

Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin, Rustom Bharucha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Mika Eglinton

Another Asia is a unique and provocative work in which Calcutta based theatre director, writer and cultural critic, Rustom Bharucha, has produced an informative and insightful narrative on the spiritual friendship between Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913). Set against the volatile backdrop of the anti-English Swadeshi movement in Bengal, and Japanese imperialism of the late Meiji period, this book questions ideas of Asia through encounters between these two iconic figures: Tagore as India's national poet and the first Asian Nobel Prize winner, and Okakura as the internationally renowned Japanese art historian and curator for the Japan Institute of Fine Arts (Nihon Bijutsuin), the Tokyo Fine Arts School and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. These two men of culture held very different views towards Asia as they did towards each other; while Tagore stood for universal humanism, Okakura was branded an imperialist and even an 'ultra-nationalist'.

According to Bharucha's explanation in the Preface and Prologue, the friendship between Tagore and Okakura existed beyond conventions in the sense that they only met twice, and no record of their exchanges, either letters or photographs of the two together have been found to date. Their meetings took place first in Calcutta in 1902 and then in Boston in 1913, just one month before Okakura left his American urban life and returned to his rural home in Izura, Ibaraki prefecture, located to the North of Tokyo. Okakura confessed that he was overwhelmed by a feeling of 'sudden loneliness' when he parted with Tagore in one of his numerous love letters to Priyambada Devi Banerjee, a relative of Tagore and a Bengali widow and poet. Tagore also seemed to foresee that this would be the last meeting with Okakura. Before long, in the fall of 1913, Okakura passed away and then Tagore received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1916 on his lecture tour, Tagore visited Japan for the first time and delivered his lectures against

nationalism and materialism, which angered Japanese imperialists; his late friend Okakura who promoted Japan-centred Asianism was completely erased from his lecture. Nevertheless, on his third visit to Japan in 1929, he expressed the much-delayed but affectionate posthumous public tribute to Okakura as 'the voice East'. This raises the question of what Tagore's ten-year enigmatic silence over Okakura suggests; but also about how they were able to nurture and maintain a friendship that transcended their cultural and ideological differences.

Despite a lack of substantial information, save for these few surviving anecdotes, this male intercultural relationship has garnered significant attention to the extent of being somewhat idealised. However, Bharucha's purpose in this work is not simply to add more pages to the hagiography on 'Asian Cosmopolitans', or to summarize their 'Asian perspectives', nor is he directly concerned with a contemporary reading of 'Asianess' and being Asian, rather his focus is on the possible 'intersection' between Tagore and Okakura within the context of the early modernist period. This was at a time when the lands of Asia were divided between Imperialism and Independence and thus the notion of a unified Asia had a more imminent resonance than it does today. Bharucha's updated study of the two Asian traveler-ideologues poses challenging questions to the reader, since not only does he ask 'how did one used to think about Asia?', but also 'how does one think about Asia today?' Bharucha states in the preface:

Without trying to 'contemporize' either Tagore or Okakura, I cannot deny that what initially seemed to be a cluster of archaic sensibilities and ideals embodied in their magnetic personalities, has turned out to be nothing less than an intellectual provocation. Far from being an exercise in nostalgia, this book has compelled me to question how one can think about Asia today through its conflicting modernity's, wars, and spectrum of differences, that nonetheless coexist with legacies of kinship and intimacy that are becoming increasingly harder to define in the age of globalization (xxi-xxii).

Spanning a panorama of time and space, from 19th century imperialism to the current age of globalization and the war on terrorism, across the cities of Calcutta, Tokyo, Boston and beyond, Bharucha shapes a wealth of information, critical thought and analysis into four main chapters titled: Asia, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Friendship.

In the first chapter titled Asia, which refers to the various concepts of Asia as a supplement to Europe, the author examines Okakura's texts on Pan-Asianism. He quotes the seminal opening phrases of Okakura's *The Ideals of the East*, published on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War in 1903: 'Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilizations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of The Vedas'. Bharucha interprets this as 'Asia is three or three-in-one because his [Okakura] entire discourse rests on a triangular structure of three mighty Asian civilizations, India, China and the as-yet-unnamed Japan' (17). In this triangle, the Japanese as an unconquered race are rhetorically situated at the apex looking down at the colonized and oppressed Indian and Chinese at the bottom. Competing with Western colonialism, Okakura spelled out the superiority of Japan and its art: Japan is a 'repository' or 'museum' of Asian civilization and thus entitled to be the leader of the East.

In *The Awakening of Japan* published in 1904, Okakura was militant in his promotion of the Japanese annexation of Korea, believing outright that Korea was part of Japan. As he became a stronger imperialist, Okakura's rhetoric revealed schizophrenic symptoms: 'Japan is and is not a part of Asia', 'we are actually not one'. Bharucha illuminates Okakura's linguistic and 'cultural schizophrenia' by detecting a combination of Englishness and Orientalism in his militaristic logic in *The Awakening of the East*. Okakura wrote the book while he was in Calcutta in 1902, but it was published posthumously; first in a Japanese translation in 1938 and then in its original English in 1940. Even after his death, Okakura was complicit in justifying the so-called Greater East Asia War.

How could Tagore not have been disturbed by Okakura's contracted notions of 'One Asia'? Why did the great poet keep such an enigmatic silence over his friend's colonial thoughts? In the longest chapter of *Another Asia*, Tagore and his repulsion towards Nationalism take centre stage. Exploiting archival evidence, Bharucha confirms that Tagore had simply not read Okakura's texts when they were published. Bharucha points out in the final chapter, that it was not until 1938 that Tagore painfully confronted his late friend's staunch militant persona through an exchange of letters with his younger Japanese friend, Yonejiro Noguchi. As a response to Tagore's condemnation of the Japanese invasion of China, Noguchi defended the war as an inevitability for which Okakura would have pledged support were he still alive. In addition to this latency, we learn that Okakura perhaps did not ask or even want his Indian friend to read his books. Okakura chose to write in English so as not to address to his Japanese contemporaries, and even less his Indian ones. His target audience was in 'the West' and particularly the United States - his business base.

Bharucha also points out that Tagore's omission of Okakura in his lecture in 1916 in Japan is probably related to Tagore's erasure of his own involvement in the Swadeshi movement against British colonial rule, in which Okakura was also visible in 1902. Although Tagore wrote an essay entitled *Swadeshi Samalaj* in 1904, locating the spirit of *swaraj* (self-rule) in Hindu civilization, kinships and everyday life, by 1908 he had gradually withdrawn himself from political activism. In saying 'I am only a poet', Tagore then consolidated his rapturous vision of universal humanism by declaring himself against nationalism and the modernity of the West. Tagore's ever-developing poetic license or the political incorrectness of his views on ongoing issues such as the West, Nation, modernization and history resulted in a series of misunderstandings and criticism surrounding his work. After conducting extensive analysis of Tagore's texts, full of ambivalent meaning and metaphoric richness, Bharucha aptly concludes this chapter on Nationalism with the following words: 'the poet's enduring significance could lie in the fact that he compels us to reformulate the existing question . . . I would say that

he is a profoundly anti-nationalist nationalitarian, whose universality cannot be collapsed into political internationalism, still less into globalism' (110).

In the third chapter, *Cosmopolitanism*, Bharucha questions the position of Tagore and Okakura as distinctive master performers on the world stage and examines the various definitions of 'cosmopolitan'. Particularly, in the section 'Cosmopolitics of Dress and Language', Bharucha makes an illuminating contrast between the universalist Tagore and the cosmopolitan Okakura who communicated in fluent English with each other and yet presented themselves as the representatives of India and Japan respectively. While Tagore, usually dressed in graceful robes, venerated his native language and rooted himself in Bengali, Okakura in traditional kimono dress wrote exclusively in English. Since his early education was conducted in English, Okakura never wielded the Japanese language as sharply as he did his acquired 'second' language. His unusual inferiority complex towards his 'mother tongue' is suggestive of Okakura's linguistic and 'cultural schizophrenia'. He positioned himself as a Boston Brahmin and the leading collector of Japanese and Chinese artworks for the Museum of Fine Arts, which has one of the richest collections in the world. Yet Bharucha penetrates Okakura's pathetic psyche of 'Cosmopolitan in Exile' and an Oriental 'stranger' through the exchanged love letters with Priyambada, whom Okakura met on his trip to India in 1912 and maintained a long distance relationship with until his death. In March 1913, just five months before his last letter dated in August of the same year, Okakura wrote in Boston: 'It is snowing here still and I long for the sunshine and flowers of the Orient. Your uncle has left for Chicago and I feel a sudden loneliness'. In this intimate confession, his profile as the scholarly cosmopolitan, promoter of Pan-Asianism is hardly recognizable.

The final chapter, *Friendship*, starts with 'The Intertexts of Love' between Okakura and Priyambada and then moves onto modalities of same-sex friendship. Along with the aforementioned love letters that reveal Okakura's amiable figure as a fisherman in Izura, Bharucha introduces Okakura's opera *The White Fox* based on a Japanese folktale about a tragic love tale between a man and a she-fox. Although the opera is dedicated to Isabella Gardner,

Bharucha points out that the real muse is Priyambada and the 'strange beauty' of writing about love in a foreign tongue. While Okakura Orientalised his Indian muse as a personification of Asia herself, Priyambada eroticised herself as a contemporary Shakuntala, a childless widow of Hindu mythology. Given the close and even claustrophobic kinships in upper caste Bengali society, Tagore must have noticed their distant love affair. Although Tagore remained silent about it, his silence seems to be compensated by an abundance of songs on the themes of love and separation. Unlike Okakura who rebelled against the social rules with alcoholism and affairs with women, Tagore imposed an almost asexual, saint-like lifestyle on himself at the time. Tellingly, Tagore's femininity was overtly marked though his soft and high-pitched voice and this was often ridiculed almost throughout his entire life. He could not bear his 'dirty' and 'nasty' peer students and the code of English masculinity in public schools; he stopped going to school and ended up dropping out of college.

Further investigating the issues of masculinity and homosociality in non-Western contexts, Bharucha argues that the Tagore-Okakura friendship is grounded in mutual affection and respect, as found in Tagore's novels, *Gora*, *Chaturanga* and *Ghare Baire*. The male friendships in these novels stand in ideological and political contrast to each other, like Gora and Binoy, Sachis and Sribilas, and Sandip and Nikhlesh. Nevertheless, they are 'contrapuntal foils for each other; they are different in themselves, and yet they complete each other ... Ideas complicate the passion that brings men together, and yet, their conflicting ideologies enhance their intimacy, even as the men are likely to drift apart' (161). It is mere speculation as to whether the Tagore-Okakura relationship would have survived had they lived long enough to confront the devastation of Hiroshima and the defeat of Japan. Paradoxically, whilst they differ radically, there is still a unique understanding and unconditional friendship between the two. In this regard, Bharucha aptly starts and ends his book with a quotation from Montaigne — 'If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel this cannot be expressed, except by answering: because it was he, because it was I.'

Elegantly handling the narrative modes of story, history and theory, Bharucha's dense and nuanced study raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. Another Asia may frustrate some readers in search of short and simplified opinions about Tagore and Okakura, but for those wanting to explore intercultural relationships that transcend existing limits of cultural studies, literary theory and performance studies, this book presents an enlightening and challenging case. Supplemented by detailed and informative Notes, which account for nearly a quarter of the book's length, Bharucha explores innovative and provocative arguments on inter-Asian relationships. One memorable example is the complicated notion of beauty within the context of Asia, and as the author recognizes, beauty is one of the most neglected and least interrogated dimensions in dominant discourses of postcolonial theory. However, without acknowledging the shared experience of beauty in the arts and everyday life, it is almost impossible to understand the reasons why Okakura was intensely loved by the Bengalis and the magnetism that brought Tagore and Okakura together. Another Asia offers valuable insights into human connectivity, and is a distinguished and essential book not only with regards the Tagore-Okakura history, but also the wider field of Asia Studies.

Mika Eglinton is a JSPS researcher based in Tokyo and London, involved in the creation of theatre as a translator, dramaturg and critic. Her research interests and publications include work on issues of reception and reconstruction of Shakespeare in non-native English speaking countries.