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## Nomadism, Psychological Autonomy, and the Politics of Non-Belonging: A Postcolonial–Cognitive Reading of Tarapada in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Atithi*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reinterprets *Atithi* by Rabindranath Tagore through an interdisciplinary framework combining postcolonial theory and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). It examines the protagonist Tarapada as a liminal subject whose repeated departures from domestic structures destabilize normative constructions of identity and belonging. Rather than reading his mobility as romantic freedom, the paper argues that it represents a structured epistemology of non-belonging. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity (1994) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theory of subalternity (1988), the study situates Tarapada as a subject who resists narrative capture. Simultaneously, CBT (Beck, 1979) is used to interpret his behavioral consistency as driven by cognitive schemas privileging autonomy and avoidance of attachment. The paper argues that Tagore constructs a model of subjectivity grounded in movement, impermanence, and psychological self-determination.

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Rabindranath Tagore’s *Atithi* constructs Tarapada as a figure whose identity is defined not through social integration but through persistent movement away from it. From his initial appearance, he is described as a “restless wanderer” who “could not stay in one place for long” (Tagore, 1914). This formulation is not incidental descriptive detail but a foundational marker of subjectivity. Unlike traditional literary protagonists whose development is oriented toward settlement, maturation, or integration into social



order, Tarapada's narrative trajectory is centrifugal, always moving outward from the spaces that attempt to contain him.

Each encounter with domestic space, emotional attachment, or social belonging ultimately results in withdrawal. What appears striking is not only his mobility but the narrative normalization of that mobility. The text does not frame his departures as rupture or trauma but as inevitability, suggesting that Tarapada's subjectivity is structured outside the logic of settlement itself. This positions him as a figure whose identity is constituted through refusal rather than accumulation of social roles.

This paper argues that Tarapada represents a postcolonial-liminal subject whose refusal of belonging destabilizes normative constructions of identity. His mobility is not romantic freedom or psychological instability but a structured epistemology of non-belonging. Through repetition—of departure, absence, and refusal—Tagore constructs a subject who resists containment and defies stable categorization.

The analysis adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining postcolonial theory, feminist theory, poststructuralism, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Spivak) explains liminality and representational refusal. Feminist theory (Butler, Showalter, Cixous) exposes the gendered asymmetries of interpretation and containment. Poststructuralist thought destabilizes fixed meaning and reveals identity as discursive production. CBT (Beck, 1979) adds a psychological dimension by reading Tarapada's behavior as structured cognitive schema rather than impulsive wandering. The convergence of these frameworks enables a multi-layered reading of Tarapada as cultural, psychological, and discursive subject.

The postcolonial foundation of this study begins with Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994), where identity emerges in a "third space" of negotiation. Tarapada embodies this liminality, but unlike Bhabha's productive hybridity, his condition is one of radical non-resolution. He does not mediate between identities; he evacuates fixed identity altogether. His subjectivity is therefore not hybrid synthesis but permanent suspension.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's intervention in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) further complicates this reading. Spivak's notion of epistemic violence is crucial to understanding how Tarapada resists incorporation into systems of meaning. He does not speak in dominant registers of power; instead, he exits discourse altogether. His silence is not absence but refusal of intelligibility.

However, a feminist intervention complicates this postcolonial framing. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) argues that identity is not essential but produced through repeated acts. Tarapada's



repeated departures can be read as performative iterations of non-belonging. His identity is not a stable essence but a repetition of withdrawal that constitutes subjectivity itself. Thus, mobility becomes performative resistance to social inscription.

Feminist literary criticism further destabilizes the gendered asymmetry in readings of mobility. Elaine Showalter's work on female madness highlights how women's deviation is pathologized, whereas male deviation is often romanticized or philosophically elevated. This becomes crucial in *Atithi*: Tarapada's mobility is read as freedom, while female characters who seek emotional attachment are positioned within domestic containment. This asymmetry reveals what Hélène Cixous calls the "hierarchized binary" of Western discourse, where masculinity is aligned with transcendence and femininity with rootedness.

From a poststructuralist perspective, identity itself is not pre-given but produced through discourse. Meaning is unstable, and subjectivity is always deferred. Tarapada's identity therefore exists not as essence but as textual effect produced through repetition of absence, movement, and refusal.

From a psychological perspective, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), as developed by Beck (1979), provides a structured model of cognition. Tarapada's behavior suggests a stable schema where attachment equals restriction, and mobility equals psychological equilibrium.

The narrative repeatedly constructs Tarapada through phrases such as "habit of sudden departure" and "could not remain in one place" (Tagore, 1914). These are not descriptive ornaments but discursive formations that produce identity through repetition.

From a poststructuralist standpoint, repetition does not reflect identity; it produces it. Tarapada becomes what he repeatedly does—he is departure itself. His subjectivity is therefore not interior essence but external inscription produced by narrative recurrence.

His movement destabilizes linear identity formation. Unlike Bildungsroman subjects who progress toward integration, Tarapada exists in anti-developmental time. His trajectory is not forward-moving but outward-dispersing. Tarapada's refusal of settlement also raises an important ethical question regarding the politics of interpretation itself. If identity is continuously produced through discourse, as poststructural theory suggests, then every attempt to define Tarapada becomes an act of interpretive control. His mobility therefore does not only destabilize domestic structures but also destabilizes the authority of narrative interpretation. The reader, like the household within the text, is compelled to seek meaning, yet Tarapada resists final meaning-making. This resistance produces what Derridean



poststructuralism would identify as “deferral”—the endless postponement of stable meaning. In this sense, Tarapada becomes a textual figure who embodies *différance*, existing always beyond the closure of interpretive certainty.

This has significant implications for postcolonial reading practices. If colonial discourse historically depended on fixing identities through categorization, Tarapada’s refusal of categorization becomes a form of epistemic disruption. However, unlike overtly political resistance, his disruption is silent and structural. He does not oppose systems of meaning; he simply withdraws from their grasp. This withdrawal destabilizes the very desire for interpretive mastery, revealing that meaning is always contingent and incomplete.

Within feminist discourse, this interpretive instability acquires further complexity. Judith Butler’s notion of performativity suggests that identity is not an essence but a repeated performance. Tarapada’s continual departure can thus be read as a repeated enactment of non-belonging, a performance that produces subjectivity through negation. However, feminist critique also demands attention to the asymmetries of who is permitted to perform mobility without consequence. Tarapada’s mobility is narratively unpunished and even philosophically elevated, while female figures in similar narrative spaces are often bound to emotional labor and domestic fixity. This asymmetry reveals that mobility is not merely existential—it is structured by gendered permissions within the text’s ideological economy.

Furthermore, Hélène Cixous’s critique of binary oppositions exposes how Western literary traditions privilege transcendence, abstraction, and mobility as masculine-coded values, while grounding, care, and relationality are feminized and devalued. Within this framework, Tarapada’s refusal to remain is not neutral freedom but culturally coded privilege that aligns with masculinized ideals of autonomy. The household’s inability to contain him thus becomes not only a narrative failure but also a reflection of how literary structures privilege masculine mobility over feminine rootedness.

From a psychological standpoint, CBT continues to offer explanatory coherence, but even this framework must be critically nuanced. While Beckian schema theory explains Tarapada’s behavior as consistent cognitive structuring, it does not fully account for the cultural and ideological forces shaping those schemas. His belief that attachment equals restriction may itself be culturally produced rather than purely individual. In this sense, psychological autonomy cannot be separated from socio-cultural inscription. Tarapada’s cognition is therefore not isolated interiority but culturally embedded subject formation.



Ultimately, the convergence of poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonial theory, and CBT reveals that Tarapada is not a simple figure of freedom but a complex site where discourse, ideology, and cognition intersect. His mobility is simultaneously psychological regulation, narrative structure, and ideological rupture. The significance of *Atithi* lies precisely in this ambiguity: it produces a subject who cannot be stabilized either by domestic ideology or by critical interpretation.

Through Tarapada, Rabindranath Tagore constructs a narrative that refuses closure at multiple levels—ethical, psychological, and epistemological. The text does not resolve the question of belonging; instead, it exposes belonging itself as a fragile construct dependent on containment, repetition, and interpretive authority. Tarapada's final significance, therefore, is not as a character who escapes society, but as a figure who exposes the instability of all systems that attempt to define what it means to belong.

A feminist intervention reveals that Tarapada's mobility is not interpreted neutrally within the narrative economy. His refusal of domestic integration is framed as natural or philosophical, while female attachment within the household is positioned as emotional excess or dependency.

This asymmetry reflects what Butler (1990) identifies as the regulatory norms of gender performativity. Masculinity is permitted mobility, autonomy, and transcendence, whereas femininity is structured around relational attachment and domestic containment.

Even within the household in *Atithi*, emotional labor is disproportionately located in female figures who attempt to integrate Tarapada into familial structures. Their desire for stability is implicitly feminized and therefore subordinated. Tarapada's refusal to remain thus becomes not only existential but gender-coded privilege.

Showalter's feminist critique of madness further illuminates this imbalance. When women deviate from normative behavior, they are pathologized; when men deviate, they are aestheticized or philosophized. Tarapada's mobility is thus culturally valorized, while similar refusal by female characters would likely be read as instability.

This reveals that mobility itself is not neutral—it is gendered privilege disguised as existential freedom.

Domestic space in *Atithi* functions as a site of ideological containment. The household attempts to stabilize Tarapada through naming—guest, son-like figure, potential member. These labels represent what Spivak calls epistemic violence, the imposition of meaning upon resistant subjectivity.



However, Tarapada continuously escapes these categories. His refusal is not articulated through discourse but through exit. This makes him partially untranslatable within systems of meaning.

From a poststructuralist perspective, this failure of naming reveals the instability of signification itself. Identity is never fixed; it is always deferred through language. Tarapada exposes this instability by refusing to remain within any signifying system.

CBT provides psychological grounding for Tarapada's behavior. Beck (1979) emphasizes that cognitive schemas determine emotional and behavioral patterns.

Tarapada's schema appears structured around autonomy preservation. Emotional closeness triggers cognitive associations with restriction, producing automatic withdrawal responses. This consistency indicates that his mobility is not impulsive but schema-driven.

Thus, his departures function as psychological regulation rather than emotional avoidance. He maintains equilibrium through movement, suggesting that mobility is not disruption but internal coherence.

Tarapada in *Atithi* emerges as a liminal subject constituted through movement, refusal, and non-belonging. Through postcolonial, feminist, poststructural, and cognitive frameworks, his identity is revealed as multi-layered: simultaneously cultural, psychological, and discursive.

Rabindranath Tagore constructs Tarapada not as incomplete subject but as critique of completion itself. However, feminist analysis reveals that this mobility is not equally distributed across gendered subjects, exposing asymmetries in how freedom and containment are narratively assigned.

Ultimately, Tarapada's refusal to remain is not absence but structured presence—one that destabilizes identity, resists containment, and exposes the fragile ideological foundations of belonging itself.

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