side by side. And significantly, in each case the second or contradictory idea (contradictory to the conventional idea of Thakur) turns out to be far stronger than the first one. This is how, Thakur is proved as neglecting or opposing native issues that are human issues as well, though the contribution of a magnanimous figure like the poet is much needed for a peripheral or marginal colonized nation like the Indians. By being so with Thakur, the nation's peripheralization rather proliferates. In this paper we will explore how Thakur peripheralizes his natives as his self-generated binaries of antithetical standpoints on ideas, humanity, colonialism and social reform like the removal of child-marriage merge on their own with far stronger contradictory ideas in each case.

### **Thakur's Binary on Ideas**

If we concentrate on Thakur's binary on ideas, we find that the *Upanishads* has been an integral part of Thakur's family, and has been handed over to Thakur. Thakur believes in the philosophy inherent in the *Upanishads*, which points out the harmonious spiritual relationship between a man and the world. By referring to Thakur's lecture series *Sadhana* (1913), prominent Thakur scholar Fakrul Alam opines that Thakur "had inherited from a family immersed in the texts of the *Upanishads* a belief in 'the great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world'" (69). Thus according to Thakur, the *Upanishads* can establish peace in a world torn with wars. Furthermore, the Upanishadian concept can also ensure equality among men across the globe by mentioning that all the creations-men, sky, earth etc, have links among them and construct an organic whole. This teaching is essential for a world where the West has generated terrible discrimination by making the majority of the world population the third world and themselves the first world. This Upanishadian teaching is to be spread, and the God has selected Thakur to initiate and fulfil the philanthropic mission. Referring to Thakur's lecture series *Personality* (1917), Alam writes "God has chosen the poet to articulate this vision of the unity of creation because 'the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of man's mind, which is the universal mind at the same time'" (69).

Thus, according to Thakur, the *Upanishads*, along with other sources of Indian religions and spirituality, is essential for world peace while the spirit of Western Renaissance and the Enlightenment fail to serve the purpose. This is the first element of the binary. But the second and contrary element in the binary is available in the drama *Achalayatan* (The Land of Immobility) where Thakur takes an standpoint opposing that of the lecture series *Sadhana* and *Personality*. In this drama Thakur shows a country meaning India, where people are reluctant to advancement and enlightenment building a kind of high walls around them or shutting the doors. They do practice knowledge but only to remain fixed in their backwardness. Their being engrossed in false belief and malpractice in religion and folklore are the main reasons. This is how the society is a place of obsolescence, superstition and immobility. In the drama Panchak is an inhabitant to whom one student is about to ask

relating the amount of sand which touches the nails of a Haret bird. This is a piece of superstition or meaninglessness in the name of religion that indicates its likeness with dark Medieval period of Europe when “there would be debates on how many thousand satans could dance on the thinnest point of a needle” (Chowdhury, S. I. 30). Here windows are always closed. One day a boy called Shubhadra mistakenly opens a window that faces the north and allows seeing beautiful world containing hills, cows and valleys which the boy is afraid of.

But with the arrival of Guru, there are changes. Windows to the north are opened. Even the King is disheartened at the impending scenario. At the end of the drama, Shonpangshus, a community of ordinary people led by Guru or Grandfather, drill a hole on the wall. Finally, the wall is diametrically destroyed removing suffocating confinement and ensuring the arrival of better days of free thinking, advancement and enlightenment. Shonpangshus who love to do work without which they are restless start reconstruction with their leader Panchak.

Thus Thakur compares the condition of the Indians with that of the medieval period in Europe. Europe succeeded in terminating the age of darkness through the Renaissance. Thakur wishes to have such positive change in India. Thakur writes: Nothing moves in the land of stasis. Walls made of stone, shut doors, piles of folk-lore, the hum of prayers, and boundaries characterize this place. The environment is very dark as it was during the middle ages in Europe. Learning goes on here, but this knowledge is no better than a cobweb (Chowdhury, S.I: 30).

Wrong interpretations and practices of religion and similar scenario in folklore may prevail in any society. But it does not mean that the whole religious affair and folklore will diametrically be rejected. Significantly enough, in India the tradition of spirituality and folklore have positive elements far more than the negative ones. But Thakur rejects them outright.

Again Thakur contradicts his standpoint of *Sadhana* and *Personality* in his essay “Praiccho O Proticcho” (The East and the West) and binary is formed. In this essay Thakur, on seeing beautifully arranged England, their development and activities, cannot but express the outburst of his admiration for them saying, “Yes, they are quite the nation of the king” (2000, p. 642). Then Thakur says that in comparison India is extremely shabby. Therefore, he indicates, India should follow those ideals of superior England, which remain behind the development. By following them the Indians should be united with the British colonizers and uphold a universal truth. In the essay “Nabajugh” (The New Era), hinting at the necessity of that unity, Thakur writes, “Unity is not only an expression of a heart, it is also a universal truth” (2000, p. 1049).

Emphasizing the issue more, Thakur views that if some men are together physically in a place, exchange of thoughts among them must take place too. From this psychological

unity civilization comes into being, and its testimony history can provide. The civilization is impossible if distrust or negligence is present. In “Nabajugh”, Thakur writes History says the place where men got together but had not been able to unite, had distrusted one another, neglected, did not harmonize the mutual interests, human civilization did not emerge there” (1049)

Thakur wants that colonized Indians will stop marking the British as colonizers that eventually gives birth to freedom movement. He wants that they will consider the colonizers as human beings, and be united with them for the formation of needful civilization.

Thakur says that due to the lack of the unity aiming at civilization, the lack which is present among the Indians, even the issue of humanity or the cause of mankind is disregarded. In “Nabajugh”, Thakur shows a severely sick British on the bank of a river. The Indians who have come to the bank do not even look at him as he belongs to different caste. They are busy in their worship. Thakur writes, “They have a substance called caste which they have known as superior to mankind” (1050).

Thus the first standpoint shown by the lecture serieses *Sadhana* and *Personality* is opposed and shattered by the second standpoint of the binary as available in “Praiccho O Proticcho” and “Nabajugh”. By mentioning England as “the nation of the king”, Thakur praises the ideals that help England to be the king of most of the colonized territory of the world, in addition to its other achievements. As India is one of the countries of that colonized territory, Thakur is giving validity to their occupation of his country. Thakur inferiorizes himself and his nation. So, the “unity” he means is the merging of the inferior colonized Indians with the superior colonizers, the British, with one way flow of ideas from latter to the former. He does not mean equal exchange which we do feel necessary for civilization. And, of course, in order to let the equal exchange take place, both the participating countries must be independent which Thakur’s India is not.

In “Nabajugh” he mentions the indifference of the Indians to the sick British who dies the next day. Undoubtedly, Thakur is right in his criticism. But Thakur raises question when he is silent relating his nation’s sickness of being colonized by the British. By saying that those Indians are worshipping but not serving humanity, Thakur expresses his view point that humanity should be at the center of religion. Again, this opinion is contradicted by himself in his essay “Attoshokti” (Self-strength) where he stresses the liberty of soul, not country’s independence. He says,

I have not paid attention to the kingship; I have kept my concentration fixed on society. That is why, freedom of society is truly the freedom of India since the freedom of doing welfare is the true freedom, the freedom to protect religion. (2000, p. 106)  
It means his spirituality does not pivot around humanity, an issue inherent in country’s struggle for freedom.

Actually in his lectures *Sadhana* and *Personality*, Thakur provides what the West, especially Imperialist British demands of a figure of colonized India. As the colonizers' purpose of having a trading colony like India is only obtaining commercial benefits, they need to subdue at any cost any attempt of rebellion of the colonized. For this, besides military hegemony, they apply cultural and intellectual ones to psychologically inferiorize the colonized. In this process they define and analyse all aspects of India to their own suitability. Identifying this Imperial strategy as Orientalism, Edward Said sums up saying, Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (88)

According to Orientalism, the British also interpret Indian religion as all-embracing and all-unifying spirituality of a cave-dweller Rishi escaping forever from any kind of involvement with the removal of socio-political injustice. This colonizers' interpretation of Indian religion creates a demand that Thakur fulfils by giving the lectures.

Thakur, considering the Western ideas superior and the native ones inferior, turns different from his nation, as an individual becomes intimate with the colonizers and his view has negative impact on the nation's identity issue. With this standpoint as Thakur can have some people in his favour, from the colonizers' part, they will always have advantage while rest of the population only torture. Discrimination is bound to arise Homi K. Bhaba views, The exercise of colonialist authority, however, requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power. (33-34)

As Thakur believes that indiscriminate internalization of Western ideas, especially those of the Renaissance, can give true freedom and happiness to his nation because to him, they were "the gift of Renaissance as the blessings of the all mankind", he almost reflects Jenny Sharpe's opinion on colonizers' colonial fantasies (18). She says,

[colonial fantasies about India where] Accompanying a public display of civilized life are images that show the natives being freed from despotic rules, raised from their ignorance, and saved from cruel and barbarous practices. (99-100)

Actually Thakur's family has nurtured an illusion for the British. Its testimony may be found when members of this family try to look at their native country almost second-handedly through the eyes of the foreigners. Such an example is given by Ahmed Sofa. Sofa informs "both Thakur's elder brother Jyotirindranath and elder sister Shornokumary Debi, for the plots of many of their novels and dramas, have borrowed materials from James Todd's book *Rajsthan*" (34). It was supposed to be opposite. And from them, Thakur bears the legacy.

These important findings one can reach from a subtle discussion on Thakur's binary on ideas. He indiscriminately rejects native ideas and accepts the Western ones. When many influential figures surrender to colonial hegemony of ideas, Thakur cannot become an exception. Thus it seems to be an exaggeration, when Abdullah Abu Sayeed, to signify Thakur's ability, brings the comparison of supersonic aeroplane that can move faster than sound and says, "Notably, in case of all aeroplanes this glorious achievement of speed is not applicable. (43)

### **His Binary on the Cause of Tortured Humanity in the Hand of the Colonizers**

Thakur feels intimately for the humanity tortured in the hands of the colonizers in different parts of the world. With this view the binary on tortured humanity emerges. In this concentration we see that Thakur writes a poem "Africa" opposing colonial torture in Africa. He expresses his iron-solid support to humanity which is brutally treated by the West. He writes,

Others came with iron manacles, With clutches sharper than the claws of your own wild wolves: Slavers came, With an arrogance more benighted than your own dark jungles. Civilization's barbarous greed Flaunted its naked inhumanity (Radice 102) It gives the impression that Thakur is in favour of protecting humanity which each moment is oppressed by colonial power in case of India too.

But we see he is not so and thus he offers contradictory idea in this binary. Shorotchondro Chottupaddhai has written an anti-colonial novel *Pother Dabi* (The Claim of the Path) in Indian context, which is similar to the kind of poem Thakur has written for Africa. As the publication of *Pother Dabi* is banned by the colonial government, Shorotchondro appeals to Thakur for his help so that the ban is removed. But Thakur declines saying that "the book is violence-inducing, that is, it makes readers dissatisfied regarding the English rule" (qtd. in Khan 18).

When Thakur prepares lectures for Europe and America, he is not late to visit those countries of development and give the lectures. He visits mostly European countries with England in his prime concentration "for two decades" starting from 1912 to 1932 with a view to giving lectures (Chowdhury K, 32). But never has he visited Africa, the continent of oppressed colonized. It appears important in our discussion in the light of the issue concerning Shorotchondro. However, Thakur's desire for global fame attracts him from periphery (Indo-Pak subcontinent) to the centre (the West). Thakur himself said, "I too have some deeds to do, I can no longer remain here in my little corner" (qtd. in Alam, 66). His desire to bring peace to war-torn world is praiseworthy indeed, but it is also the fact that colonized India with its tortured common people-the working class is a "little corner" or periphery for him. For him, similar is the case with Africa which is why the poem "Africa" is immaterial.

With this stronger contradictory idea, the binary of tortured humanity merges and it is vindicated that Thakur is perhaps indifferent to the issue of the torture on humanity by the colonizers in India and elsewhere in the world.

### **Binary on Colonialism**

Thakur offers binary relating his view on colonialism as well. In his drama *Tasher Desh* (The Land of Cards) (1933) Thakur shows a country of cards where “shackle is considered ornaments” (2001, p. 452). The cards cannot realize the value of freedom. So they live in complete imprisonment. At one stage two normal human beings—a Prince and the son of a trader—come. They are spontaneously free in their attitude, so much so that they exert a strong influence upon all. Almost all cards, along with the Queen, want to shatter the rule of remaining confined within the all-out imprisonment with a view to becoming human beings. At last, the King himself understands the necessity of freedom like the Queen.

To Thakur freedom is an integral characteristic of men with which they are termed as men. Prominent Thakur scholar Serajul Islam Chowdhury views that by showcasing the country of cards and their imprisonment, Thakur allegorically represents the colonized India, “a colonized India under imperial rule” (28). Chowdhury opines that Thakur, in his *Tasher Desh*, wishes to make the Indians aware, so that they fight against the British colonizers for a free India. Thus, the drama is anti-colonial, as opined by Chowdhury.

Now Thakur’s being in favour of the colonizers forming his antithetical binary on country’s freedom may be shown if from “Kalantor” (Another Era) example is drawn, where Thakur directly opposes freedom movement. But we will show Thakur’s indirect role relating education which does form his antithetical binary on country’s freedom.

Thakur advocates English education in a colonial country despite in 1835 British educationist Thomas Brabington Macaulay’s proposal of the education policy for India which is dehumanizing and hegemonic for the Indians. He says, in point 34 of his speech, by giving English, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern,—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (n. pag.). That Thakur advocates this English education is proved when we see in almost all of his writings the heroes or the heroines are educated with English education. The literary pieces *Hoimonti* (Autumnal), *Shomapti* (Ending) and *Noshtoneer* (The Spoilt Nest) are examples in this regard. In *Noshtoneer*, the protagonist Charu expresses strong interest for English poets like Tennyson which Thakur is proud to show. Interest for other literature is valid, but when Thakur’s characters hardly exhibit interest for native literature, it is self-marginalizing.

By inferiorizing own culture and literature, the struggle of freedom may be opposed. The hegemonic English education and culture play this role in case of Indian freedom. But Thakur in “*Praiccho O Proticcho*”, with complete denial of the truth, inverts the proposition

saying, Until we respond to the call of the English, our being together with them is fruitful, forcing the English to leave is impossible (2000, p. 659). When Thakur is playing this role, some figures belonging to subjugated societies even diametrically reject English because they know the reality. Such a figure is Ngugi wa Thiong'o who at one stage of his authorship gives up writing in English.

Thus Thakur dehumanizes and inferiorizes his nation offering an obstacle to his country's independence.

With this stronger element, Thakur's binary on country's freedom merges and he turns out to be in opposition to his country's freedom. Here we do believe the strength of English education and culture but the realities of Thakur and Ngugi's society must be taken into account.

### **Binary on Child-marriage**

It is viewed that Thakur reveals his strong opposition of child-marriage which has been the custom of his society. Thus, in this binary the first element is found. In the short stories Hoimonti, Shomapti and Noshtoneer he depicts Hoimonti, Mrinmoyi and Charulota respectively who are the victims of child-marriage. But the second and contradictory element in the binary appears as he himself raises contradiction when he in his practical life marries a girl of nonage and later marries off all his daughters in their child-age. Ahmed Shorif writes, "In his family life also in accepting an uneducated girl of nonage as wife or in marrying off his daughters of nonage he had no uneasy condition of mind" (16). It proves his frame of mind is typical of his family, society and his intellectual class. Thus, binary concerning child-marriage dissolves and Thakur is proved as withdrawing from contributing to the removal of humanity-turnishing custom.

### **CONCLUSION**

After deliberation on these binaries it is clear that Thakur, like Socrates or Rousseau or Ngugi, cannot fulfil the expectation of his nation and universal humanity. It is true that in his "life-cell the fire of sleepless genius burns robustly day and night with the thirst of doing the impossible", as deemed by Abdullah Abu Sayeed (43). But to us, this comment is applicable only with relation to his artistic ability. This is how Thakur eventually contributes to the peripheralization of his nation.

\*Instead of the conventional "Tagore", "Thakur" is written maintaining the originality and needful nativity in spelling and pronunciation.

\*\*All the quotations from Thakur as well as those from Kabir Chowdhury, Sadat Ullah Khan, Abdullah Abu Sayeed, Ahmed Shorif and Ahmed Sofa are mentioned in our translation.



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