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Modernism and Modernity in Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction. Contextualization of Modernism in and for India

Modernism as an aesthetic movement is embedded into socio-political contexts of reactions to modernity. From these particular contexts emerged different concepts of modernity, leading to various expressions of modernisms¹, the study of which still leave a minor place for Indian artists. The awareness of this plurality pointed at possible shifts in the meanings attributed to these concepts and their relationship. It seems therefore nowadays indispensable to re-investigate the latter by focusing on the variations against the standardization of modernity and modernism as defined by European and American expressions, and also against the standardization of the relation of these two concepts. The interweaving of modernism and modernity differs since the mutual reactions are singular to the context, but also since the context implies various artistic and political

¹ Regarding the difference between modernism and modernity, “let us remind ourselves of the useful distinction between modernity as a global phenomenon with wide political, economic and social implications, and the more specific aesthetic movement known as modernism, which has engaged fruitfully and critically with the predicament of modernity. Global modernity as such arrived in India with the consolidation of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. Introduction of art schools, art exhibitions, the processes of mechanical reproduction and other modern institutions in India was part of Westernization, which transformed artists’ status and outlook as well as art patronage. In the 1920s, during a further paradigm shift, the radical formalist language of modernism offered Indian artists such as Rabindranath Tagore and Jamini Roy a new weapon of anti-colonial resistance. In their intellectual battle with colonialism, they readily found allies among the Western avant-garde critics of urban industrial capitalism, leading them to engage for the first time with global aesthetic issues.” Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism India’s artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947*, London, Reaktion Books, 2007, p.10. Using this definition as my conceptual framework, I use modernity as the socio-political concept towards which modernism as an aesthetic movement is directed, in the plurality of the nature of the relations of the two concepts in the world.

influences on the modernists. In particular, the cultural shifting of the debate on modernity implies variations in the colonial and postcolonial state of India, which engages the question of its 'identity' in a modern world². On the use of modernity in relation with colonialism, Kapur Geeta comments:

Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change that we call the process of modernization. It is also an ontological quest with its particular forms of reflexivity, its acts of struggle. Modernity takes a precipitate historical form in the postcolonial world, while its praxis produces a cultural dynamic whereby questions of autonomy, identity and authenticity come to the fore. These are desired individually but are sought to be gained in collectivity. Even the tasks of subjectivity, so long as they are unresolved, require acts of allegorical exegesis-often via the nation³.

These qualifications tally the ambivalent context in which Tagore is located during his life from 1861 to 1941. This time period includes two main sides: on the one hand, the British implementation of European modernity with its price, colonization, and on the other hand, Indian traditions, with their religious depths, social communities, but also material lacks, and structural problems such as education (in Tagore's opinion). The differences between these sides were largely amplified by the British themselves and by the various resistances and the rise of nationalists in India, making the latter often appear as two radical opposites, as an inextinguishable tension. Tagore incarnates in this context the "builder of a national ideology for cultural revival that would transcend nationalism"⁴.

The specificity of this modernism is also shaped by the particular situation of the former capital of Bengal, Kolkata. It represents the locus of intersection of the local and the global, the traditional and the modernist, the colonial and the indigenous, the Bengali speakers and the English speakers, the international and the national. The conflicts and tensions of these different forces occurring suddenly in this single place transformed it into an important modernist city. However, Partha Mitter draws our attention towards the singular cosmopolitanism of Kolkata, presented as a '*virtual*'

2 Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism, Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, New Delhi, Tulipa Books, 2000, p. 299.

3 Ibid., p. 298.

4 Uma Dasgupta, "Rabindranath Tagore and Modernity", in *Tagore and Modernity*, edited by Krishna Sen & Tapati Gupta, Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co., 2006, p. 1.

one. Indeed, in the particular Indian context, cosmopolitan modernity was mainly virtual, in the sense of a mediated exchange, via literature and Western values imported through colonialism. Their impact on the Bengali elite was effective and they shaped the modernist movement, but it was mainly a fictive relation maintained in printings. It should be noted that Tagore constitutes a remarkable counter-example, whose international character partly explains his singular position within modernism in India.

Modernity created a globally 'imagined community' based upon print culture, whose members may never have known one another personally, and yet shared a corpus of ideas on modernity. To explain this community's critical engagement with modern ideas, I propose here the concept of the 'virtual cosmopolis'. The hybrid city of the imagination engendered elective affinities between the elites of the centre and the periphery on the level of intellect and creativity⁵.

This status characterizes the complexity of the mediated anti-colonial modernism in India.

Modernist expressions in Art

This socio-political context led to a shift in aesthetic expressions, as noticed in particular by Partha Mitter and Supriya Chaudhuri⁶, regarding above all the movement of '*primitivism*', as an aesthetic expression based on a positive evaluation of the concept of nature. If this artistic movement was a reaction against the sudden burst of the urban character and the new industrial state of cities in Europe, its adoption by Indian artists pointed rather to a denunciation of a colonial style of living against Indian values. It served as a political denunciation by using urbanity as a symbol for denouncing colonial influences. Tagore's concept of harmony with nature concerned the universal man and its socio-political application in India while the exotic quest of Paul Gauguin looked for new horizons to escape

⁵ Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism India's artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947*, London, Reaktion Books, 2007, p. 11-12.

⁶ Ibid., p. 12; Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Modernisms in India', in Osborne, P., Brooker, Peter, Gasiorek, A., Longworth, D., & Thacker, A. J., *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 945.

their own modernity. The first chapter of *Sādhanā*, “The relation of the individual to the universe”, illustrates this ideal of Tagore:

The west seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things. This sentiment is the product of the city-wall habit and training of mind. For in the city life man naturally directs the concentrated light of his mental vision upon his own life and works, and this creates an artificial dissociation between himself and the Universal Nature within whose bosom he lies. But in India the point of view was different; it included the world with the man as one great truth. India put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal. She felt we could have no communication whatever with our surroundings if they were absolutely foreign to us⁷.”

Tagore’s primitivism and valuing of nature are internally addressed, while European primitivism is an external quest for something ‘beyond’ and ‘other’ than its own location.

Considering modernism as a global phenomenon requires taking into consideration alternative expressions that are *not* to be considered as reinterpretations and inventions of European modernisms. Although modernism, as defined in its European manifestations, found expressions due to global influence and exchanges⁸ within Indian Art, the impact of its emergence in colonial Kolkata cannot be underestimated. It would therefore be misleading, as Partha Mitter remarks, to read Tagore as a ‘*cubiste manqué*’, or as some derivative painter from the West⁹. The stakes of an investigation on modernism in non-Western spaces should not be to establish a classification of what matches or differs from modernism as defined in its Western perspective, but to investigate its proper meaning and expression in different contexts. One should therefore not study what Tagore had ‘similar to’, ‘less’ or ‘more’ than Western modernists, but *what this very concept signifies in his literature*. In this sense, modernism can be defined in my study as a creative movement that reacted to colonial modernity.

Modernism in India consists mainly in a reinterpretation of and a response to the European reception by attempting to construct India’s

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhanā, The Realisation of Life*, London, MacMillan, 1913 / 1957.

⁸ Concerning the modernist Tagore, see Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism India’s artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947*, London, Reaktion Books, 2007, p. 65-77.

⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

identity. It marks the beginning of a transition and a reflection on ‘alternative modernities’¹⁰, or a reflection on what should or will India be. It became intrinsically related to the stakes of colonialism, and connected with ‘modernity’ from which it is inseparable. Modernity in this sense is a double reflection on Indian values compared to Europe’s exportation of its own values. The originality of Tagore is to have distanced himself from the two radical directions, from a complete ‘modernization’ in a ‘Western sense’, that is an acceptance of the whole intrusion of England into India, such as secularization, monopolization of the language, British political government, rise of nationalism, and from a complete rejection of the West in favor of Indian nationalism. An example of Tagore’s reserve towards the *Swadeshi* movement, a nationalist movement fighting against the British power, whose strategies included a boycott of non-Indian products for reaching self-sufficiency of material goods to weaken the colonial economic hold, is to be found in Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World*¹¹. As we shall later see, the protagonist Nikhil introduces a definition of modernity that includes collaboration with the West in the sense of a reevaluation of how Indians value education, the place of women, freedom and a balance between the two worlds. According to Tagore, modernity is a rather extended subject whose crucial position determined the place of India in the world.

Definition of Modernism by Tagore

In *Nationalism*, published in 1917, Tagore expresses his criticism against nationalism in its various expressions in the world, which he takes for responsible for the contemporary troubles in Asia and in the West. The latter is rather severely blamed for its impersonal government, its surveillance and the ‘vigilance’ of its ‘machine’¹² that leads to various forms of imperialism (colonialism and wars). Consequently, Tagore opposes the negative concept of Nation to the valuable cultural and social one of

10 Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of modernism in a globalizing world”, in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Eds), *Geographies of modernism, Literature, Culture, Spaces*, London / New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 7.

11 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (trans. by Surendranath Tagore), London, MacMillan, 1919.

12 Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, London, MacMillan and Co., 1917, p. 25.

Western ‘Civilization’¹³. Japan, which comes secondly, is considered as a model for Asia, having successfully modernized while still preserving its own essence and original culture. However, Tagore carefully invites Japan to moderation and harmonization in this encounter of modernity and tradition, expressed in the following quote. Finally, when it comes to India, Tagore recognizes the social problem of the caste system and the need for social modernization (education, science, women, etc.), although he calls for preventing politics in the European sense, i.e. nationalistic and belligerent, for replacing the social function of the Indian structure. In this context he offers the following definition of modernism, retrieved from “Nationalism in Japan”, somewhat critical against a war-torn Europe in the colonial context:

While I agree with them [the means of modernization in Japan] so far as to say that the spirit of the race should harmonize with the spirit of the time, I must warn them that modernizing is a mere affectation of modernism, just as affectation of poesy is poetizing. It is nothing but mimicry, only affectation is louder than the original, and it is too literal. One must bear in mind that those who have the true modern spirit need not modernize, just as those who are truly brave are not braggarts. Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat, straight wall-surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies’ bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters¹⁴.

Tagore criticizes the Indian (or perhaps global?) tendency for imitation of the West, known as the large ‘Westernization’ of India as a simple copy that denatures both the model, via the simplification in the process, and the copy itself. Modernity must point to the renewal of Indian categories on the side of innovation and creativity, selecting in this process with a critical mind the positive contribution of the Western civilization (in opposition to the deficiencies of the European political nations). In this picture of Europe one can read a disillusionment with this continent and a

¹³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 75.

perceptive and critical evaluation of modernity in its opposition to nature, the former being associated with a feeling of ‘imprisonment’ symbolizing the European lifestyle. Thus, Tagore finds in modernism a tool for an aesthetic and moral anti-colonialist struggle towards independence. Finding a harmonious relation to the West, one that would neither be complete rejection (traditionalism) nor alienation, constitutes an objective to a large part of Tagore’s literature, which guarantees him originality in his opposition to most of his contemporary fellows and singularity in the understanding of modernism¹⁵. These aspects constitute the further developments of my analysis.

Modernism and Modernity: the case of Nationalism

In this first definition, modernism appears as belonging to the anti-colonial movement, as a call for ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’. Modernity, far from being one-sided, is however a complex concept in Tagore’s writings, including a critical evaluation of the West, of colonialism and of Indian nationalistic movements, in particular of the *Swadeshi* movement¹⁶.

15 Although the following comment is not related to the aforementioned reference to Tagore, Swapan Majumdar’s remark could also apply in this context: “For Tagore modernity did not consist in the deployment of a mere device or style, a technology of language and form; on the contrary it guaranteed a freedom of choice in determining one’s course of action or shaping a view of life. Political freedom was not unimportant to him, but freedom of mind was of much greater import. Assertion of one’s individual identity was a matter of value for him, but of greater consequence was how that individuality was to be related to the society at large.” Swapan Majumdar, “The Other Face of Modernity: Tagore’s Search for Alternatives”, in *Tagore and Modernity*, edited by Krishna Sen & Tapati Gupta, Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co, 2006, p. 24.

16 The *Swadeshi* movement was part of the political movements for the Indian Independence. It developed a nationalistic consciousness based on the boycott of British and European products to empower India and provide the country with a self-sufficient (the meaning of *Swadeshi*) economy supported by its local productions. It valued the products but also the methods of production, showing the revival of Indian traditional techniques for handicrafts and productions. It was also part of Gandhi’s principle for his non-cooperation movement, which opposed Tagore and Gandhi, the former believing in a common association and harmony between cultures, supported by the positive evaluation of the British educational system against the weakness of Indian and modern techniques. For more details on the disagreement between Tagore and Gandhi, see ‘Politics, Gandhi and Nationalism’, in Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Hampshire / Burlington, Ashgate, 2005, p. 38-57.

In his novel *The Home and the World (Ghare-Baire)*, Tagore draws the portrait of modernity, of the construction of nationalistic ideologies, and the foundation for India's independence in the introspection of three different voices and their entanglement in the alternation of three different first person perspectives narrating the story. The psychology of the characters, so depicted, gives sense to the complexity of modernity according to the different trends in the social-political context: Sandip, intransigent militant of the *Swadeshi* movement in the novel, illustrates the ambivalent use of modernity for the sake of its political uses. In this sense modernity is an adjective designating colonialism, against which one should fight. Its ideology however opposes the anti-colonial discourse to the use of 'modern' means, in order to achieve the 'anti-modern' ideas. Sandip embraces modernity in the pragmatic political strategies, dreaming of a Western military style to defend Indian nationalism, based on anti-colonial values. The character expresses this ambiguity as follows:

This is exactly how such curious anomalies happen nowadays in our country. We must have our religion and also our nationalism; our 'Bhagavadgita' and also our 'Bande Mataram'. The result is that both of them suffer. It is like performing with an English military band, side by side with our Indian festive pipes. I must make it the purpose of my life to put an end to this hideous confusion. I want the western military style to prevail, not the Indian. We shall then not be ashamed of the flag of our passion, which mother Nature has sent with us as our standard into the battlefield of life¹⁷.

Modernism is the modernization of Indian political foundation against the colonial influences, including here the political deviance and the manipulation of the concepts for the sake of the protagonist himself. Modernity is here passionate and emotional, used with nationalistic affectation to provoke the crowd. This non-accordance of the idea to the means in its political use, although complex, is condemned by Tagore's philosophical ideas, represented by Nikhil's position and his criticisms, in the following passage expressed by his wife Bimala:

(*Bimala*) "My husband, at this, broke his silence. "You must

17 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (trans. By Surendranath Tagore), MacMillan, London, 1919 (Electronic version realized by the Gutenberg project), p. 57.

confess,” said he, “that you have as immense an attraction for foreign medicine as the earth has for meteors. You have three shelves in your sitting-room full of...”

Sandip Babu broke in: “Do you know what they are? They are the punitive police. They come, not because they are wanted, but because they are imposed on us by the rule of this modern age, exacting fines and-inflicting injuries¹⁸.”

This example illustrates the hypocritical use of the 'modern age' being characterized as 'punishment', while the use of modernity is underlined by Nikhil. The latter is often qualified as 'modern', or 'too modern'¹⁹, the qualification designating in this case the nature of his convictions, in contrast with the domain of political application of 'modernity' of Sandip. Nikhil aims at renewing the social foundation of Indian societies. Modernity is then an inner moral virtue regarding social character such as education, women, religious understanding, etc. The beginning of the novel shows his commitment to his ideals through the education of his wife, her freedom in marriage and Nikhil's own generosity towards human beings, despite their religions, richness or castes. It could be that this sincere sense of modernity is a reason precisely for his failure among the passionate crowds at the edge of Indian nationalism, as the character is losing the respect of his fellow citizen by not following the ideology of the *Swadeshi*, in favor of Sandip with his popular speeches and spontaneous sense of actions. Righteousness and inner qualities do not go together with political leadership in Tagore's writings. It illustrates the rising of the fervor leading to the Partition, which Tagore tried to prevent in depicting the differences of attitudes of the protagonists. In spite of their complex psychological features, the preference given to Nikhil filters through Tagore's writing, and one can hardly avoid hearing the author in the protagonist when the latter says:

What I really feel is this, that those who cannot find food for their enthusiasm in a knowledge of their country as it actually is, or those who cannot love men just because they are men—who needs must shout and deify their country in order to keep up their excitement—these love excitement more than their country.

18 Ibid., p. 17.

19 Ibid., p. 2, p. 5 & p. 47.

To try to give our infatuation a higher place than Truth is a sign of inherent slavishness. Where our minds are free we find ourselves lost. Our moribund vitality must have for its rider either some fantasy, or someone in authority, or a sanction from the pundits, in order to make it move. So long as we are impervious to truth and have to be moved by some hypnotic stimulus, we must know that we lack the capacity for selfgovernment.

Whatever may be our condition, we shall either need some imaginary ghost or some actual medicine-man to terrorize over us.²⁰

A large account of the debate between the two characters relies on rhetoric, on their own abilities of convincing each other. Nikhil could be the portrait of the moderate philosopher, or the wise spiritual leader, whose awareness of modernity and colonialism is based on a moral conception of human nature, supported by philosophical concepts, while Sandip uses stylistic devices to carry on the affectivity of his speech, and his concepts are therefore almost transformed as allegories.

Finally 'modern' is an adjective that one finds the most in Bimala's statement, Nikhil's wife, regarding the English language, foreign clothes and ornaments, etc. Modernity is in her case a synonym for British or foreign, which symbolizes the popular assimilation of this situation, to which Sandip reacts by amassing power and building influence. While Nikhil is perhaps the only one to have understood modernity in its independent meaning, the one that Tagore promotes in *Nationalism, The Home and the World* points out its various uses, popular and elitist. The picture offered by the novel remarkably conveys the complex situation by intermingling and confronting the different judgments and personalities of each characters, with their dilemmas and inner difficulties. The entanglement of perspectives enables a multi-layered establishment of facts and their interpretations in the complexity of human nature.

Global modernity: a harmonious encounter

Against Sandip and the ideology of the *Swadeshi*, modernism for Tagore expresses the ideal of a harmonious encounter between East and West. In this regard, he is in opposition with a large part of the Bengali elite who embraced modernism as a copy of the Western world, and another large

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23-24.

part who founded the Non-Cooperation movement. Consequently, Tagore incurred both Westernisers' and traditionalists' wrath²¹. As reflected in the aforementioned analysis, he encouraged a social use of modernity against a political one, which is insufficient and unfair for him²². This distinction is the expression of Tagore's anti-colonial conviction in its moderate sense: not a rejection of the West as such, but a criticism of the direct application of a Western political system in a foreign country, whose context is necessarily not adapted for it. The opposition between the social and the political prevails in Tagore, not with the intent of erasing politics, rather in the sense of a true conformity between social and political. This idea is justified in *Nationalism*:

Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India, but among all nations. I do not believe in an exclusive political interest. Politics in the West have dominated Western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you. (...) But from the earliest beginnings of history India has her own problem constantly before her – it is the race problem. Each nation must be conscious of its mission, and we, in India, must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political, simply because we have not yet been finally able to accomplish what was set before us by our providence²³.

Political nationalism does not answer India's problem and it is therefore an error to try to copy what has led Europe to war. It is inadequate first because it already seems to sign the decline of Europe and secondly because of its misunderstanding of Indian culture. For how could it be applicable to India whose roots are supported by a social system based on

21 See for example *Tagore and Modernity*, edited by Krishna Sen & Tapati Gupta, Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co, 2006.

22 A detailed study of the social versus the political in Tagore's thought is to be found in Kalyan Sen Gupta's analysis: "It follows that the 'élan' of different civilizations is situated in different places. The vital power of a country lies in whatever it is that takes care of welfare as a whole. Any serious blow there will jeopardize the entire country. In Europe, politics or the state occupies that place, and its people depend upon it in almost every matter. India, however, owes its life to well-balanced social arrangements. Thus the West survives by protecting the state, while our country lives on socially regulated conventions free from any state intervention." Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Hampshire / Burlington, Ashgate, 2005, p. 39-40.

23 Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, London, Macmillan, 1917, p. 97-98.

identities such as ‘family’ rather than political theories such as Rousseau’s social contract? Nikhil tries to construct a modern social state appropriate to India itself, while using the advantages and the benefits of the West, such as education and scientific progress, which expresses the nature of Eastern-Western positive relations.

Tagore did not (only) see the West as a colonial power submitting India as it may have seemed in the first comment from *Nationalism*; nor did he fully blame the West or the British for their values. This comes probably from Tagore’s personal international experience²⁴, his various encounters and friendships with personalities of the West, from A. Einstein to W. B. Yeats, and his critical evaluation of exchange related to colonization. As aforementioned in the introduction, Tagore is precisely not a ‘virtual cosmopolitan’ as most of his fellow citizens, but a real citizen of the world. This characteristic provided him with an unromanticised picture of the West, as well as a distance with regard to its own nation, while the concept of modernity in India has been inflated with various connotations of India emerging from its actual distance to Europe. On the side of Nikhil, Tagore writes in *Nationalism*:

We have to consider that the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth. Therefore if it be true that the spirit of the West has come upon our fields in the guise of a storm it is nevertheless scattering living seeds that are immortal. And when in India we become able to assimilate in our life what is permanent in Western civilization we shall be in the position to bring about a reconciliation of these two great worlds. Then will come to an end the one-sided dominance which is galling²⁵.

The anti-colonialism of Tagore means harmonization of the relations between East and West. Tagore sees this complementarity through the exchange of mutual forces and positive values, by which he intends enriching India from the Western scientific progress and the education, and

24 It should be emphasized here that Tagore is a complete international character, who lived, visited, delivered lectures and conferences in more than 30 different countries all over the world. He was a main proponent of Indian thinking in the world and a committed thinker of understanding between cultures.

25 Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, London, MacMillan, 1917, p. 15.

bringing to the West India's spiritual learning, peace and humbleness. In 'The Sunset of the Century', a poem written in Bengali on the last day of the nineteenth century, Tagore opposes the forthcoming violence of the West with the simplicity of the East – an expression of Tagore's primitivism –:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood - red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its own shameless feeding. / For it has made the world its food, / And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels, / It swells and swells / Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness. (...)

Keep watch, India. / Bring your offerings of worship for that sacred sunrise. / Let the first hymn of its welcome sound in your voice and sing / "Come, Peace, thou daughter of God's own great suffering.

Come with thy treasure of contentment, the sword of fortitude and meekness crowning thy forehead.

Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud and the powerful / With your white robe of simpleness. / Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul. / Build God's throne daily upon the ample bareness of your poverty / And know that what is huge is not great and pride is not everlasting²⁶.

It is certain that Tagore's reflection should be placed in its original context: the ideal pacifist saw the rise of European nationalism and violence followed by the First World War, until the rise of anti-Semitism. In parallel, he saw the rise of Indian movements such as the *Swadeshi*, and the beginning of the Hindu-Muslim violence in the march for Indian Independence – Tagore passed away in 1941, only a few years before the massacre of Indian Partition. He witnessed Europe take the wrong path and tried to promote a new quest for India to find harmony. As the European model was about to be destroyed, and with it the colonial ideology, Tagore tried to find in the Indian roots a path towards a peaceful freedom, which had to be constructed on a global harmony, a 'universal man'. His belief

26 Rabindranath Tagore, "The Sunset Of The Century", in *Nationalism*, London, MacMillan, 1917, p. 133-135.

turned out to be a utopia after the partition of India. It is nevertheless an attempt for a trans-national and trans-cultural harmony founded in the concept of modernity – as the re-invention of harmonious models of encounters between the East and the West.

Tagore's attempt to reconcile different horizons is however not based on any kind of standardization. He did see the differences between East and West, and criticized their excess²⁷ and dangers according to his ultimate criteria of 'harmony': harmony between humans and nature, harmony with the infinite in a spiritual sense, harmony between men, etc. Harmony in this sense does not mean becoming-one under the yoke of one particular ideology or force, but establishing a balance of different movements or cultures according to their human values, a necessarily ideal concept that should be thought as a 'horizon' to direct human conduct, rather than a complete reality:

Civilisation must be judged and prized, not by the amount of power it has developed, but by how much it has evolved and given expression to, by its laws and institutions, the love of humanity. The first question and the last which it has to answer is, Whether and how far it recognises man more as a spirit than as a machine? Whenever some ancient civilisation fell into decay and died, it was owing to causes which produced callousness of heart and led to the cheapening of man's worth; when either the state or some powerful group of men began to look upon the people as a more instrument of their power; when, by compelling weaker races to slavery and trying to keep down by every means, man struck at the foundation of his greatness, his own love of freedom and fairplay. Civilisation can never sustain itself upon cannibalism of any form. For that by which alone man is true can only be nourished by love and justice²⁸.

27 See for example in *Sādhanā*: "In the great western continent we see that the soul of man is mainly concerned with extending itself outwards; the open field of the exercise of power is its field. Its partiality is entirely for the world of extension, and it would leave aside – nay, hardly believe in- that field of inner consciousness which is the field of fulfilment. (...) In our country the danger comes from the opposite side. Our partiality is for the internal world. We would cast aside with contumely the field of power and extension. We would realise Brahma in mediation only in his aspect of completeness, we have determined not to see him in the commerce of the universal in his aspect of evolution. That is why in our seekers we so often find the intoxication of the spirit and its consequent degradation." Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhanā, The Realisation of Life*, London, MacMillan, 1913 / 1957, p. 125-127.

28 Ibid., p. 111-112.

The criticism of particular states underlies the superiority of human cultures, and the criticism of political modernity leads to a possible universal path of harmonious and spiritual understanding. Here is the true expression of modernism in its aesthetic sense, as Art in Tagore's spiritual sense is a means towards true modernity of thinking, as a moral value and a spiritual transcendence.

Aesthetic unity: the case of Shantiniketan

The defense of Art in Tagore's thought goes together with the idea of 'self' and 'personality' in their constitutive meanings for the nature of human beings. The social-political dimension constitutes the appearance of Reality, to which the artist gives its true meaning:

The urging of our artistic nature is to realize the manifestation of personality in the world of appearance, the reality of existence which is in harmony with the real within us. Where this harmony is not deeply felt, there we are aliens and perpetually homesick. For man by nature is an artist; he never receives passively and accurately in his mind a physical representation of things around him. There goes on a continual adaptation, a transformation of facts into human imagery, through constant touches of his sentiments and imagination. The animal has the geography of its birthplace; man has his country, the geography of his personal self. The vision of it is not merely physical; it has its artistic unity, it is a perpetual creation. In his country, his consciousness being unobstructed, man extends his relationship, which is of his own creative personality²⁹.

Art is the expression of one's subjectivity, which can however reach universality in its harmonious relation to nature and civilization. In the *Religion of Man*, a tension – which is precisely not an opposition – is constructed between the individual self and its personal creation and the universal nature of man, or 'Man the Eternal'³⁰. Art, being the work of a

29 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man (The Hibbert Lectures for 1930)*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1931 / 1958, p. 132-133.

30 This tension is developed here: "But the mysterious fact about it is that though the individuals are separately seeking their expression, their success is never individualistic in character. Men must find and feel and represent in all their creative works Man the Eternal, the creator. Their civilization is a continual discovery of the transcendental humanity. In

singular man, reaches out to the world and makes Man transcend his singularity, a belief that founded Tagore's conviction on the possibility of a universal dialogue beyond cultures via the artistic medium:

But the artist finds out the unique, the individual, which yet is in the heart of the universal. When he looks on a tree, he looks on that tree as unique, not as the botanist who generalizes and classifies. It is the function of the artist to particularize that one tree. How does he do it? Not through the peculiarity which is the discord of the unique, but through the personality which is harmony. Therefore he has to find out the inner concordance of that one thing with its outer surroundings of all things³¹.

This harmonization of the world, the association of differences to create, to contribute to a unique reality has been Tagore's empirical and conceptual leitmotiv. It was however for Tagore not only an ideal or a utopia, but a concrete realization that he himself founded: *Shantiniketan*.

Shantiniketan, Tagore's University, symbolizes precisely this communion between nature, Art, and human beings. Tagore conceived it as a gathering of all religions and cultures – from the beginning various Professors from diverse religions and nations taught there - where education is a celebration of nature, for which Art constitutes a fundamental model. Buildings were open, classes were held outside, in the open air, in order to maintain a connection with nature. Education, modernity, and nature do not contradict each other but should be brought together in harmony according to Tagore's leitmotiv. The Arts were also included in the compulsory subjects of schools, and could be combined with sciences as subjects, to liberalize education and thus to provide students with more possibilities to develop their potential. Finally, Tagore withdrew from the educational system any examination: "The basic philosophy underlying the removal of exams was to create a space for the students who would be free from torture of a suffocating process of accumulation and reproduction"³². Swapan

whatever it fails it shows the failure of the artist, which is the failure in expression; and that civilization perishes in which the individual thwarts the revelation of the universal. For Reality is the truth of Man, who belongs to all times, and any individualistic madness of men against Man cannot thrive for long." Ibid, p. 135.

31 Rabindranath Tagore, "What is Art", in *Personality, Lectures delivered in America*, London, MacMillan, 1917, p. 24.

32 Swapan Majumdar, "The Other Face of Modernity: Tagore's Search for Alternatives", in *Tagore and Modernity*, edited by Krishna Sen & Tapati Gupta, Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co., 2006, p. 30.

Majumdar explains the functioning of the school according to Tagore's principle of "awakening of the spirit" (ibid.), which concerns both the knowledge itself, but includes also the social dimension of mingling, of expanding human contacts and creating a universal solidarity. Modernity and creativity are experiences made with others, a schema provided by the education of *Shantiniketan*.

The motivation for grounding *Shantiniketan* is expressed by Tagore as follows:

The truth became clear to me that India had cut her path and broadened it for ages, the path that leads to a life reaching beyond death, rising high above the idealisation of the political selfishness and insatiable lust for accumulation of materials. The voice came to me in the Vedic tongue from the ashrams, the forest sanctuaries of the past, with the call "Come to me as the rivers to the sea, as the days and nights to the completion of their annual cycle. Let our taking and imparting truth be full of the radiance of light. Let us never come into conflict with one another. Let our minds speed towards their supreme good." My heart responded to that call and I determined to do what I could to bring to the surface, for our daily use and purification the stream of ideals that originated in the summit of our past, flowing underground in the depth of India's soil, the ideals simplicity of life, clarity of spiritual vision, purity of heart, harmony with the universe, and consciousness of the infinite personality in all creation.³³

Influenced by Tagore's personal feeling for nature experienced during his own education, *Shantiniketan* became a model for an alternative educational model – and a modernist place for the Arts³⁴. Paintings by

33 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Introduction by Rabindranath Tagore' in *Shantiniketan, The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore*, W. W. Pearson, MacMillan, New York, 1916.

34 My paper explores the modernist ideas and Tagore's ideas on modernity and modernism, rather than an historical account of aesthetic expressions. This is however to be found in the analysis of P. Mitter. He wrote about Santiniketan: "The institution began as a high school in 1901, gradually acquiring in the 1920s a cultural centre, a university, a department of agriculture and an institute for rural reconstruction, the last two reflecting urgent nationalist concerns. A cultural critic of imperialism, Tagore did not reject modern science and technology at Santiniketan, but adapted modern educational methods to the Indian environment. The poet's pedagogic ideology had remarkable parallels with the Bauhaus movement, even as its driving force was a critique of Western urban colonialism based on ancient Indian thought." We refer to the chapter on Tagore for further developments, in Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism India's artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947*, London, Reaktion Books, 2007, p. 78-81.

Kandinsky and Klee as well as a large number of modernist painters found a place in the exhibits of *Shantiniketan*, while Stella Kramrisch was appointed to teach history there, introducing the European modernist movement³⁵. The University represented the concentration of Tagore's ideas and the challenge posed by his sense of modernity: a harmonious place for education symbolizing the unity of Men – beyond cultures and religions -, the unity of life – including the study of modern sciences while respecting nature, Tagore's moral and philosophical values, and a balance between the East and the West for India, i.e. based on Indian fundamental principles of wisdom and knowledge and including the rational, scientific progress of the West, as well as the newest movements in the Arts – modernism.

Conclusion

This paper is a short attempt at examining Tagore's concept of modernity, by trying to understand what modernism and its relation to modernity means in this poet's work. Considering the large range of his writings, essays and novels were selected according to what I considered to be the most relevant to the present investigation, favoring the more systematic writings among Tagore's novels and essays. *Gora*, however, another complex criticism of Nationalism, has not been included here, since its analysis would deserve a complete paper³⁶. It also did not focus on the introduction of European modernisms and European modernist expressions in India from a historical or aesthetic perspective. Rather, it underlined a conceptual understanding through Tagore's work of his own ideas, and the experience of modernism in India through his Indian writings. In so doing, I tried to present the important differences of these concepts in an Indian colonial context, as well as the singularity of Tagore himself in his own context, hoping to contribute to an exploration of the poet's talent and richness of expression and thinking.

35 Also regarding the influence of Santiniketan in Indian modernism, Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Modernisms in India', in Osborne, P., Brooker, Peter, Gasiorek, A., Longworth, D., & Thacker, A. J., *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 998.

36 Regarding this topic, reference can be made to Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the politics of self*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.