

Tagore's Subject Consciousness: Perspectives on Divinity

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Keywords: Tagore, subject, Brahma, cosmopolitanism, civilization

Abstract: As a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue between the East and the West, Tagore's creation of a subject consciousness is of great significance to the understanding of Asian civilisation, but it has not received due attention in academic circles. His construction of subjectivity reflects the characteristics of Asian civilization. Under the influence of the thought of Brahma, humanity is the spiritual subject in the relationship with nature and the divine. Tagore's transcendent subject is different from the West's subject which is completely defined by apposition with the object. As a force of reflection, the subject consciousness infiltrates Tagore's thinking on the relationship between Eastern and Western civilisation from the perspective of cosmopolitanism using the Asian philosophies of the relationship among nature, others and even the self. Tagore's construction of subjectivity is of great significance for communication and mutual learning between Eastern and Western civilisation.

1. Introduction

As a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue between the East and the West, Tagore's practice of various art forms focuses on the creation of a subject consciousness, which is of great significance to the construction of the subject in Eastern civilisation. Under the omnidirectional impact of ancient and modern Eastern and Western cultures, Tagore not only understands the western subject consciousness based on the contradiction between the subject and the object, but also is deeply influenced by Indian traditional philosophy. In the real historical background of the conflict between Eastern and Western civilisation, Tagore proposes that the spiritual civilisation of the East should be used to save the civilisation of mechanical efficiency of the West, and the important way to reach this outcome is through subject consciousness. How does the subject of Tagore's construction reflect the characteristics of Eastern civilisation in distinction from the West? Based on Tagore's attention to the philosophy of divinity, the author describes Tagore's digestion of the dichotomy of subject and object in the West and his emphasis on spiritual civilisation in an Asian way, and the author further describes Tagore's thinking on the relationship between Eastern and Western civilisation from the perspective of cosmopolitanism.

Although Tagore is influenced by Western philosophy, "*the work of Rabindranath is essentially Indian in sentiment and form*"[1]. As an important part of traditional Indian philosophy, Brahma lays the foundation of Tagore's religious thought, which has origins in the Upanishads. Tagore is heavily influenced by Hinduism, served as secretary of the Brahma Society. In the Upanishads, Brahman, as the noumenon of the world, has supreme power. "I" refers not only to man as the subject, but also to

other life in the phenomenal world. At the same time, “I” also replaces “Brahma”, in the language of *The Principal Upanishads*, where it is written, “*For him who sees this, who thinks this and who understands this, life-breath springs from the self, hope from the self, memory from the self...indeed all this (world) from the self*”[2]. In contrast, “ego” refers to the self of an individual life. Therefore, Brahma is the manifestation of the essential identity of the subject in the phenomenal world and the noumenon of the general phenomenal world. The lives in the phenomenal world in Tagore’s works include human beings and all things in the universe. They are esemplastic with Brahma, which makes human beings, as the subject, face the relationship with nature and the divine.

2. Humans and nature: the subject of the integration of subject and object

Tagore inherits the idea of Brahma from the Upanishads and opposes the idea of Brahma as an abstraction. He believes that Brahma can perceive everything and live in the infinite space of the universe, as a manifestation of everything in the world, such as in Tagore’s line, “*Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well*”[3]. Nature is no longer just an object of objectification, but wears the cloak of divinity, showing the infinite holiness of nature.

Brahma manifests into natural images such as the ocean, light and birds. Specifically, the various incarnations of Brahman include the laughter between the sea and children, the vicissitudes of night and day, the endless search of the birds and so on. The power of Brahman not only works on nature, but also illuminates our thoughts. The soul of humans and nature share a divine illumination, and the homologous integration of self and nature makes the kinship between humans and nature traceable to its origin. Nature is no longer an object to be conquered by humans. Many images in nature are integrated with the pure pursuit of the self, presenting a fresh and quiet sense of nature.

Tagore pays attention to the intrinsic value of nature in a nontechnical way. “*The colours and sounds of nature enter into our hearts as a harmony of beauty*”[4], arousing aesthetic pleasure and a sense of salvation of the soul.

The depiction of Brahma in Tagore’s works makes nature full of mysticism. In this sense, nature is regarded as a living organism, which is closely related to Tagore’s forest philosophy. Tagore realises the personalisation of nature in the unity of nature and humans, and the integration of subject and object makes Tagore’s subject consciousness show the characteristics of monism. In this sense, Tagore’s subject is integrated with nature and never separates from the surrounding environment. In this way, when Tagore deals with the relationship between humans and nature, he does not extend the power of humans beyond the scope of the Western sense, nor pursues the relationship beyond all material things, but realises the integration of subject and object. This holistic thinking is different from the opposition between subject and object in the West, further highlighting the intimacy between humans and nature.

Tagore takes care of the ontology of nature and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature at the same time, highlighting the higher level of ecological and poetic double wisdom. Tagore’s emphasis on the subject consciousness resulting from the integration of subject and object is based on the reflection of the mechanical emphasis on nature in the West. Tagore uses Indian philosophies of nature as a part of Brahma to oppose the exploitation and extraction of natural resources by the West under the dichotomy of subject and object. This kind of integrated subject is Tagore’s new development of a subject consciousness, which is different from the notion of a self-perfect subject opposed to an object in the West. This subject consciousness has a strong sense of ecological ethics, which reflects Tagore’s moral respect for nature and a strongly held beliefs in a community of life. In Today’s ecological crisis is becoming increasingly serious. As a representative of the Eastern style subject consciousness, Tagore’s understanding of the relationship between humans and nature has important ecological significance for today.

3. Man and the divine: the spiritual subject

Tagore emphasizes respect for nature and begins to think about human spiritual subjectivity. He believes that the divine also exists in the souls of human beings. He regards Brahma as a personified divinity. On many occasions, he calls this divinity “infinite personality”. Infinite personality with perfect integration of subject and object is Tagore’s understanding of human existence, which is related to the belief that the combination of the divine and humans makes humans divine. The relationship between the divine and humans also becomes the key difference between traditional Indian philosophy and Christianity. Unlike the emphasis on original sin and redemption in Christianity, the divine has a potential instantiation in human beings, according to Tagore—the deity of personality. Specifically, the divinity of the Brahman manifests itself in both the group and the individual.

The divine comes among the common people; as Tagore writes, “*He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones*”[3]. The juxtaposition of the divine and ordinary people generates the combination of humanity as a group with the supreme power, and the dignity of humankind is immeasurably enhanced. Brahma also appears in the individual self. Tagore elaborates on the self in terms of “*his own self*” [5] and “*future self*”[5]. The former refers mainly to restriction, that is, “*He is more in truth than he is in fact*” [5]. But the latter refers to the ideal state of the greater self, “*which is outside the limits of his personality*”[5]. Tagore believes that human inner divinity is infinite “*in the varied manifestations of truth, goodness and beauty*”[6] and realises in the pursuit of the ultimate goal.

Tagore believes that the soul is the source of life, the place where the infinite is displayed in the finite, and the way to establish its permanence lies in the Brahma. He holds that the essence of self “*in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self*” [5], affirming the infinity of self in the ideal human who is in unity with Brahma. This infinite self is not an isolated, inflated self, but a transcendent self. This is endowed by the infinite divinity manifested in the heart. This kind of self-transcendence is expressed in Tagore’s emphasis on “*the divinity in him—which is his humanity*” [6]. In this sense, Tagore emphasizes the spiritual subject through introspection.

Tagore’s emphasis on the consciousness of the spiritual subject is due to the mechanical alienation of the human spiritual world by technology and the impoverishment of the human mind caused by the war for political rights and interests. He infuses emotion into spiritual subjecthood and emphasizes the realisation of “*transcending a self-centred existence*” [4] in the union, which is the transcendence of the human spirit. He sees the one-sidedness and impoverishment of human life in India, Europe, America and even the whole world in the early 20th century, and tries to restore a healthy spiritual world through holism and personality. On this basis, he extrapolates the infinity of the spiritual subject in Brahma to the nature of Asian civilisation as a spiritual civilisation, and then uses spirituality to soothe Western civilisation which is suffering from alienation by technology and war.

Under the influence of the thought of Brahma, Tagore leads a reflection on the relationship between humanity and the divine and nature from two paths. One path is manifested as the subject consciousness and spiritual subject consciousness resulting from the integration of subject and object, the other is realised in the personification of nature and divinity. Finally, these two subject consciousnesses converge in Tagore’s reflection on the prevalence of materialism. He needs to confront the problem of materialism’s strangling of the human soul. On the one hand, humans revel in conquering nature, and on the other hand, they revel in the huge benefits brought by technological development. Tagore sees the essence of the problem through this crisis, and then uses the resources of India’s Brahma to try to resolve the crisis faced by Western society with Eastern culture. Therefore, he preaches the divinity of nature and promotes the divinity of the human spirit. His goal is to guide the pursuit of the infinite integration of humans with spirituality. On this basis, Tagore advocates

witnessing the infinite in the combination of the finite and the infinite, which reflects his infinite confidence in human nature and his idealism.

Under the influence of the thought of Brahma, Tagore's subjects from the integration of subject and object and the integration of subject and spirit go hand in hand. Together, this constitutes Tagore's thinking on the relationship between humanity, the divine and nature. Tagore regards nature and spirit as a whole, and believes that they have a close kinship and oppose artificially setting up barriers to separate this close relationship. Tagore further points out that the problem in India was that it pays too much attention to the spiritual field and ignores the natural field, while the West is intoxicated in its great victory over the natural field. After examining the opposition between nature and spirit, he believes that the two must be unified into a whole.

Tagore realises the integration of divinity, nature and humanity in Brahma, rendering the subject consciousness different from the extreme self, which is a Western concept opposed to the object. Tagore presents the Eastern subject consciousness as the integration of subject and object. At the same time, the self-conception as an infinite personality is based on a spiritual subjectivity. As a pioneer of dialogue and communication between Eastern and Western civilisation, Tagore pays attention to the divinity of nature and the infinity of personality in the finitude of things, showing the harmonious relationship of the unity of the finite and the infinite, with obvious Asian characteristics that focus on spiritual life.

4. The rhythm of life: the subject in the cycle of life

Tagore is influenced by the idea of immortality and rebirth depicted in the Upanishads. Tagore believes that there is also an inner self: *"He is never seen but is the seer, he is never heard but is the hearer... there is no other thinker but he. He is yourself, the inner controller"* [2]. This self, which dominates human behavior, exists inside the body and is considered the subject in the cycle of life. This subject will not die out because of the passing of the living body, but will be put into a new living body as it is created. Tagore inherits this view of life, and at the same time is influenced by the cyclical view of time in Indian Buddhism. He advocates feeling the rhythm of life in the subject's immanence.

Tagore believes that there is no fundamental opposition between life and death. Life and death complement each other in the cycle of life and weave together to form a whole. Human existence belongs to the life cycle composed of birth and death. Death is just one event in life and does not affect the immortal soul in the cycle of life. Tagore believes in the gradual improvement of the individuals until they reach the ideal state. Before reaching its goal, the soul, as the subjectivities in samsara, must experience many subjects of life. Tagore writes, *"This fragile vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life"* [3]. Death is a preparation for a higher and fuller life. Even if the main essence of the living body dies, the main entity in the cycle of life will not disappear but enter a new life. This gives rhythm to the flow of life: *"it is ever moving, and therewith shedding its finitude every moment"* [5].

In the change of constant death and constant birth, the subject in the cycle of life can achieve a higher quality of life, which means that it can transcend its own subjectivity in the cycle of life to realise the coordination between the subject of a single life and the subject in the infinite cycle of life. On this basis, self-denial of life is the way to realise a new self: *"Death is not the negation of life, but it is the gateway through which life constantly renews itself"* [7]. In this sense, Tagore's view of death is toward life as well as toward death. Death is a part of the whole sequence of life leading to a new birth. Death returns the subject to the supreme soul at the end of life and is therefore the gateway to eternity. In Tagore's opinion, death and life are two sides of the same body and are synonymous. Death is not the disappearance of the solid body but the power of the existence of life. This understanding of death is related to the spirit of the Upanishads that will eventually return to the

universe, and everything will go to a joyful state of unity with the Brahma. Death does not break the union with the Supreme Brahma. Death is only a temporary and necessary end to achieve the ultimate realisation of union with the Supreme Being internally. Death, as a way of release from life, pursues the ultimate goal of conforming to the highest cosmic noumenon.

The cycle of life and death constitutes the overall outline of the circle, in which the death of the subject of the living body is just an opportunity to renew the meaning of life for the subject in the cycle of life: “*He goes from life to life; death becomes only an incident in life, a change from one scene to another*”[1]. Tagore’s life-and-death conversion of the rhythm of life is quite different from the thought that death represents the end of life, and it is different from the Western inner sense. His cycle of life is also different from Nietzsche’s “eternal cycle”, as every moment is a cycle and a creative point of return, and every repetition must be understood as creation. Creation cannot overcome emptiness, but limited life is realised into infinite possibilities through the process of rebirth. Its goal is to achieve the integrity and endless pursuit of life. Therefore, the subject in samsara denies the finitude of the self in the state of death. It affirms that the self is at the centre of the spiritual universe, and realises the vision of human beings as subjects with Asian thinking.

Tagore realises the value of the main body of the cycle of life in the process of life and death, which reflects what is eternal in human nature and how people express themselves through their short lives. This sense of life is a cyclical recurrence, closely related to the Eastern view of circular time, as opposed to the enlightenment of modern time. Tagore’s realisation of the renewal of the subject in cyclical time is of great significance for understanding the realisation of the value of life in Asian civilisation.

5. Conclusion

Tagore’s subject consciousness realises the unity of the divine, nature and self through Brahma, empowering nature and self with subjective transcendence. The transcendence is different from the Western subject which is completely defined by the object, and it contains the conception of the wholeness and unity of the world. Tagore, through Asian thinking on the relationship between humans and nature, the other and even the self, forms a heterogeneous existence against the agitation of the subject consciousness of Western modern philosophy. Tagore emphasises spiritual enrichment and spiritual harmony and reflects on Western enlightenment rationality in an Asian way. Tagore pursues spiritual transcendence from the perspective of the entire universe and humanity, and realises human divinity in his infinite pursuit of ideal subjectivity. He uses the Eastern emphasis on spirit to dispel the excessive dependence on the material world and technology, and attempts to dispel the Western dichotomy between subject and object through their unified relationship.

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