

**Tagore and Shakespeare: Myriad Minded Men**

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**Abstract**

The Bard of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, has often been compared to the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare, but there are also readers who have viciously opposed the comparison. Living in two different temporal and spatial dimensions, in two different geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts, and on the opposite sides of colonization, it might appear difficult to find that these two literary giants had similarities, though there are articles that have attempted to identify them. This paper is an attempt to look at some of the common features that can be identified in the works of these two literary icons, divided by geo-cultural and spatio-temporal variances and yet analogous in the outstanding versatility of literary genius that make them unique.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Tagore, Versatility, Analogies, Literature

**Introduction**

A Google search for “myriad minded man” yields endless results with “Rabindranath Tagore” placed before the phrase, which was used by the University of Oxford in 1940 in its citation conferring Tagore with an honorary doctorate. It was chosen as the title for his biography by Andrew Robinson and Krishna Dutta, published in 1995, and thus gained currency, spawning numerous articles and write-ups being titled with permutations and combinations of this phrase, including this paper. Amidst the ocean of search results, one will find a couple of articles about the “myriad minded Shakespeare” too, which was originally the title of a book on the Bard by E A J Honigmann, and then taken up by scholars and enthusiasts across the world. There are multitudes of intellectual giants who have dazzled the world with their brilliance and creativity and genius, from the beginning of recorded human history, from Panini and Plato onwards. However, only a few among the multitude of authors are successful when it comes to transcending temporal dimensions and crossing cultural and generation divides. Only people who specialise academically or take a keen interest in specific knowledge domains might be familiar with the names of many such geniuses. This is where Tagore and Shakespeare become the exception, in that their names and contributions – perhaps not in its entirety – are familiar to a common man, especially that of Shakespeare. Tagore’s familiarity faces certain obstacles such as linguistic barriers, though in India, he stands tall in the list of luminaries.

This paper aims to examine whether it is possible to identify certain common features in the expanse and versatility of the literary domains of these two enduring masters, and to see whether the epithets “the Shakespeare of the East” and “the Shakespeare of India” or “the Indian Shakespeare” attributed to Tagore, stand justified.

**Rabindranath Tagore: The Quintessential Indian**

Born into an aristocratic family in pre-Independent, undivided Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore belongs to a long line of distinguished people who found creating history quite easy. It was rather a sort of family tradition, so to say, as can be seen from the long list of path-breakers and outstanding intellectuals in the family tree. Right from Gopimohan Tagore and his son Prasanna Kumar Tagore, ancestors four times and five times removed from Rabindranath Tagore, the family boasts of pioneers in business, academic and social realms. Prasanna Kumar Tagore, for instance, is credited with founding “the first modern Indian theatre in Calcutta”, his son “Gnanendramohan went to England and became the first Indian to become a barrister”. Another ancestor, Jatindramohan Tagore was a patron of musicians and poets including Micheal Madhusudan Dutt, and was also “was the first Indian to become a member of the Royal Photographic Society” (Islam 2021), and his younger brother, Raja Sir Sourindra Mohan Tagore is regarded as a legendary musician and musicologist, who “founded the Bengal Music School and the Bengal Academy of Music”, and would be “the first Indian to receive the degree of Doctor of Music from the universities of Philadelphia, USA, in 1877, and Oxford, UK, in 1896” (Khan 2018). Thus, polymaths abounded in the Tagore lineage, and they would go on leaving behind their stamp as first-timers throughout history: be it his brother, Satyendranath Tagore, who was the first Indian to clear the Civil Service exam with a syllabus set in sync with the British Universities, or his other brothers who would all give significant contributions to the fields of art, music, literature, education and social reforms. Perhaps Rabindranath Tagore would be the brightest star in a firmament of bright stars, but it was probably natural that he would shine bright in a multitude of domains, and become a name that is engraved forever in the annals of Indian, specifically Bengali history.

Looking into the legacy that is left behind by “Gurudev” as he was fondly called, first by Mahathma Gandhi, then by others, where to begin and how to end would be difficult tasks for any researcher. He grew up in a household permeated with discussions and performances of music, literature, political and social deliberations, his extra ordinarily brilliant mind getting all the nurture it needed to augment its unrestricted growth to become a Ficus tree that stood broad and tall in the tapestry of history. Though he preferred to identify himself as *ami kavi*, a poet, the briefest adjectives to describe would still run for several lines, as can be seen from the description provided by poetryfoundation.org.

Although Nobel Prize-winning poet Tagore prioritized poetry, he also made notable contributions to literature as a dramatist, novelist, short story writer, and writer of nonfictional prose, especially essays, criticism, philosophical treatises, journals, memoirs, and letters. In addition, he expressed himself as musician, painter, actor-producer-director, educator, patriot, and social reformer. (poetrfoundation.org)

One could not agree more with Buddhadeva Bose when he declares that, “[i]t would be trite to call him versatile; to call him prolific very nearly funny” (poetryfoundation.org).

“Gurudev” was not an epithet for merely being the first non-European and the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, but it is something that tries to capture the essence of his legacy – be it in Music, or literature, or educational and social reforms including founding a University, or for his political stance or contributions in painting or philosophy, or his boundless philanthropy. Visva Bharati University evolving from Santiniketan, Rabindra Sangeet originating from his compositions, his distinctive style of painting, and two national anthems are only the tip of the iceberg. As a writer there was not a genre he tried, and successfully too. For once, here was a jack of all trades, and a master of all. As Himadri, a popular blogger observes, “he was an entire culture in himself” (argumentativeoldgit 2010).

### Tagore, the Literateur

To comprehend the range of Tagore as a writer, it is essential to place his legacy in as much entirety as possible, before moving on to his literary classics, which are copious. He was a prolific writer for a span of almost six decades, and is said to have “dictated his last poem a few hours before his death” (poetryfoundation.org), but “he never repeated himself: each new collection broke new ground, both stylistically and thematically. The sheer variety of his poetic output is breathtaking, and makes nonsense of any attempt to comment in general terms on the nature of his work” (Himadri 2010). From *Gitanjali*, which won him much appraisal in the English-speaking world and the Nobel Prize, the list of the classics he churned out included poetry collections such as *Manasi* (1890) and *Sonar Tari* (1894), plays including *Chitrangada* (1892) and *Dak Ghar* (1912), novels such as *Gora* (1910) and *Chokher Bali* (1903), short story collections including *Broken Ties and Other Stories* (1925) and non-fiction such as *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913) and *Nationalism* (1917). He is known to have experimented with forms and stylistic devices, to have brought in psychological realism into Indian fiction, and to have gifted the short story to Indian literature (poetryfoundation.org).

As a writer, Tagore’s name is synonymous with Bengali literature, very much like the name of Shakespeare is synonymous with English literature. Of course, the name ‘Tagore’ is deified in Bengali culture, history and literature, but then, the name Shakespeare is also etched into the cultural legacy of the British Isles, though his legacy is more or less monolithic vis a vis that of Tagore’s.

### Shakespeare: The Man and The Legend

Baptised Gulielmus, filius Johannes Shakespeare, William, son of John Shakespeare, would convert this name into one that has enthralled entire English-speaking world for over four hundred years. Quotations penned by this man, who is not supposed to have finished formal education, have remained popular with generations of people, irrespective of technological advancements like never before and drastically changing preferences of newer gen people. Though his literary output looks miniscule compared to the massive creative output left behind by Tagore, it should be remembered that Shakespeare’s 52 years is nowhere near Tagore’s 80 years at Life’s crease. Also, Shakespeare was not blessed with as nurturing a home environment or family heirloom of polymaths, as per records. The circumstances of these two literary giants could not be more diverse, including spatio-temporal, geo-political, cultural and linguistic contexts, which all can affect the way a writer may evolve into a symbol of his culture and heritage.

Shakespeare is credited with having given the world “38 plays, 2 narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and a variety of other poems” (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust). English Literature and Language were still in the developmental stage during the Bard’s time, as was a nascent British Empire, trying to find its foothold amidst tumultuous internal and external strifes. The language and the literature and the empire would evolve, spread out and diverge from what it used to be during the Bard’s life time, and there was not the diversity of genres available for him to push the boundaries of his creative prowess. Nevertheless, it is to his credit that he had tried his hand at all available genres of literature including long poems, sonnets and plays, and within drama, all possible genres such as comedy, tragedy, history and tragicomedy, and all with the highest possible success. He mended the available genres and even established a new form of Sonnet, later christened as the Shakespearean sonnet, and invented numerous words to suit the communication requirements in his works.

The expanse of the British Empire during the era of colonisation infinitely helped in reinforcing the popularity of Shakespeare, no doubt, and by the time the sun set over the empire, the name was too deeply legendized by the so-called mainstream and English-speaking countries and communities, to suffer any set back. However, it is to be accentuated that there is something in the works of Shakespeare that enables it to transcend generation gaps with every coming century, whatever never-before-seen trends and innovations happen. Also to be mentioned is the fact that there is the Anti-Stratfordian theory which proposes that these plays could simply be not written by “a single, lightly educated provincial” because they “so brim with expertise” (Buslik 2020). The Anti-Stratfordians find it curious that “for a man who was so prolific with his pen, Shakespeare didn’t leave much evidence of his life behind” (Farouky 2007), particularly letters or deeds that would have thrown light on his family, his relationships, his hobbies or his travels. Thus, due to the unavailability of essential records, for instance regarding his education or the 7-year-hiatus between leaving his home town and then surfacing in London or the lack of data to show his accessing materials regarding foreign cultures and languages such as Italian, scholars argue that Shakespeare might as well be a myth, rather than a legend that grew from solid facts, unlike the legendizing of Tagore, which grew from the solid proof.

### Tagore vis-a-vis Shakespeare

Because of the sheer vastness of the magnitude of the heritage left behind by the two ageless maestros, a comparative analysis prerequisites certain definite parameters for clarity and conciseness.

For the purpose of this study, it is proposed to use certain aspects of playwrighting and lyrical poetry for the analysis, mainly

- i. influence of classics and epics
- ii. experimentation
- iii. presence and use of Nature
- iv. lyricism

### Theatre as a Stage: Classical Influences and Experimentation

Since Shakespeare is more recognised for his plays than his lyrical works, it seems only fair that the analysis begins with the plays. Most of Tagore’s plays were written for his students at the Santiniketan to be performed in the open air, and he loved to participate in them “as actor, producer, director, composer, and choreographer” (poetryfoundation.org). Shakespeare too, is said to have participated in the plays that he wrote, as producer, director and actor. In Tagore’s plays there is a synthesis of Western dramatic techniques – such as “the poetic or symbolist European drama” – and the Indian classical dramatic tradition which relied on “the depiction of emotion or *rasa* rather than of action”, all the while taking care to blend in “the folk tradition of Bengali *Jatra* performance – a combination of group singing, dancing, and acting induced by a trance-like state – to achieve a synthesis of music, poetry, dance, drama, and costume” (poetryfoundation.org), and this actually brings many of his plays closer in nature to Shakespearean plays, making the chasm of three hundred years melt away.

“Tagore’s experiments in dramatic forms extended from his earliest musical and verse dramas in the 1880s, through rollicking social comedies and symbolic plays in prose, to the highly imaginative and colorful dance dramas of the 1930s” (poetryfoundation.org). This love of experimentation is found in Shakespeare too, while tackling different genres of dramas. Both Shakespeare and Tagore had a habit of drawing from ancient epics, as evinced by the numerous articles and books on this aspect, such as *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*

(2019) by Jonathan Bate and *Influence of Kalidasa on Tagore* (2003) by Chinmoy Howlader. More than direct influences and allusions, the thematic, situational and emotional influences on Tagore and Shakespeare can also be not missed, because it is well-established that all great World Classics and Epics deal with “moral dilemmas, ethical conflicts, and even supernatural elements” along with “human emotions, moral dilemmas, and power struggles”, union-separation-reunion motif, and themes of love and identity (Pandey 2024). For instance, in *Hamlet* the moral dilemmas, perhaps resulting from the fatal flow of the unfortunate Prince, the dire situation he finds himself in – whether to take revenge for his beloved Father’s murder by killing the new groom of his Mother – the ethical whirlpools faced by several characters, supernatural elements such as the presence of the Ghost and power struggles between the major male characters are all common to epics and classics. As for Tagore, from the play he wrote when he was 20, *Valmiki Prathibha* (1881) to one of the last speeches he delivered, “The Supreme Message of Humanity Uttered in India” (1940), the entire canon of his works – both literary and non-literary – is rife with allusions and inspirations drawn from Sanskrit classics and epics, especially *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, says Tripathi in his essay “Influence of Sanskrit Classics on Tagore’s Creativity”, and goes on to say that he was also “in the habit of taking easy liberty with the sources of his writings” (Tripathi 2015). The same goes for Shakespeare too, who only took inspirations from classics and epics, such as episodes or characters, but made whatever he borrowed, his own, as one Shakespeare critic remarked.

### Nature as a Tapestry

Looking at the presence and the use of Nature in the works of both authors, Nature is inextricably woven into the fabric of the majority of their works, be it plays or poems, and in the case of Tagore, even non-literary works and speeches, such as “The Religion of the Forest”. Their deep-seated love for Nature keeps surfacing in the lyrical poems they wrote, and also in the dialogues of their characters, and even in the settings of their plays. Tagore’s Arjuna in *Chitra* muses that “Spurious fame spreads from tongue to tongue like the fog of the early dawn before the sun rises” (Tagore 1913), while Shakespeare’s Ulysses remarks to Achilles that “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* III, iii). Infinite number of quotations like these can be listed out to illustrate how much Nature was incorporated into the souls and minds of these two outstanding authors, despite living and experiencing city life and the urbanity of their times. Even their setting of plays, choosing of settings and stories, placing of characters, use of language without ever shifting Nature from the centre stage of a work – all point and highlight how they were kindred spirits, allied in their love towards Nature, enfolding Nature deep into their works.

### Language and Lyricism

The use of language is something that enables both Tagore and Shakespeare to remain at the *numero uno* spot in a gallery of Masters of Literature. The fluid and innovative way of using language to suit their intentions in conveying an exact shade of meaning is remarkably unique to both legends, be it their plays filled with dramatic energy or their lyrical works which vary in their tone and atmosphere. Any one sonnet by Shakespeare or any of the famous lines from his masterpieces in theatre can be used to illustrate the way a hardly-formed language becomes a mellifluous tongue in his skilful hands. “This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new” is from *Gitanjali* composed by Tagore, but it can easily be from the Shakespearean literary world, the similarities are so close as to be almost indistinguishable, be it in the use of internal rhyme,



the repetition of the /l/ sound or the flow of sounds that skate across the words giving the sense of flowing, very like a floating musical note that is ushered out of a flute by a whiff of controlled breath. “Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May” is how the lover sighs in “Sonnet 18” of Shakespeare, and which exemplifies the way he chooses the sounds and the words to echo the effect of roughness on the delicate buds, which resembles the way language is manipulated by Tagore to capture the exact shade of sensation and emotion for the reader. Every word is carefully chosen for its semantic and phonetic significations, and no word is replaceable without a loss in meaning and effect. The way they could apprehend the precise sense, sound and form of words to complement the emotion and effects they wished to unravel before the reader or viewer is simply awe-inspiring, and is not the forte of every other writer.

### Personal Similarities

Along with the positive points of similarities, certain resemblances can also be possibly identified in the personal lives of Tagore and Shakespeare. Particularly the loss of immediate family members who were very close to the writers, like the only son of Shakespeare, which may or may not have affected the brooding atmosphere of *Hamlet*, and the loss of Tagore’s beloved wife, two daughters, youngest son and his stoic Father preceded the composing of *Gitanjali*. Both authors never allowed their personal life to seep into their creative world, even though scholars have tried to pick out at least vague glimpses from their works, particularly with Shakespeare.

While tracing the formative influences, Tagore’s are clear and specific, and solid evidences of being influenced by classical writers, both from Eastern and Western literary traditions such as Kalidasa and Shakespeare himself, can be easily detected, and Tagore himself had made it abundantly clear in his discussions about his work. Shakespeare’s influences are also traced back to Homer and Ovid, and other classical writers of the then prominent Western traditions, though he did use the episodes for World History outside his beloved Isle and the continent. Perhaps the reason for their doing imaginative time travel and re-creating ancient times in their texts with a language that had nothing to do with the cultural scenarios they depicted, was probably the way their artistic minds were immersed in the rich traditions from yesteryears.

### Legacies of Tagore and Shakespeare: A Comparison

Unquestionable in their excellence and outstanding brilliance, Tagore and Shakespeare remain unaffected by changing trends and preferences amidst a world seemingly struggling to catch up with the rapidly changing world and social orders and institutions. It would be interesting to look at the factors behind this.

The first would of course, be their innate and infallible sense of the Universal – whatever story or timeline or cultural and linguistic settings they chose for their plays, for instance, it was invariably relatable universally, without the constraints of the local features or aspects. Ben Crystal, who is an actor, director and producer, explains the reasons for Shakespeare’s popularity as follows:

[T]he reason why he probably became popular then and is popular now is because he didn’t ever write what it was to be from Stratford-upon-Avon or Warwick or England, he wrote what it was to be human. Whether it’s being jealous of your best friend’s girlfriend, or loving someone so much you want to kill them, or trying to understand what it is to be a king or a soldier or a strong woman in a patriarchal society. These are

all things that we can relate to around the world; love and loss, yearning and hatred, jealousy and death. . . . the themes and the issues are universal. (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust)

The same reason can be applied for Tagore's popularity too, whether he is depicting the anguish of a Chitra who is confused about her falling in love or the loneliness of a young boy in *Dak Ghar* or the tender love of a Kabuliwala for an innocent girl child or the confused girl bride in "The Exercise Book", Tagore also selects situations that a human heart can connect with and empathise, rather than sympathize.

Another reason for the enduring popularity of Shakespeare as identified by Professor Sir Stanley Wells, the President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, is that every "time the plays are performed, they take on new resonances with life at the time they're being performed", and he goes on to add that

I think Shakespeare has outstripped his contemporaries because he is such a profound writer. His plays give us the greatest sense of the value of human life; of how people live; of how people love and of the importance of human relationships than any other writers of his time or of any other time. Shakespeare's plays are as popular as they are because he was perhaps the greatest writer who has ever lived. It's partly because he was writing plays which go on being performed and therefore which can be brought freshly to life for each generation by actors of the present. (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust)

This is again applicable for Tagore's plays and lyrical poems, because they keep re-inventing themselves every time they are performed or read, and they are able to adapt themselves to whatever timeframe they are placed and connect with their audience and readers. *Gitanjali*, for instance, with its song offerings and which was described by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan as "the offerings of the finite to the infinite" (poetryfoundation.org).

"As drama, they always happen in the present; it's not monumental stuff that goes out of fashion. It's perpetually asking to be regenerated, translated and spread" is how Professor Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute, describes the plays of Shakespeare. He goes on to say that "they adapt things themselves and they ask to be adapted themselves", and most importantly, he declares that "Shakespeare is folk art as well as high art" (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) something that cannot be used to define all World Classics and Epics even though they permeate civilizations as narratives. Whatever Dobson observes about Shakespeare goes well for Tagore too, because it is the same type of adaptability, the same appeal of being high art and folk art at the same time, the same capacity to be forever in the present and never slip into being out of fashion that characterizes the Tagorean plays and lyric songs too.

Fakrul Alam is keen to look for the "qualities of permanence" in Tagore's prose as translated into English, and is of opinion that

[i]n addition to the strength of his ideas and the intensity of his feelings, the main reason why his prose works found an appreciative audience for a long time in the west can often be attributed to his adroit use of the English language in his letters, lectures, essays and speeches and his ability to adjust his style in accordance with the occasion, the audience, the genre and the subject matter. (Alam 2009)

Though Alam's discussion is limited to Tagore's popularity in the West, it is applicable for the unabated popularity of Tagore in India too, across the multifarious cultural and linguistic backgrounds. If English is a reason for the sustainable popularity of a writer like Tagore, then

Shakespeare is in a naturally blessed vantage position, and Tagore should be at a disadvantage. However, despite his own claim that “I am not at all strong in my English grammar” and that “I do not know the exact value of your English words”, in his letter to Ezra Pound, claiming that “in my use of words there must be lack of proportion and appropriateness” (Tagore, cited in Alam 2009), he was one of the most exemplary users of the language, who could transport the sense and emotions in his native language to this foreign language with minimum to zero loss. This adaptability into foreign languages is ever present in Shakespeare too, and is one of the factors for his popularity spreading across the English-speaking world and outside.

### Findings

From the comparative analysis of extracts from texts by Shakespeare and Tagore, it can be found that there are clear similarities in

- i. the way both writers were influenced of classics and epics
- ii. how both writers indulged successfully in experimentation
- iii. how ubiquitous was the presence of Nature in their works
- iv. how clearly defined is their use of Nature in their works irrespective of genres
- v. how both writers successfully manipulated and exploited the language for effective lyricism

It can also be seen that the similarities between these two iconic writers extend beyond their literary canon, and spread into their personal life, the nature of the legacy they left behind, and even in the manner in which they prevail changing trends and thinking processes.

### Conclusion

The scope of this paper does not permit a more detailed discussion regarding the similarities between these two writers who are more of cultural symbols and icons now, than mere authors, though it can be established beyond doubt that there are several points of common features that can be identified in the literary canons of Shakespeare and Tagore. The presence of Tagore’s bust at Shakespeare’s birth place at Stratford-upon-Avon, the celebration of the legacy of this lofty son of India’s, in connection with the 163<sup>rd</sup> birth anniversary of Tagore, the engraved poem “In Honour of Shakespeare” that Tagore penned on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare, are all priceless appreciation for this poet who chose to remain rooted in his land, his provincial Bengal and yet grew cross-borders around the globe thanks to his outstanding creativity and versatility. The Bard of Bengal thus, without an iota of doubt, deserves to be equated with the Bard of Avon, and be rightly called as “the Shakespeare of the East” or “the Indian Shakespeare”.

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