

COMMEMORATING 150TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Rabindranath, Fascism and Four 20th Century Poets

Sisir K Majumdar

The rise of fascism in the 20's and 30's affected people in all walks of life. Poets, philosophers and scientists were no exception; Fascism and its consequences fractured the very conscience of mankind. Here is an outline of how the five eminent poets of this century reacted to the socio-political ideology of Fascism—Ezra Loomis Pound (1885-1972) of the USA, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) of Ireland, Yonejiro Noguchi (1875-1947) of Japan, Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941) of India and Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) of Great Britain. All great men do not always think and react alike. Thinking and response to certain moral and ethical issues affecting humanity at large sometimes become the testing stone of their real greatness. History in retrospect is always a critical judge. It forgives nobody.

Ezra Loomis Pound was often called the "poet's poet" because of his profound influence on the 20th century writing in English. Following the worldwide depression in the 1930's, he turned more and more to history, especially economic history. He declared his admiration for the Italian Duce-dictator-Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (1883-1945); he wrote "Jefferson and/or Mussolini" (1935). This obsession affected his "Cantos"-which even earlier had shown evidence of becoming an uncontrolled series of personal and historical episodes. His comment on the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is a matter of shame ("Spain, is an emotional luxury to a gang of sap-headed dilettantes").

As war in Europe drew near in 1939, he tried to keep the peace between Italy and the USA, but failed. He came back to Italy a disappointed man. During 1941 to 1943 he made several hundred pro-Fascist broadcasts over Radio Rome, and often openly condemned the US war effort. He was arrested by US forces in 1945 and spent six months in a prison camp for war criminals near Pisa. Returning to the United States to face trial for treason, he was pronounced "insane and mentally unfit for trial" by a panel of doctors and spent twelve years (1946-1958) in Saint Elizabeth's Hospital for the criminally insane in Washington DC. In 1958 charges against him were dropped, and he was released. He returned to Italy. He died in Venice on November 1st, 1972. Such was the fate of a traitor, who betrayed not only his country, but the entire civilized world. His talent lacked ethical and moral backbone. It was more mechanical than spiritual and philosophical.

A poet, politician, a mystic-nationalist Irish, Nobel Literature Laureate (1923), Yeats, in his later life fancied Fascism, which Edward W Said (1935-), Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, New York, USA, describes as "his unacceptable and indigestible reactionary politics-his out-right fascism..." in his book—*Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, London, 1994, p. 275). Yeats admired the Italian Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, for his vigour and his authoritarian lucidity. In his "On the Boiler" (1939), a prose pamphlet, Yeats vented his rage and frustration at a corrupt world. It has also been assumed in informal circles that he longed for political power and that he would have used it violently if he had secured it. Yeats's

rage, however, is a poet's rage, his vision of life a poet's vision-though a confused and disillusioned one. In spite of- poor health, he did not retire from politics. Suspecting that, the violence of the 1930's must end in war, he was horrified by the prospect, and yet attracted to it. He assured himself that beneath the marching feet of Mussolini's Italy, one might still hear the themes of love, art, beauty and civility. Yeats's sense of life during those turbulent years was apocalyptic-a misguided prophetic revelation; sometimes he ran away from apocalypse in terror; sometimes he conspired with it. What a tragedy, intellectual and otherwise!

In the 60th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), it is interesting to recall the contradictory stand taken by British poets. It was not only a fight against Fascism; it was a fight for the restoration of human conscience; but it affected different poets differently. While Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972), Poet Laureate, 1968, compared the Spanish Civil War as a war between light and darkness ("I look upon it simply as a battle between light and darkness"), Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), Nobel Literature Laureate, 1948, remained indifferent. Eliot's cowardice and escapism came out in his own words ("While I am naturally sympathetic, it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in collective activity").

Rabindranath stood defiant against Fascism from its very birth. In comparison to what Ezra Pound, Yeats and Eliot did about it, Rabindranath offered the civilized world a pleasant contrast. It was a flicker of hope in those days of darkness and despair in the world of intellects. He exposed the horrific dangers of competitive, aggressive nationalism in a series of lectures given abroad (Nationalism, 1917) to the annoyance of Britain, the USA and Japan. He opposed fascism tooth and nail, but died on August 7, 1941, before its ugly exposure and its ultimate extinction. The poem-PRANTIK (THE BORDERLAND) speaks his mind :

"She-serpents hiss everywhere, exhaling poison-breaths, Soft words of peace will sound like hollow jests. Before I take my leave, let me invoke those who, in human homes, are preparing themselves to wage war against the monsters."

(Written at Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal, India, Christmas Day, 1937-and translated from the original Bengali by Ketaki Kushari Dyson: "Rabindranath Tagore-I won't let you go: Selected Poems", Bloodaxe Books Ltd. Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 1991 page 211 No. 18).

The philosophy of international brotherhood and universalism of Rabindranath (Nobel Laureate in Literature , 1913) glorified the intellectual traditions in the first half of this century. Repeatedly he stood up to defend freedom and was a prominent voice against injustice.

In October 1935, fascist Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) when the League of Nations was in session in Geneva, and entered the capital, Addis Ababa, in May, 1936. In 1936 (Magh 26, 1343-Bengali Year), Rabindranath wrote a magnificent invocation to Africa in a poem of the same title-"AFRICA" :

"With man-traps stole upon you those hunters whose fierceness was keener than fangs of your wolves, whose pride was blinder than your lightest forests. You wept, and your cry was smothered,
Your forest trails became muddy with your tears and blood, While the nailed boots of the robbers Left their indelible prints Along the history of your indignity.

Today when on the Western horizon the sunset sky is stifled with dust storm, When the beast, creeping out of its dark den Proclaims the death of the day with ghastly howls, Come, you poet of the fatal hour Stand at that ravished woman's door Ask for forgiveness, And let that be the last great word In the midst of the delirium of a diseased continent."

(Translated from the Bengali by Hiren Mukerjee: "Rabindranath Tagore: Himself A True Poem". People's Publishing House, New Delhi, India 1961, p. 44)

The poet thus ended the poem on a note of sheer power of mind. The spirit of brotherhood was the basis of fraternal with the people of emerging Africa. (The full poem has also been translated from the original Bengali by William Radice : "Selected Poems: Rabindranath Tagore", Penguin Books, London, 1985/1987, p. 102-103.)

In March 1937, Rabindranath issued a statement in support of the People's Front during the Civil War in Spain : "In the hour of the supreme trial and suffering of the Spanish people, I appeal to the conscience of humanity :

"Help the People's Front in Spain,
Help the government of the people;
Cry in a million voice: halt the reaction,
Come in your millions to the aid of democracy,
to the success of civilization and culture."

The poet was not keeping well during those days, but still his flamboyant and fiery spirit gleamed in his words. In 1936, he also sent a memorable message to the "World Conference of Peace" held in Belgium, which was called by Romain Rolland (1866-1944), Nobel Laureate in Literature (1915) and Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). He could not attend the conference because of ill health.

In 1938, after the betrayal at Munich by Britain and France over Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia-the unholy Munich Pact of 1938 (Sept. 30th) and the subsequent seizure of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany, the poet wrote to the then Czechoslovak President-Eduard Benes (1884-1948) "I feel so keenly about the suffering of your people as if I was one of them. For what has happened in your country is not a mere local misfortune, which may at the best claim our sympathy, it is a tragic revelation that the destiny of all those principles of humanity, for which the peoples of the West turned martyrs for these centuries, rests in the hands of cowardly guardians who are selling it to save their own skins. It turns one cynical to see the democratic peoples betraying their kind, when even the bullies stand by each other." To boost the morale of the Czech people, Rabindranath wrote a long poem in 1938 [*"Prayashitta"-"Expiation Atonement) for Sin"*] translated into English and sent it to him on October 15th, 1938. It reflects the poet's inner reaction to the Munich Pact:

"Do not howl in fear or angrily judge God, Let the swelling evil burst itself in pain and vomit out its accumulated filth.
But let us hope for the sake of the dignity of moral
justice in this world, That God will never suffer to be cheated of His due
by the miserly manipulation of a diplomatic
piety carefully avoiding all cost to itself, That a terrible penance may have to be
passed through
to its ultimate end, Leaving no remnant of poison in a treacherously healing

scar."

Translated from Bengali by the poet himself: "Poems"-Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, India, 1970, p. 187-188, No. 110.)

History is sometimes cruel and unkind. The poet's prophecy proved right. Nazi tyranny tarnished the conscience and civilization of the day. On the dangers of Fascism, whether German or Japanese, Rabindranath never ate his words, and never watered the wine. For consistency, he was infallible till the last day of his life.

When the Japanese poet-Yonejiro Noguchi—(1875-1947 : Pen name-Yone Noguchi) asked for the poet's approbation of Japan's real motives as the builder of a new powerful Asia (by massacring the Chinese and the Manchurians), the poet retorted like an angry lion. He wrote to Noguchi in 1938 : "Your letter has hurt me to the depths of my being, and tore to pieces your conception of an Asia raised on a tower of skulls."

During the last days of his life, the poet was a sad man, but he never lost hope in the future of mankind. In the last public message for mankind, on his 80th birth anniversary, in his "Crisis of Civilization", written on April 14th, 1941, three months before his death on August 7th, 1941, the poet expressed his beaming hope: "But it is a sin to lose faith. I will preserve faith to the very end one day once again invincible man will resume his onward march for recovering his destined dignity and nobility, having overcome all the obstacles on the way."

This is the message of Rabindranath for posterity—the guiding gospel for the people today in this mortal world. □□□