



***The Child*: Rabindranath Tagore's Only Original English Poem—A Critical Reading**

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ABSTRACT

In the huge corpus of Rabindranath Tagore's poetical writing, we find only one poem *The Child* (1931), which Tagore had written originally in English. Sisir Kumar Das has edited three volumes of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, published by the Sahitya Akademi. However, almost all poetical writings other than *The Child* are translated from the original Bangla either by the poet himself or by other translators whose translations were approved by the poet. Surprisingly, the case of *The Child* is opposite: here, the English poem was translated by the poet himself into Bangla later, with the name *Shishu Tirtho* and was collected in the volume *Punascha*. In this context, this poem is significant in Tagore's canon. This poem was also written in a new poetic style with a prose pattern which was prevalent at that time after the development of the twentieth-century Modernist poetry in the hands of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. This paper aims at a modern critical evaluation of Tagore's *The Child*.

In 1930, in the course of his long European tour, Rabindranath Tagore was in the land of the Germans, a people for whom he had a high regard and admiration. While in Germany, he was taken, among other places, to Oberammergau, the well-known centre of Christian Passion plays. Tagore enjoyed a passion play about the life of Jesus Christ. This play has been performed every ten years since 1634. He saw these plays and felt so deeply moved and impressed that a few days later, when he was still in Germany and the inspiration was fresh and vivid, he sat through the whole night to write a long poem, *The Child*, the only one he ever wrote directly in English. Rabindranath wrote it when the German UFA company



requested him to write a text suitable for film. The poet's travelling companion Amiya Chakraborty was sending news back home at that time (24 July 1930) that Rabindranath “had been writing plays for film in English for the whole day in a new style. Like films, this is also his new passion for creation” (*Rachanabali* 517). However, the poem did not end up as a film. The finished form of that work is *The Child*. It was published in booklet form by Allen and Unwin Company of London in 1931. Later, it was translated into Bengali as *Shishutirtha* by the poet himself in 1932 and included in the anthology *Punascha*.

The manuscripts of this poem preserved in Rabindra Bhavan show that the present text of the poem has been prepared through many changes and traditions. In various texts, its name was planned as 'He is eternal, He is newly born', 'The New Comer', 'The Babe' and finally 'The Child'. Rabindranath read the poem under the name 'The Babe' (1 December 1930) at a reception at Carnegie Hall in New York. The meeting was organised by the 'Discussion Guild' and the 'India Society of America'.

The poem *The Child* revolves around a Biblical theme, the nativity and birth of Christ, transformed and transmuted by Indian myths, symbols and imagination into a moving universal drama of the ever-renewing life of man symbolised by the new-born child. The renowned Tagore-critic Nihar Ranjan Ray, in his book *An Artist in Life*, comments, “The mystery of birth and death and life's eternal march through the rise and fall of civilisations, through glorious light and fearful darkness, is concretised here in stately images, meaningful symbols and dignified diction; scene after scene roll on in mighty waves as it were, and in the Bengali version, at the final crests of the waves there is that life-generating refrain, 'Victory to life, victory to the newly born', the echo of which seems to reverberate through eternity and the universe (Ray 287).

The Child is a notable poem in Rabindranath's poetical works. The eternal journey of mankind in search of the ultimate ideal, and the symbol of that ideal, reaching a newborn baby through various conditions, is depicted in this poem. The amazing play of a far-reaching imagination and the unique technique of various and evocative word combinations are displayed in this poem.

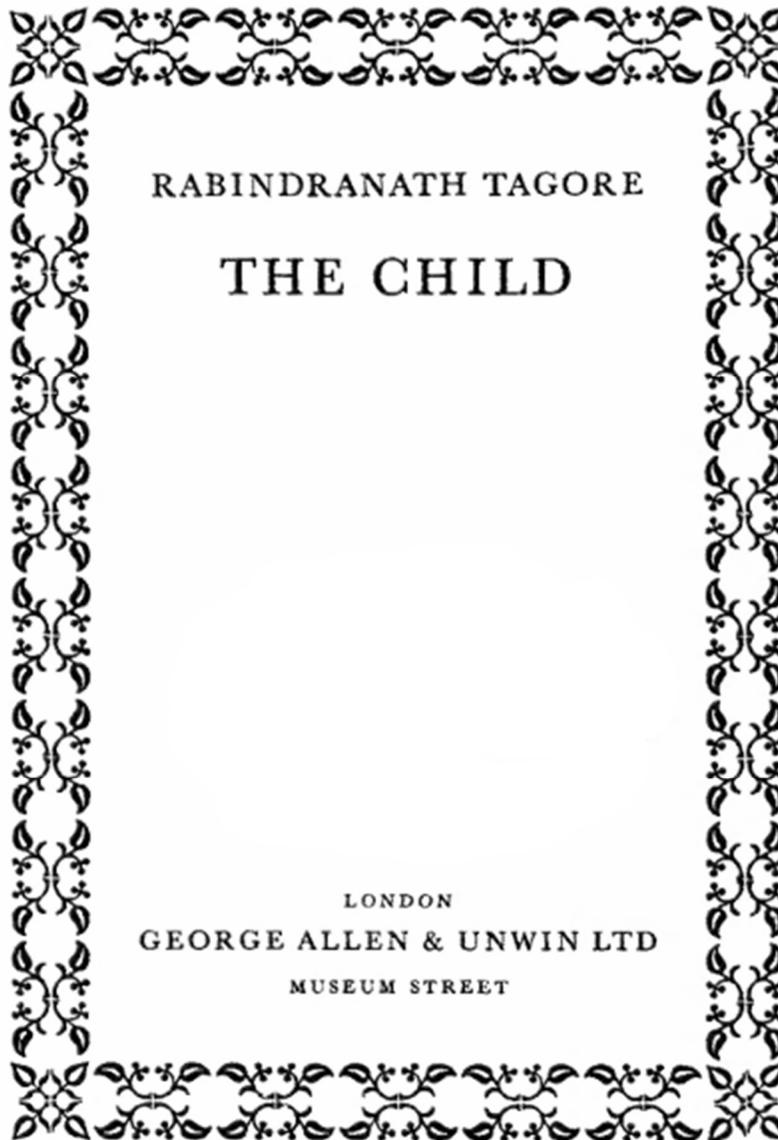
There on the crest of the hill
stands the Man of faith amid the snow-white
silence,
He scans the sky for some signal of light,



and when the clouds thicken and the nightbirds

scream as they fly,

he cries, 'Brothers, despair not, for Man is great.' (*The Child* 9)



Title page of the first edition of *The Child* (1931)

Since the beginning of creation, people have been living on this earth for so long. They are only intoxicated with food and shelter and fighting with each other, showing their animal nature. Physical strength is their only strength. According to them, struggle and violence are the only desires of humans.



A devotee saint lives next to them. Seeing this misery and ugliness of people, he calls out and says, man is not so small, know him as great. No one wants to believe his words: these words are self-deception. The surroundings were shrouded in the darkness of the primaeval age. Gradually, the clouds moved away. The dawn of a new age dawned. He called all the devotees and said, "Now set out." No one understood the meaning of these words well. Only in the life-vibration of the dawn, a subtle, incorporeal voice seemed to whisper in their ears, "Let us all set out on the pilgrimage of success." An endless procession of countless people—men, women, children, kings, subjects, rich, poor, fools, scholars, and priests—began. This was the first era of man's search for truth.

‘The time has come,’ proclaims the Man of faith.

‘The time for what?’

‘For the pilgrimage.’

They sit and think, they know not the meaning,
and yet they seem to understand according to their
desires.

The touch of the dawn goes deep into the soil
and life shivers along through the roots of all
things.

‘To the pilgrimage of fulfilment,’ a small voice
whispers, nobody knows whence. (*The Child* 10)

How many days and nights did the pilgrims walk, how many difficult paths did they traverse? In exhaustion and despair, they finally became desperate and killed their guide, calling him a liar and a deceiver; then a terrible reaction arose among the passengers. Everyone was remorseful, bewildered—there was no certainty as to where they would go. Then an old man said, "The one we killed will show us the way. He has died and is alive in our own life. He is the great victory over death."

They ask each other in bewilderment,

“Who will show us the path?”



The old man from the East bends his head and says:

‘The Victim.’

They sit still and silent.

Again speaks the old man,

‘We refused him in doubt, we killed him in anger,

now we shall accept him in love,

for in his death he lives in the life of us all, the

great Victim.’

And they all stand up and mingle their voices and sing,

‘Victory to the Victim.’ (*The Child* 15-16)

The group of young men moved forward again in joy. There was no doubt in their minds, no fatigue in their feet. They began to say, "We will conquer this world and the next. The soul of the dead leader is inside and outside our hearts. We have to reach the immortal world of light." This was the inspiration for their realization of their true nature.

Gradually, the pilgrims passed through cities, royal forts, gold mines, and lands ruled by books of death-and-death spells, and one sunny morning, at the foot of a mountain, at the edge of a forest, they arrived at a quiet village. There, on the bank of a spring, in a leafy hut, they saw a newborn baby in the arms of its mother. Seeing that baby, everyone knelt down and loudly proclaimed, "Victory to man, to that newborn, to that eternally living one." Here their journey ended. They reached the immortal world of light on the pilgrimage of success.

A ray of morning sun strikes aslant at the door.

The assembled crowd feel in their blood the primeval

chant of creation:

‘Mother, open the gate!’

The gate opens.



The mother is seated on a straw bed with the babe on
her lap,

Like the dawn with the morning star.

The sun's ray that was waiting at the door outside
falls on the head of the child.

The poet strikes his lute and sings out:

'Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.'

They kneel down, —the king and the beggar, the saint
and the sinner,

the wise and the fool,—and cry:

'Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.'

The old man from the East murmurs to himself:

'I have seen!' (*The Child* 21)

The meaning of this metaphor can be understood in this way: man is forever on a quest for the ultimate ideal. That ultimate ideal or the final goal is to gain the vision of his self-nature: to realise the eternal man within him. But, in the development of animal power, various impurities such as greed, lust, hatred, jealousy etc. prevent him from realising the god within him. Human being thinks that the pursuit of animal power is his only desire; he does not believe that there is a part of God within him - no other human being has greater potential. From time to time, saints and wise men appear in this mundane world to show us the ultimate truth and meaning of existence. They say that man is not what he appears to the outside world, he is great, he is eternal. He closes his eyes to the various evils and horrors of the world, yet he sometimes searches for a hint of light. He does not believe the words of devotees and saints— he thinks that all this is self-deception. Then, gradually, the fog of the unpleasant weather clears, and the words of the great man strike their dormant conscience. With his advice, man advances on the path of self-discovery, and under his leadership, he journeys towards the pilgrimage of success. Various types of people advance through various stages. Some understand his advice little, some do not believe it, and



some interpret it distortedly. When, due to their own weakness, the attainment of that ideal is delayed, then, in utter disbelief, they kill their great leader. In this way, those who advise on a greater life, people immersed in a hundred weaknesses and ugliness, cannot understand the real meaning of their advice and persecute them. After their death, in the great example of their sacrifice, the animal intelligence of man is cut off to a great extent. The words of the dead great men, their inspiration, gradually guide man towards his goal. Gradually, man abandons the pride, opulence, and luxury of animal power and, with a calm and peaceful mind, sees his inner soul — the eternal man. That eternal human being, like a newborn baby, spotless, white, pure, generous. Children are the symbol of the eternal human being within humans. This child-vision is the ultimate stage of the new age success of human life.

Apart from being a metaphor for self-realization, we can also consider *The Child* as a metaphor for the emergence of great men in the world. When various evils appear in the country and society, and the darkness of unrighteousness and untruth descends all around, then great men are born.

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśhāya cha duṣhkṛitām
dharma-sansthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge*

(To protect the righteous, to annihilate the wicked,
and to reestablish the principles of dharma,

I appear on this earth, age after age.)

[Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 4, Verse 8]

All these great men were born as children. With the birth of this child, a new age is created, the glory of humanity is established again, and man regains his true, eternal ideal. In this way, Buddha was born, Jesus Christ was born, and Sri Chaitanya was born. They all first came to their mother's lap as children. With the birth of these children, a new era has descended on earth. Before Buddha, humanity was almost extinct due to animal sacrifices, the loud roar of sacrificial offerings and the arrogant oppression of formal religion. At that time, Buddha came with a new message: humanity was established again with the message of compassion, friendship and love. Jesus Christ also appeared in the worst days of humanity; in the arrogance of royal power, jealousy, arbitrariness, and the moral degradation of man, a torrent flowed over the chest of the earth, and then the embodiment of love, Jesus Christ, appeared. Even before the advent of Sri Chaitanya, Bengali society had two terrible days; in communal differences, social judgment of high and low, and extreme moral degradation. Bengali society had become like a closed swamp full of



algae. With the advent of Chaitanya Dev, the flood of love brought excitement back to the stagnant waters. Society and life were liberated. Therefore, from age to age, the country waits for the birth of great men and moves towards their ideology. With their advent, people regain the glory of lost humanity.

In *The Child*, the poet has metaphorically described the birth of Jesus Christ. Two references in this poem are combined with the events of the Bible. The astrologer, who knew the stars and signs, said, "The signs of the stars cannot be wrong; their signs have stopped here."

"Now, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judoea in the Days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem.

Saying, where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." [*St. Matthew, Chapter II.*]

Then, Jesus Christ was born in a very poor house-stable. The inhabitants of the surrounding area were all poor shepherds.

"And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

"And there was in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." [*St. Luke, Chapter II.*]

It can also be seen in Rabindranath's poetry that the travellers arrived there according to the signal of the star, there-

The potter's wheel goes round, the woodcutter brings

fuel to the market,

The cowherd takes his cattle to the pasture,

and the woman with the pitcher on her head

walks to the well.

But where is the King's castle, the mine of gold,

the secret book of magic,



the sage who knows love's utter wisdom?

“The stars cannot be wrong,” assures the reader of the sky.

‘Their signal points to that spot.’ (*The Child* 19)

The poet is indicating that Jesus Christ was born in a poor village, amidst the atmosphere of poverty. The wise men of the Bible have become astrologers in the hands of the poet. The devotee also reminds him of John the Baptist.

In this era of frustration and faithlessness, *The Child* germinates faith in the minds of the readers.

The poet strikes his lute and sings out:

‘Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.’

(*The Child* 21)

The poem is highly symbolic. It ends with the rays of positive signs of development. Because of this, this poem is equally enjoyable and relevant to modern readers.

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