

***Quartet* -- THE OTHER TAGORE**

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Rabindranath Tagore, the only Indian to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, is generally regarded as *Guru Dev* (Divine Teacher), as quintessentially earnest. Joseph Hone, the biographer of W.B. Yeats, records that Tagore "looked as if he had stepped out of the Vedic age" and that this was one of the attractions he held for Yeats,¹ but Yeats also did complain that his friend Tagore wrote "too much about God."² Yet *Quartet*, a novella hardly known outside the native Bengal of its author and fortunately made available in 1993 by Heinemann in an English translation by Kaiser Haq, creates quite a different, a more complex, impression of Tagore.³ It is philosophical, but about love and passion too, and also shot through with humour and irony.

The novella, set in *fin de siecle* Bengal, begins by presenting two contrasting pairs of brothers -- Jagmohan and Harimohan, and Harimohan's sons, Sachish and Purandar. Jagmohan is fiercely rationalist and anti-traditional. When a young man who had married into the family, wrote to him, addressing the letter "To Your Auspicious Feet," his objections to the form of address amount to a rejection of a whole cultural pattern. Jagmohan is independent, full of sturdy pride and iconoclastic; he rejects anything that could be profitable in a worldly sense. He is a repository of all the moral virtues. He despises the individualistic, non-humanitarian *sannyasis* (religious mendicants) in quest of salvation. "Service to humanity was an important aspect" of his creed. (p. 8) In a word, he is the saintly atheist. Harimohan, on the other hand, is worldly, self-indulgent and even unscrupulous.

Sachish whom Jagmohan educates (Harimohan is glad to accept this arrangement, but later tries to detach him from Jagmohan) comes to share Jagmohan's idealism and atheism, the ideal disciple of "Uncle." It is suggested that atheism is acquired *via* English. Both Jagmohan and Sachish are English-educated. Jagmohan "was well-known for his exceptional mastery of English. In the opinion of some he was the Macaulay of Bengal, to others he was Bengal's Dr. Johnson." (p.5)