



## The Enigmatic Imagery in Tagore's Doodles

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*How little I know of this wide world!*

*So many cities and capitals in country after country-*

*How many human achievements,*

*How many rivers, hills, oceans and deserts,*

*How many strange creatures, unfamiliar trees still remain beyond the grasp of my knowledge!*

- **Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore**

(Translated from Bangla Poem titled *Oikatan* from *Janamdine* verse, 1941)

What was embedded in the recesses of the mind of this luminous Nobel Laureate which was yet to be discovered even after dedicating his whole life in enriching the treasures of literature, music and drama. There was a never-ending search for some mysterious yet precious visual vocabulary and a language in which he could express his unfathomed feelings and thoughts in free-flowing child-like mannerism without the constraints of aesthetic burden of crafty elements of design and composition. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore discovered this urge in his 60s and these thoughts are delicately reflected in a wonderful poem titled '*Oikatan*' from *Janamdine* verse written in 1941 wherein he truthfully admits that he is still standing at the shore of sea with a burning desire to fathom the depths of his mindscapes employing his visually wayward lines and doodles restructuring strange creatures

**(Plate:1)**, goggle-eyed birds, beaked heads imbued with qualities of primitive art **(Plate:2)**, prehistoric monsters, birds, faces, dream landscapes and sun-sets drenched in emotional torrents, fantasy and melancholy.<sup>1</sup> **(Plate:3)** A deeply sensitive psyche peeps through his self-portraits and faces of women with eyes filled with blank expressions and shadows of remorse gazing at a point fixed in infinity. These works betray the struggle of an innocent child and a hermit at the same level evolving in a playful and comic exercise. Here he was after capturing the essence of wisdom through the carefree abandon of a toddler targeting his creative energies to feel and touch the conscious and sub-conscious layers of mind without employing clever aesthetic modes to demystify the inner truth. The evocative quality of his works seems to grow more and more when one silently immerses oneself in his dream images.

Tagore's images are products born out of a staple diet of powerful imagination where a sense of organic rhythm prevails bordering on the folk and tribal idioms. These seemingly simplistic doodling creations infact possess a spiritual stance impregnated with philosophical overtones in the drawings of men, women, birds, animals and trees and even inanimate objects. The variety of subjects dear to Rabindranath's intellect and his innovative technical experiments are indeed amazing. Dominating black ink lines divide the tinted areas which are themselves of intriguing shapes, sometimes fantastic birds and legendary spirit of doodling, the execution is independent and free, full of strength and vitality resulting in no definite direction or pre-meditated construction. There is a flair of intense rhythmic automatism in his 'scribbled' or 'doodled' pen and ink, or crayon lines and brushstrokes with black ink that fill the shapes and forms of fantastic faces, figures and objects as also the background spaces. He possesses a rare ability to harmonize his lines with splashes of coloured inks and crayons.<sup>2</sup>

**(Plate: 4)**

Inspite of such wonderful and expressive drawings and paintings, animals, finely cut in arabesque and sometimes mask-like faces in profile or oval-shaped. His colour schemes are dark harmonies of deep mystery, from where the figures often emerge with light outlines. Reddish, brownish, yellowish tones that are imbued with expressive power often contrast with a black background. All his images reverberate with subtle rhythm and delicate balance through which the realm of calm and quiet breathes in gentle and mystical charm. In a truth admission Tagore in his own words wrote apologetically the following lines in 1930 which are quoted here:

*"I as an artist, cannot claim any merit for my courage of the unsophisticated, like that of one who walks in a dream on a perilous path, who is saved only because he is blind to the risk."*<sup>3</sup>

Tagore did not receive any formal training in drawing and painting. In fact, it took quite a while for his paintings to be seriously accepted as works of great artistic significance. The only training which he had had from his young days, he said, was *'the training in rhythm: rhythm in thought and rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory, which is insignificant in itself.'*<sup>4</sup>

Famous French art critic, Henri Bidou points towards an insight into the psycho-analysis and creative processes of this great writer, dramatist, musician and artist by uncovering the layers of his art and literary works and he avers:

*"Rabindranath says, that there is no connection between his work as a poet and his work as a painter. As a poet, he has before his eyes a vision which he describes, or, as he calls it, a mental representation. He sees a landscape, a garden, or a face, he imitates as a painter imitates, this model impressed upon his mind. His verses communicate images seen or created. On the contrary, when he becomes a painter, exactly at the point at which others begin to copy, he ceases to copy. His pictures do not represent a scheme preconceived in his mind. So, far from seeing them beforehand, he actually does not know, while he is doing them, what they are going to be. So, in producing his poetry, he worked as a painter, now that he is a painter, he works like a poet."*<sup>5</sup>

Another prominent aspect relating to his art reveals that certain things can better be expressed in the visual language than in words, of which he was no doubt a master. He was free from the shackles of art education which sometimes hinders the progress of a creative genius by limiting his work in the four walls of well-defined and well-accepted norms of fundamentals of art. In an overwhelmingly realistic revelation prominent art historian- Stella Kramrisch sums up Tagore's creative acumen in the following words:

*"Training of the hand is one thing, guidance by the spirit another. The work of Rabindranath Tagore, singularly free from conventions and schooling, is subject to a discipline of its own. It does not stop at design or composition. Each of the hundreds of drawings and paintings is a living and balanced artistic organism."*<sup>6</sup>

Unveiling the sorrowful portraits of women seeped in deep melancholy it is important to acquaint with his childhood years and the atmosphere which prevailed in his wealthy, literate and creative family. The loss of his mother at an early age and absence of his father who was mostly traveling, the loneliness, lack of company and his restricted life hints at a longing for freedom which is

amply visible in his landscapes, portraits and self-portraits. **(Plate: 5)** These works capture the expression of loneliness in a mysterious rhythm revealing certain narrative contents bordering on the relationships of man-woman, agony-ecstasy and life-death. Sudhir Kakar, writer and psycho-analyst has devoted his life to understand the causes and reasons pertaining to the prevalence of remorse and gloom on the faces of women in Tagore's works and he highlights how Tagore's close relationship with *Kadambiri Devi*- the wife of his elder brother had brought out many unknown aspects in him. *Kadambiri* came as a bride at the age of nine and she and Tagore grew up together. She was his playmate, companion, creative critic, friend and anchor. Her suicide four months after Tagore's marriage left him broken and depressed. The grief, guilt and loneliness at the loss of *Kadambiri* and also may be his mother, the two most important women in his life, reflect in his work a perennial stream of haunting images.<sup>7</sup> These two important women in his life became the face of his metaphors for a wailing and lost childhood. Each portrait portrays a thing called Indian psyche which has many commonalities determined by notions of hierarchy, myths and morality dwelling on the poetic stylization of spiritualism and mysticism. *Kadambiri Devi* emerges as his muse and inspiration in the works pulsating with beats of emotional palpitation catering to his spiritual manifestation.<sup>8</sup> **(Plate: 6 & 7)**

In 1930 his works were exhibited to wide acclaim in France, U.K., Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. Describing these works, the curator of the art gallery in Moscow noted, "*the more we acquaint ourselves with his paintings, the more we are struck.*" While Anand Coomarswamy, the art historian, described his work as "*genuine examples of modern primitive art.*" For unlike Tagore's poems that celebrated the beautiful, his art expresses the grotesque.<sup>9</sup>

Tagore has give us a new insight to peep into the mystical imagery which lurks in the minds of men who are under the trance of spiritual resurrection and these remarkable visual images point towards a certain emotional language which help felicitate in exploring the boundaries of our mindscapes and are akin to poetic enigmas. These renderings are like a whip of fresh breath and they have the power to penetrate into the innermost cords of human psyche. Yet these images do not prick but gently caress and preen the latent layers of intellect preparing the practitioner of an aesthetic exercise to touch the new milky ways of the unknown.

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