

# Exploring a South-South Dialogue: Spanish American Reception of Rabindranath Tagore

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## Resumen

Este artículo se concentra en la recepción de Rabindranath Tagore en algunos países de América Latina. En la historia de este continente, los primeros años del siglo XX fueron cruciales, porque muchos países de América Latina estaban esforzándose por destruir el control de Europa y establecer una identidad propia. Sin embargo, era difícil definir “lo propio” en una sociedad tan múltiple y multirracial. En un momento tan complejo de la historia, Tagore personificaba una alternativa para algunos autores de América Latina. Él era como un representante del “tercer mundo” que había ganado el reconocimiento de Europa, de los colonizadores; por tal motivo, su poder/sabiduría era tan fuerte como el de los británicos. Este artículo, dividido en tres partes, busca primero explorar la historia del contacto directo entre el poeta hindú y algunos escritores latinoamericanos; segundo, analizar varias traducciones de las obras de Tagore, hechas por latinoamericanos; y, finalmente, discutir unos ensayos y textos críticos realizados por estudiosos de América Latina sobre Tagore. El artículo se centra en Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979), la única autora del mundo hispano con quien Tagore tenía un contacto directo, y también en poetas de nombre mundial como Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) y Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), para explicar cómo ellos recibieron a Tagore.

**Palabras claves:** Rabindranath Tagore, literatura de América Latina, Victoria Ocampo, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, estudios de traducción, estudios de recepción, literatura comparada

## Abstract

This article concentrates on Rabindranath's reception in a few Latin American countries. In the history of Latin America, early twentieth century was a crucial time when various Latin American countries were striving to come out of Europe's grasp and establish an identity of their own. Yet, in the multifarious and multiracial society of Latin America it was difficult to define their 'own'. At such a critical juncture of history, Rabindranath represented an alternative to various Latin American authors. He was, to them, a representative of a British colony who had been recognised and acknowledged by Europe, and thus symbolized a power/knowledge equivalent to that of Europe. This paper, divided in three parts, explores this reception and its impact, firstly by analyzing the history of the direct contact; then by focusing on the Latin American translations of Rabindranath's works; and finally, by re-reading a few essays and critical-writings on Rabindranath. Among others, the paper alludes to Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979), the first and perhaps the only Latin American author who came in direct contact with Rabindranath; and some of the most important Nobel Laureates of Latin America, like Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) and Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), to show how these authors and poets received Rabindranath in their own contexts.

**Key words:** Rabindranath Tagore, Latin American literature, Victoria Ocampo, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, translation studies, reception studies, comparative literature

*Who can tell, when throwing a stone into a pond, where do the ripples created go? When weeks ago, in the middle of an electronic discussion about the connections between Latin American and Indian literature, I ventured to mention Rabindranath Tagore's high standing among current Latin American readers, many were surprised. And I have to confess that I myself was also surprised, because it never occurred to me Tagore's presence in Latin America would sound odd to anybody, least of all to a Bengali (Chacón, 1999).*

Alfonso Chacón wrote the quotation above in 1999, particularly regarding his own country, Costa Rica. Rabindranath Thakur's (1861-1941, popularly known as Tagore) relevance among the general Latin American readers of the

new millennium was a topic of great debate. It was nevertheless, certain that this Indian poet, who was also the first non-European Nobel laureate, was one of the first Indians to initiate a South-South dialogue that had mutual impact on various Latin American countries as well as on India. By focusing on Spanish American reception of Rabindranath, this article would primarily explore a part of that larger contact, manifested in the literatures of Spanish America.

In his path-breaking essay 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', Hans Robert Jauss, a stalwart of Reception Aesthetics, underscored the importance of Reception Studies in understanding the "historical life of a literary work". He also distinguished

between simple or passive reception, and active reception or critical understanding of a text, thus broadening the scope of Reception Studies:

The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of its communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production which surpasses them (Jauss, 1970, 8).

While trying to trace the historical life of Rabindranath's literary works in Spanish America, I would focus on "simple reception" or reading of his works by Spanish Americans, as well as "active reception" or critical understanding of his works. The act of translation or transcreation, which – as I would explicate in this article – was also a kind of reception, would be instrumental in this entire process.

As it was evident from the title, my article would focus on the Spanish American countries, particularly Argentina, Chile and Mexico<sup>1</sup>; to explore Rabindranath's reception in these countries. Nevertheless, since the English translations and the Spanish translations made in Spain had played significant roles in Rabindranath's reception in Spanish America, I would have to refer to those translations frequently. Therefore, to avoid any confusion, a parenthesis was necessary here. Throughout this paper, I used the phrase 'Spanish translation' to refer to translations made in Spain, and by translators/poets from Spain;

while the Spanish American counterparts had been referred to as 'Spanish American translations'.

It was well-known that readers who did not have access to Bangla or Bengali language – the Poet's mother-tongue in which vast number of his works were composed – actually had very limited access to Rabindranath because most of his works remained untranslated till date. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that almost all the Spanish and Spanish American translations of Rabindranath done so far were translations of his English writings.<sup>2</sup> Whether these English versions should be considered translations of the Bangla texts, and if yes, how 'faithful' those translations had been, were different questions altogether, which I did not have the scope to discuss here. However, knowledge/readings of Rabindranath's reception in other countries/cultures could definitely add new dimensions to our readings of Spanish American as well as Indian literatures.

The article, divided into three main sections, aimed at exploring the beginning of a South-South dialogue between India and several Spanish American countries. The first section elaborated the context of the contact by giving a brief overview of the Indian poet's 'popularity' in the Spanish American countries with allusions to his reception of Latin America.<sup>3</sup> The second section analysed the impact of Rabindranath on Spanish American literatures, including some of the most important Spanish American translations, transcreations and adaptations of Rabindranath; and the third section, referring to several essays and authors/poets, ventured to understand the reasons behind such readings and reception.

## The contact

Physically Rabindranth Thakur (1861-1941) arrived in Latin America in 1924<sup>4</sup>. The history of the contact however, had begun much earlier, when his poetry reached the south-western hemisphere, mainly through French and Spanish translations. As Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) mentioned in her *Autobiografía*, “Tagore estaba instalado en mi vida desde 1914” (17). Ocampo, of course, was well-versed in French and read Andre Gide’s translation of *Gitanjali*, *L’Offrande Lyrique*, published in 1914. In Spain, sporadic translations of Rabindranath started appearing from 1913.<sup>5</sup> Complete books, translated into Spanish, would begin to appear from 1914-15, thanks primarily to Zenobia Camprubí Aymar (1887-1956) and Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958). These were perhaps the most popular Spanish translations which gave the poet a widespread recognition in these countries, which, by far, surpassed his popularity in the English speaking world.

Strangely however, Rabindranath had never been to Spain, and visited only one Latin American country, Argentina. Apart from Victoria Ocampo, he had never been in close contact with any other Hispanic author.<sup>6</sup> He had planned to visit Spain during his Europe tour in 1919, but for some reason or other - much to the disappointment of Camprubí, Jiménez and his innumerable Spanish admirers – this trip was cancelled.<sup>7</sup>

Leonard K. Elmhirst (1883-1974), Rabindranath’s English secretary who accompanied the poet to Japan and Argentina, confirmed that during his Japan tour in early 1924, some Latin American diplomats had arranged

a reception for the poet, and insisted that he must visit the Latin American countries “where his works were so well-known and appreciated” (Elmhirst, 40). However, it appeared that Rabindranath did not know much about Latin American cultures before his visit to Argentina. Dyson (2009) described how the Argentine journalists were surprised by Rabindranath’s knowledge of Argentine culture, yet it turned out that Rabindranath had read only one book on Argentina, William Henry Hudson’s *Far Away and Long Ago*, as Ocampo stated in her writings. During his brief stay in Argentina, Rabindranath’s health did not permit him to get to know the heart of the country, a deficiency he later acknowledged to Ocampo: “I am not a born traveller – I have not the energy and strength needed for knowing a strange country and helping the mind to gather materials from a wide area of new experience for building its foreign nest.” (Dyson, 390). In fact, this was one of those very few voyages, of which Rabindranath did not keep any account in the form of letters or diary or travelogue, something that he generally used to do. Nonetheless, the trip did revive his poetic creativity that was dormant for the last few years, and in 1925 he published a new book of poetry, *Purabi*, which he dedicated to Victoria Ocampo.

In 1924, on his way to Perú, Rabindranath arrived at Buenos Aires on 6<sup>th</sup> November, and was forced to stay there for some time to recover his failing health. In fact, Prasanta Pal, one of the most important biographers of the poet, asserted in the ninth volume of Rabindranath’s biography (*Rabijiboni*) that initially Rabindranath had planned to visit several Latin American countries

including México, Perú and Argentina. This plan however, was abandoned later most probably in consideration of the Poet's health. Anyway, the news of his visit to Argentina was announced there almost two months prior to his arrival, during September 1924, as Ocampo confirmed: "En septiembre de 1924 se anunció que Rabindranath Tagore pasaría por Buenos Aires, rumbo a Lima... Su llegada sería el gran acontecimiento del año." (Ocampo, 1961a: 13). A similar picture was found in the newspaper reports cited in Ketaki Kushari Dyson's *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden* (2009). She wrote, "*La Argentina*, writing on 7 November 1924, confidently declared that few foreign personalities visiting Buenos Aires had created the interest Tagore had created; no sooner had the boat docked than she was invaded by journalists wishing to interview this very special passenger..." (Dyson, 77). Despite his illness, Rabindranath had to talk to the reporters and told them that he intended to give a few talks there on Santiniketan – where he established an international university, Visva-Bharati – and visit México and Perú. None of these were finally made possible as his health condition deteriorated. Victoria Ocampo came to his rescue and offered him refuge in a country house at San Isidro. Nevertheless, some interviews, articles, poems and stories of Rabindranath were published in various Latin American newspapers and magazines. *La Nación*<sup>8</sup>, published from Argentina, and *Repertorio Americano*<sup>9</sup>, published from Costa Rica, were two of the most important of such newspapers and journals. In many of her writings, Ocampo wrote about huge number of people who came to visit the poet in San Isidro,

once again testifying Rabindranath's popularity in Argentina: "Verdaderas caravanas de admiradores llegaban por la tarde. Por lo general se sentaba debajo de una *tipa* cerca de la barranca y les hablaba." (1982, 30-31). Among these visitors there were Argentine students and scholars interested in India and its cultures, as well as people who knew nothing about India or Rabindranath. Leonard K. Elmhirst used to note down most of these conversations, a number of which were also published in *La Nación*, translated by Victoria Ocampo (Elmhirst, 1961), and several others were published much later in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. From Scriba's article (2011) we came to know that some of the Spanish American scholars had requested Rabindranath to publish Spanish translations of his writings, which Rabindranath politely declined, apparently, due to his weak health at that time. Nevertheless, other translators/poets would continue to translate his works into Spanish (as I would elaborate in the next section).

The South America File (RBVB-015, File No. 378) preserved at the Rabindra Bhavana Archive in Santiniketan contained thirty-odd letters the Poet had received from various Latin American countries including Argentina, México, Perú, Uruguay and Ecuador, bearing testimony to his popularity in these countries. Most of these letters were in Spanish, and a few in English. These were all enthusiastic expressions from his readers – one of whom was Mexican poet José Vasconcelos – who had read his works in Spanish or French or English. There were also earnest requests to visit some particular country or write foreword to a book

etc., which probably Rabindranath had never been able to read as he did not know Spanish.

Perhaps insignificant, but passionate testimony to the poet's popularity existed in the Argentine newspapers, where several poems were published during Rabindranath's stay in Buenos Aires. Most of these poems, by not-so-known or completely unknown poets, were dedicated to Rabindranath, and were intensely emotional; bearing proof of the poet's popularity among the Latin American readers. Dyson (2009) cited some of these poems published in *La Nación*, and among Elmhirst's papers preserved in the Dartington Hall Archive (File no. LKE Tagore 1, C. South America), there was also one poem titled 'Corazón', sent directly to Rabindranath by a certain Adolfo F. Guerra.

This craze, perhaps in a somewhat diminished scale, sustained for quite a long time, even after Rabindranath's demise. Ocampo's correspondences with Krishna Kripalani during 1960-61 revealed the elaborate manner in which Argentina was preparing to celebrate Rabindranath's birth centenary. In a letter dated 14 May, 1961 she wrote, "Yesterday our postage stamp was issued and I have sent you some cards that were sold in the streets of Buenos Aires. Many people were buying them, and when some philatelists recognised me at the Central Post Office, they asked me to sign many of those cards because I had known Tagore." (Kripalani, 1982:52). The Argentine government in fact, set up a committee to organise the birth centenary, and as part of the ceremony two plays of Rabindranath, *The Post-Office* and *Malini*, were performed in Teatro Nacional Cervantes under the supervision of Victoria Ocampo.<sup>10</sup>

While discussing Rabindranath's popularity in the Spanish American countries, it was also imperative to remember that Spanish translations of his poems began to appear from August 1913, months after the publication of *Song Offerings*. The bibliography provided in *Redescubriendo a Tagore* informed us that between 1914 and 1941, 25 books of Rabindranath were published in the Hispanic world and 11 in the Lusophone world. Even during the 20s and 30s, when Rabindranath's 'popularity' in the English world was brought to question by Yeats, Ezra Pound and such others, his works were still famous and relevant in the Hispanic and Lusophone world.

### **“Simple Reception” to “Critical Understanding”**

The history of Rabindranath's international reception started mainly from 1912, when the poet rewrote some of his Bangla poems in English, a casual attempt that eventually took the form of *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, and created history by winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The award and the book had often been given exaggerated importance, thus branding him as 'the poet of the *Gitanjali*'.

Interestingly, these assumptions of the English West did not apply in case of the Hispanic World. The first known Spanish translation of Rabindranath's works was published even before Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel Prize. Spanish author Pérez de Ayala (1880- 1962) published translations of a few poems of Rabindranath in a Madrid based news daily, *La Tribuna* on 23 and 29 August 1913, which were

perhaps the first Spanish translations of Rabindranath's poems.<sup>11</sup> The Spanish American scenario was even more interesting, as in Argentina Joaquín V. González translated Rabindranath's translation of one hundred poems or dohas of Kabir, a medieval Indian poet. The book *Cien poemas de Kabir*, which was a translation of *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*<sup>12</sup> came out in the midst of the world-wide violence of the First World War, in 1915, and in the introduction to this book González referred to Rabindranath's *Sadhana* and the Tagorean concept of love; love, where one finds fulfilment. González, and the entire Spanish America, found an answer to several questions in this message of love, of harmony and tolerance uttered by the saint poet Kabir, and reiterated by Rabindranath. Taken as an example of "active reception" this translation could be read as the first Spanish American response to Rabindranath. The fact that González chose to translate *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* instead of the much-hyped *Song Offerings*, I believe, spoke volumes about Spanish American reception of the poet.

The second known Spanish American translation of Rabindranath appeared in 1917, *Song Offerings* translated by Abel Alarcón (1881-1954), a well-known Bolivian intellectual and politician, into *Oraciones líricas*. This translation appeared a year before the celebrated Camprubí-Jimenez translation, yet later the former was mostly eclipsed by the latter. Alarcón's introduction to the book bore evidence that he was deeply moved by *Song Offerings*, and also gathered some significant contextual information before venturing to translate it. He did not, however,

translate the entire *Song Offerings*. He carefully rendered into Spanish the first 92 poems of the book, omitted the next 6 poems, and again translated poem numbers 99-102, following continuous numbering and without mentioning anything about this omission in his text. Whether Alarcón had any issue with the arrangement of the poems in *Song Offerings*, like Rabindranath's French translator Andre Gide, was not clear.<sup>13</sup> However, from the title of the book as well as the introduction, it appeared that Alarcón, like many of his English counterparts, also considered Rabindranath a sage, a wise man from the East, perhaps influenced by Evelyn Underhill's categorization of Rabindranath as a mystic poet. In Alarcón's introduction he referred to Kabir. He was likely to be familiar with González's translation of *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (*Cien poemas de Kabir*). His Spanish rendering captured quite successfully the nuances of the English text. Consider for instance, song number 7 of *Song Offerings*:

My song has put off her adornments.  
She has no pride of dress and decoration.  
Ornaments would mar our union; they  
would come between thee and me; their  
jingling would drown thy whispers.

My poet's vanity dies in shame before  
thy sight. O master poet, I have sat  
down at thy feet. Only let me make my  
life simple and straight, like a flute of  
reed for thee to fill with music.

Alarcón translated it as:

Mi canción dejó atavíos. Ella no tiene  
el orgullo del ropaje ni las galas. Los  
adornos nuestra unión malograrían;

en medio de vos y de mí interpondríanse; y sus rumores ahogarían las voces suaves y secretas con que me habláis al oído.

Mi vanidad de poeta parece de vergüenza ante vuestra presencia. ¡Oh poeta! maestro, sentéme bajo de vuestros pies. Tan sólo permitidme hacer mi vida simple y sincera para vos como una flauta de caña para colmarse de música. (27-28)

Compare it to the Camprubí-Jiménez version:

Mi canción, sin el orgullo de su traje, se ha quitado sus galas para ti. Porque ellas estorbarían nuestra unión, y su campanilleo ahogaría nuestros suspiros.

Mi vanidad de poeta muere de vergüenza ante tí, Señor, poeta mío. Aquí me tienes sentado a tus pies. Déjame sólo hacer recta mi vida, y sencilla, como una flauta de caña, para que tú la llenes de música. (*Ofrenda lírica*, 97)

Despite the difference in language, which any reader familiar with Spanish would immediately notice, the two translations were quite similar. Both the translators captured the nuances of the English source text, yet they had also taken certain liberties. While Camprubí-Jiménez converted the line “they would come between thee and me” into “estorbarían nuestra unión”, Alarcón amplified the line “their jingling would drown thy whispers” as “sus rumores ahogarían las voces suaves y secretas con que me habláis al oído”.

The next important Spanish American translation appeared in 1923-24, in México. Chilean poet, a very close

friend of Victoria Ocampo, and the first Latin American Nobel Laureate, Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) published a compilation of poems in 1924, entitled *Lecturas para mujeres* (Readings for Women). Published by the Secretary of Education, Mexico<sup>14</sup>, the book was meant for Mexican school children, especially, as the title made it evident, girls; for, Mistral believed, girls require a different kind of education. This book was, in Mistral’s own words, a step towards formation of the ‘new woman’ or “*mujer nueva*”, and also of a serious kind of feminine literature, literature of home:

Ya es tiempo de iniciar entre nosotros la formación de una literatura femenina seria. A las excelentes maestras que empieza a tener nuestra América, corresponde ir creando la literatura del hogar, no aquella de sensiblería y de belleza inferior que algunos tienen por tal, sino una gran literatura con sentido humano profundo. La han hecho hasta hoy, aunque parezca absurdo, sólo los hombres: un Ruskin en Inglaterra, un Tagore en la India, para no citar más (Mistral, 1924: 9).

Such a reading of Rabindranath might sound limited to people who had access to Rabindranath’s works in Bangla, particularly his letters, diaries and memoirs, but like many other readers not familiar with the Bangla language and culture, Mistral had access only to works which had been translated into English, and therefore her reading of Rabindranath was bound to be fragmented.

Nevertheless, it was indeed significant that in such a compilation Mistral included ten poems of Rabindranath, along with writings of authors and poets

like José Martí, Rubén Darío, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Amado Nervo, Manuel Machado, José Enrique Rodó, Thomas Carlyle, Giovanni Papini, Romain Rolland and several others. In this book Mistral also recommended all the works of Rabindranath to her readers (Mistral, 68). Among the ten poems printed in this book, six were taken from *The Crescent Moon* (*La luna nueva*), three from *Fruit Gatherings* (*La cosecha*), and one from *The Gardener* (*El jardinero*). Interestingly, not a single one from *Song Offerings*, pointing out, once again, that the Nobel Prize was not the sole reason behind Rabindranath's popularity, though it acted as a catalyst. Mistral arranged the poems across different sections of her book, yet her choice of the poems was quite significant, in the sense that all these poems dealt with love, and most of these were on maternal love. The first one, for instance, "No quiero amor que no sabe dominarse" was taken from *Fruit Gathering*, poem number 63 ("Not for me is the love that knows no restraint"), where it did not have any title. However, in *Lecturas para mujeres*, the poem had been given a title 'Amor de Esposa' or 'Wife's Love', and it had been grouped along with other poems by several other poets, under a section called 'El Sereno Amor'. Similarly, the last poem of Rabindranath printed here, was poem number 6 of *El jardinero* (*The Gardener*), where, again, it did not have any title. However, Mistral would add a title to this poem, 'La Libertad' or 'The Liberty'.<sup>15</sup> She retained the titles of the poems taken from *La luna nueva*, however, it was important to note that some of the translations she used here, did not match those of Camprubí-Jiménez.

Since the book did not mention name of any translator<sup>16</sup>, perhaps we could guess that these were Mistral's own translations. Consider, for example, translation of a poem from *The Crescent Moon*, 'Baby's Way'.<sup>17</sup> The English poem opened as: "If baby only wanted to, he could fly up to heaven this moment. It is not for nothing that he does not leave us. He loves to rest his head on mother's bosom, and cannot ever bear to lose sight of her." (Tagore, 2004: 5). The Camprubí-Jiménez translation ('El niño es así') opened as: "Si el niño quisiera, podría volar ahora mismo al cielo. Pero por algo no se va. ¡Le gusta tanto echar la cabeza en el pecho de su madre y mirarla y mirarla sin descanso!" (Tagore, 2012: 13). In Mistral's book the title remained almost the same, only she added an ellipsis at the end (*El niño es así...*), but the translation was somewhat different: "Si el niño quisiera, podría volar al cielo en este instante. Pero por algo no se va. ¡Le gusta tanto doblar la cabeza en el regazo de su madre, y mirarla y mirarla, sin descanso!" (Mistral, 68). While the former used a phrase typical to mainland Spain (and not commonly used in Mexico), "ahora mismo", Mistral went for a more literal translation of "this moment" as "en este instante". Similarly, instead of "echar la cabeza" as used by Camprubí-Jiménez, Mistral would go for "doblar la cabeza", though there was no significant change of meaning.

In this context, it would be relevant to mention that the translations of Rabindranath's poems included in many of Victoria Ocampo's works, particularly in her *Autobiografía IV* (1982) and in the only book she wrote on Rabindranath, *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* (1961), did not

match Camprubí-Jiménez or Alarcón's versions. Take for instance, the song number 84 of the English *Gitanjali*, quoted in Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro. The first stanza of the English poem was:

It is the pang of separation that spreads  
Throughout the world and gives birth  
To shapes innumerable in the infinite  
sky. (Tagore, 2009: 217)

Camprubí and Jiménez translated it as, "La espina de la separación pasa el mundo y hace nacer formas innumerables en el cielo infinito" (Tagore, 2012: 132); and Abel Alarcón translated it as, "Es la angustia de la separación la que se dilata a través del mundo y da nacimiento a innumerables formas en el cielo infinito" (Tagore, 1917: 195). In Ocampo's Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro yet another translation was found: "La espina de la separación atraviesa el mundo y hace nacer formas innumerables en el cielo infinito" (37). All these translations captured beautifully the meaning of the source text. The diction of the first one was simpler than the second, which was a bit more literal; while the third perhaps, tried to create a balance. However, like Mistral, Ocampo did not mention the name of any translator. So we might again guess that this was translated by Ocampo herself. Anyway, it was explicit that Rabindranath had several translators in the Spanish American countries, a fact that also reflected his popularity in those countries.

In fact, from the early 1920s the impact of Spanish America's contact with Rabindranath was visible in literature, apart from translations, underscoring how reception could lead to re-creation.

While talking about her life Gabriela Mistral once admitted, "Mis maestros en el arte y para regir la vida: la Biblia, el Dante, Tagore y los rusos." (Autobiografía de Gabriela Mistral, 1930). In 1922, she published her first book *Desolación*, where she included a section called 'Comentarios a poemas de Rabindranath Tagore'. This book contained Mistral's responses to three poems of *Gitanjali*, (poem nos. 6, 95 and 102). The Spanish lines of *Gitanjali* she quoted here did not match the translations of Camprubí-Jiménez or Abel Alarcón. She might be following some other translations or translating the poems herself. Either way, a close reading of these poems could depict how Mistral's focus was completely different from that of Rabindranath. In a way, these comments revealed her reading of Rabindranath, and cropped up within that reading her own feelings of desolation and solitude. Consider for instance song no. 6 of the English *Gitanjali*:

Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust. I may not find a place in thy garland, but honour it with a touch of pain from thy hand and pluck it. I fear lest the day end before I am aware, and the time of offering go by Though its colour be not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and pluck it while there is time.

This quest for fulfilment became in Mistral an insecurity of rootlessness, a sense of feeling inferior: "Verdad es que aún no estoy en sazón... tan pequeña me veo, *que temo no ser advertida; temo quedar olvidada...* ¡Recógeme, pues, recógeme pronto! *No tengo raíces clavadas en esta tierra de los*

*hombres.*” (Tapscott, 2002: 83-84; emphasis added). What were offerings to the Supreme in Rabindranath, became in Mistral the anguish of a woman in this world dominated by men.

Or, take, for instance, the first one of these poems, which was a response to song number 95 of Song Offerings, quoted below:

I was not aware of the moment when  
I first crossed the threshold of this life.  
What was the power that made me open  
out into this vast mystery  
like a bud in the forest at midnight!  
When in the morning I looked upon  
the light  
I felt in a moment that I was no stranger  
in this world,  
that the inscrutable without name and  
form  
had taken me in its arms  
in the form of my own mother.  
Even so, in death the same unknown  
will appear  
as ever known to me. And because I  
love this life,  
I know I shall love death as well.  
The child cries out when  
from the right breast the mother takes  
it away,  
in the very next moment to find  
in the left one its consolation. (Tagore,  
2009: 239)

Mistral quoted a line of this poem as the heading of her poem:

“SÉ QUE TAMBIÉN AMARÉ LA  
MUERTE”

No creo, no, en que he de perderme  
tras la muerte.

¿Para qué me habrías henchido tú, si  
había de ser vaciada y quedar como

las cañas, exprimida? ¿Para qué  
derramarías la luz cada mañana sobre  
mis sienes y mi corazón, si no fueras  
a recogerme como se recoge el racimo  
negro melificado al sol, cuando ya  
media al otoño?

Ni fría ni desamorada me parece, como  
a los otros, la muerte. Parece más  
bien un ardor, un tremendo ardor que  
desgaja y desmenuza las carnes, para  
despeñarnos caudalosamente el alma.  
Duro, acre, sumo, el abrazo de la muer-  
te. Es tu amor, es tu terrible amor, ¡oh,  
Dios! ¡Así deja rotos y vencidos los huesos,  
lívida de ansia la cara y desmade-  
jada la lengua! (Tapscott, 2002, 81).

A careful reading of this poem would show that Mistral begun at the point where Rabindranath ended. Mistral’s poem opened with the ringing belief that death was not the end of life. Almost all along his life, Rabindranath perceived death in a very positive manner, for him mortal life was a journey, kind of a performance on stage, birth being its entry-point, and death the exit-point. However, that was not the end of the journey, death was simply beginning of a new journey. In other words, his love for death stemmed from his love for this mortal life, his belief in the beauty of this world. This love and belief in the mortal life, which resonated in Rabindranath’s poems, was absent in Mistral’s. The positive approach reflected in the first line of Mistral’s poem, immediately stumbled in the second line with the imagery of “las cañas, exprimida” or crushed sugarcanes. “El racimo negro melificado al sol” alluded to a sensuality that was absent in the source poem, where the identity of the “you” remained ambiguous, as in many of his other works.

Knowingly or not, Mistral successfully captured this ambiguity. Like Rabindranath's Bangla poem – which obviously Mistral had not read – she also used the informal 'you' form of Spanish, 'tú'.<sup>18</sup> However, this intimacy was completely shattered in the last stanza where death appeared to be fierce, dangerous and difficult, that wreaked havoc, and thus, this imagery eliminated any possibility of love.

Close to the publication of *Lecturas para mujeres* in México, Chile saw publication of a new book of poems, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, in 1924, by a promising young poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) – who, eventually would be the second Latin American Nobel Laureate – where the influence of Rabindranath was too evident. And though only one poem acknowledged the debts explicitly, the impact of Rabindranath could be found in several poems. According to Neruda, poem number 16 of *Veinte poemas* was a paraphrase of the 30th poem of *The Gardener*. It was however, interesting that this declaration was added only in the second edition of the book, in 1937, after Neruda was accused of plagiarism by another Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. (Cuando Huidobro acusa a Pablo Neruda de plagiar el poema de Rabindranath Tagore, 2013).<sup>19</sup> A close study of the two poems would reveal that it was not exactly a paraphrase but rather Neruda's reception of Rabindranath. The 30th poem of *The Gardener*, which was basically an English rendering of the Bangla poem 'Manaspratima' sang about an idol of the soul, a 'perfect' creation of the poetic mind:

You are the evening cloud floating in the sky of my dreams.

*I paint you and fashion you ever with my love longings.*

You are my own, my own, *Dweller in my endless dreams!*

Your feet are rosy-red with the glow of my heart's desire,

Gleaner of my sunset songs!

Your lips are bitter-sweet with the taste of my wine of pain.

You are my own, my own, *Dweller in my lonesome dreams!*

With the shadow of my passion have I darkened your eyes, *Haunter of the depth of my gaze!*

I have caught you and wrapt you, my love, in the net of my music.

You are my own, my own, *Dweller in my deathless dreams!* (Tagore, 1915; emphases added)

Neruda's poem, however, voiced a screaming desire for the 'perfect' lover *out there*:

En mi cielo al crepúsculo eres como una nube

y tu color y forma son como yo los quiero

Eres mía, eres mía, mujer de labios dulces y viven en tu vida mis infinitos sueños.

La lámpara de mi alma te sonrosa los pies,

el agrio vino mío es más dulce en tus labios:

oh segadora de mi canción de atardecer,

*Cómo te sienten mía mis sueños solitarios!* Eres mía, eres mía, voy gritando en la brisa

de la tarde, y *el viento arrastra mi voz viuda.*

Cazadora del fondo de mis ojos, tu robo estanca como el agua tu mirada nocturna.

En la red de mi música estás presa, amor mío,

y mis redes de música son anchas como

el cielo.

Mi alma nace a la orilla de tus ojos de luto.

En tus ojos de luto comienza el país del sueño. (Neruda, 2007; emphases added).

Despite the overt sensuality of the poem, this could also be interpreted as a quest for the ideal form, the eternal quest of an artist. During that period, by and large, this was the quest of the entire Latin America.

### **An exploration of the “Critical Understanding”**

In order to understand the reason of such popularity and relevance of Rabindranath in the Hispanic world, the context of the reception must be taken into account. Confronted with the dilemma of their pre-colonial past on the one hand, and the luring call of European modernism on the other, Latin America ‘discovered’ the medieval Indian poet Kabir through Rabindranath, and the combination, to a large extent, soothed their blood-trailed past and present – a history fraught with racial tension, struggle for independence, series of dictatorships, military junta, underground guerrilla warfare, and of course, direct and indirect interventions of the USA. From the late 19th century, a strong anti-Spain tendency was building up in most of the Latin American countries, and also an inclination to go back to their pre-colonial past. At the onset of the First World War, torn between its dependency on Europe and a deep desire to reject Europe and find an identity independent of Europe – for Europe was the root of all their troubles – Spanish America encountered Rabindranath

exactly when it was looking to other countries in search of an alternative. By this time, a number of Latin Americans, like Victoria Ocampo, had also realised that their own identity was significantly different from that of Europe. In 1930, in a letter to Rabindranath, Ocampo voiced this crisis of Latin America:

Ambos somos [referring to herself and Waldo Frank] huérfanos. Y Europa es la causa de ese sentimiento. Nos sentimos *sus* huérfanos. Su verdadera imagen nos atrae y nos rechaza al mismo tiempo. Nuestras raíces están doloridas y nuestros corazones angustiados por eso. Frank y yo, cuando nos encontramos, nos tomamos de la mano como niños errantes, perdidos en su América propia... Echamos de menos a Europa, terriblemente, los dos. Y sin embargo, cuando vivimos en Europa, sentimos que no puede darnos la clase de alimento que necesitamos. Algo nos falta. (Ocampo, 1982: 38-39)

Coupled with this desire to look beyond Europe, was also the quest for a new literary form. By 1914, the first wave of *modernismo* had already died down. The second generation of *modernista* poets were looking for a new literary form and diction, through which they would be able to express their own reality, and also to move beyond that reality to a rather surreal realm of truth and beauty. And that was when Latin America found Kabir and Rabindranath and their messages of love, as González pointed out in his introduction to *Cien Poemas de Kabir*:

Desde que yo he comenzado a estudiar y a darme cuenta de los problemas íntimos de nuestra nacionalidad,

arrancados del corazón de su historia, he adquirido la convicción de que el Odio en ella se revela con los caracteres de una ley histórica. ...Cuando pude leer a Tagore...mi regocijo no tuvo límites al poder reforzar mi pobre voz con la de aquellos preclaros instrumentos de la música de amor. (Tagore, 1952: 47-48)

Perhaps it was her interaction with Rabindranath that made Victoria Ocampo conscious about the Latin American identity crisis. While staying at San Isidro, time and again Rabindranath expressed his displeasure with Latin America's attempt to imitate Europe. His attitude and Ocampo's reaction to that in 1924, was delineated in Ocampo's book *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro*:

Mi ojeada a América del Sur – escribe Tagore a Romain Rolland – no es reconfortante. La gente se ha enriquecido de repente, y no ha tenido tiempo de descubrir su alma. Es lastimoso ver su absoluta dependencia de Europa para sus pensamientos, que deben llegarles totalmente hechos. No les avergüenza enorgullecerse de cualquier moda que copian, o de cultura que compran a aquel Continente...

¿Pero dónde íbamos a *comprar* nuestra cultura, si no en los países de dónde venimos...? ¿Acaso la cultura europea no es también la nuestra? (Ocampo, 1961a: 69)

However, it did not take her long to realise that there was something lacking in that culture, and from that point stemmed her search for an American identity, which led her to establish the journal *Sur*, a journal that, according

to Mistral, would eventually change the course of Latin American literatures (Meyer and Horan).

Ocampo was also very much influenced by the Tagorean god, who was not rigid and judgemental like the Christian God, but rather a friend, a guide, as she mentioned in her autobiography:

Yo no creía en Dios, en un Dios personal exigente, mezquino, implacable, el Dios vengador, limitado que habían tratado de imponerme... Dios de Tagore, ¿me oyes? Dios que no quieras ponerme a cubierto de nada y que no temas el olvido en que te dejo, ¡cómo me conoces! ¡Dios oculto que sabes que siempre te buscaré! ¡Dios que sabes que hacia ti sólo vamos por los caminos de la libertad! (Ocampo, 1982: 19-20)

The acknowledgement of Europe in the form of the Nobel Prize, admittedly, played an instrumental role in expanding Rabindranath's fame; however, that was not the sole important factor. Perhaps the fact that Rabindranath could conceptualise of a profound, self-less love from within a colony which had its own blood-trailed reality, made him even more poignant and relevant in the Latin American countries. It was also significant that despite the huge popularity of *Song Offerings* in the English West after receiving the Nobel Prize; in Spain, Camprubí and Jiménez chose to translate *The Crescent Moon* and then *The Post-Office*. In fact, *Song Offerings* would be the ninth book Camprubí and Jiménez would translate and publish in 1918. In the first two texts they translated, the 'child' played a very important role, and the emphasis was also on love, happiness, innocence; feelings that

Hispanic world really needed at that time. These poems revived the decaying *modernismo* in the Spanish American countries, and in Spain gave birth to a new kind of poetry, pure poetry or la poesía desnuda. The development of 'La poesía desnuda' or 'Naked Poetry' in Spain had often been traced back (Nemes, 1961; Johnson, 1965) to the 7<sup>th</sup> song of *Song Offerings*, "My song has put off her adornments".

Among other things, the Hispanic world was also influenced by Rabindranath's ways of expression, his very simple diction and use of imageries and metaphors, which were carried across successfully even in translations. Various authors would refer to this simplicity and accessibility of his poems. In 1918, in an open letter to Zenobia Camprubí, famous Spanish author and philosopher, Ortega y Gasset drew attention to the universal appeal of his poems:

Rabindranath [sic.], en cambio, no necesita nada histórico y suntuario, nada peculiar de un tiempo y de un pueblo. Con un poco de sol, de cielo y de nube, de hontanar y de sed, de tormentos y de ribera, con el quicio de una puerta o el marco de una ventana donde asomarse, sobre todo con un poco de amoroso incendio y de fiebre hacia Dios, elabora sus canciones. Esta lírica, se compone, pues, de cosas universales, que dondequiera hay, dondequiera ha habido, y hace de ella un pájaro pronto a cantar desde toda rama. (Ortega y Gasset, 2011: 230)

If this letter highlighted the initial Spanish response to Rabindranath, the Latin American response could be found almost after nine years, when Victoria Ocampo wrote 'La alegría de

leer al Rabindranath Tagore' where she also underscored the same aspect, the refreshing nature of Rabindranath's poems, his concept of love and the fulfilment that he found in love, "Entrar en los poemas de Tagore, al salir de la novella de Proust [Swann's Way, *In Search of Lost Time*], es el baño del viajero rendido y polvoriento después de una travesía del desierto occidental. Es respirar aire puro debajo de un árbol secular después de una prolongada permanencia en una gran ciudad." (1961a, 20). This refreshing, soothing aspect of Rabindranath's notion of love would remain relevant even in 1961, when another Argentine poet, Eduardo González Lanuza, would again highlight this universal appeal of Rabindranath's poetry, the lucidity of his poetry:

Tal vez el secreto fundamental de su [de Rabindranath] poética consista en haber sabido adquirir una cortés evanescencia, como de fantasma, fluctuante y casi traslucida, pero mantenedora por lo mismo de su perfil inconfundible. Si se ha podido definir la música como el bordeado contorno del silencio, la poesía de Tagore se podría, a su vez, caracterizar como la ondulante – y deleitosa – ribera de lo inefable. (*Sur*, 1961: 46-47)

It was not only Rabindranath's poems and songs, his essays were also quite popular in Spanish America. Ocampo, of course, was an avid reader of Rabindranath and had read almost all of his English works, but even Joaquín González, Abel Alarcón and others have also referred to Rabindranath's essays. In his letter (dated September 23, 1924) to Rabindranath, José Vasconcelos referred to *Personality*,

*Sadhana, Nationalism* explaining how deeply he was moved by these books. *Nationalism*, though not as popular as his poems, would remain relevant in the Hispanic world for a long time, as we see in the writing of the famous Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). In a short piece published in the Tagore Centenary issue of *Sur*, Borges drew a connection between the way Shaw rejected capitalism and the way Rabindranath eschewed imperialism:

Shaw rechazaba el capitalismo, que condena a los unos a la pobreza y a los otros al tedio; parejamente Rabindranath Tagore rechazaba el imperialismo que disminuye a los oprimidos y al opresor. La cultura oriental y la occidental se conjugaron en este hombre, que manejó los dos instrumentos del inglés y del bengalí; en cada página de este libro conviven la afirmación asiática de las ilimitadas posibilidades del alma y el recelo que la máquina del estado inspiraba a Spencer. (1961: 61)

Having suffered for a long time from internal colonialism and the US imperialism, perhaps it was easier for the Spanish American countries to understand Rabindranath's warnings against narrow Nationalism and appreciate his ideas of Internationalism.

Rabindranath's paintings were not less known in the Spanish America either. In many of her writings Victoria Ocampo referred to the "doodling" Rabindranath used to make in his notebooks during his stay in Argentina. Though this was an old habit of the poet, Ocampo was perhaps one of the first persons to encourage him, and later she would play an instrumental role in organizing an exhibition of Rabindranath's paintings in

Paris, which established the famous poet as a modern painter. In 1967, famous Mexican poet and diplomat, Octavio Paz (1914-1998) delivered a lecture at Delhi University in India, where he discussed Rabindranath's paintings and poems and the intricate relationship between these different forms of art: "Tagore wanted to sing with the lines and colours. Therefore, instead of words and letters, he set off with lines and paints, which are always rhythmical." (Paz, 1991).

To anyone familiar with the range of Rabindranath's creations, it would appear that while rendering his works into English, the poet probably chose to expose only a few aspects of his self and hide the rest. Yet, with that fractional exposure Spanish America 'discovered' an alternative in his writings; an alternative set of beliefs, expressions and ways of thinking, which came from another colony like their own, and won over the colonisers. Probably, therein was the importance and necessity of a South-South dialogue, which Rabindranath and his Spanish American contemporaries had exemplified.

## Notes

1. The reason behind focusing on these three countries is purely logistical – most of the texts/ authors I have been able to locate so far, belong to these countries.
2. Some sporadic translations have been done by S.P. Ganguly, Malabika Bhattacharya and other scholars. However, as far as I know, no complete book of Rabindranath has been translated into Spanish directly from Bangla.
3. I shall not go into detailed analysis of the latter part, as that would require a separate article.

4. For a brief overview of Rabindranath's life and works, see (Kripalani, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography).
5. Elsewhere I have written about some of the earliest Spanish and Spanish American translations of Rabindranath, including the translations made by Pérez de Ayala and Abel Alarcón. For details, see (Bhattacharya, 2012).
6. He did write a few letters to Zenobia Camprubí, but those were very brief and formal correspondences. For details see (Das & Ganguly, Saswato mouchak, 1987).
7. A detailed account of his plan and the Spanish euphoria can be found in (Das & Ganguly, Saswato mouchak, 1987).
8. Details on the articles published here can be found in (Dyson, 2009)
9. Details on the articles published here can be found in (Scriba, 2011)
10. For details on Rabindranath and Ocampo, see (Dyson, 2009), (Ghosh, 2010) and (Ganguly, The Kindred Voice: Reflections on Tagore in Spain and Latin America, 2011) and (Ganguly, Ocampo y Tagore: Entre la Vision de Uno y lo Otro). There are also other significant works by these and other scholars.
11. See note 5.
12. Rabindranath translated these poems of Kabir in assistance with Evelyn Underhill and Ajit Kumar Chakraborty. For details, see (Das, The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, 2011).
13. From Ruiz's (Ruiz, 2014) article, it seemed that José Vasconcelos was heading the Ministry of Education during this time. Given his interest on Rabindranath, it was no wonder that he would promote this kind of a book.
14. Needless to add, that Mistral knew nothing about the Bangla source poem, 'Dui pakhi' of Sonar Taree.
15. In fact, Mistral did not cite any source at all, except the name and nationality of the poet/author.
16. Bangla source poem: 'Chaturi' of Shishu.
17. For some strange reason, the English translation capitalizes the 'y' of 'you', which is not there in the Spanish source text.
18. The incident, however, found no mention in Neruda's Memoirs, though he mentioned the Tagore family and Vicente Huidobro in the book.

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