

Romain Rolland and the Eastern links: An Intercultural Discourse

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Paper Received on 10-10-2022, Accepted on 20-11-2022,
Published on 24-11-22; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.26

Abstract:

Romain Rolland, a French writer, art historian, thinker, great novelist, essayist, and letter writer, was a symbolic figure for internationalists who opposed extremism of all kinds and stressed the importance of a pluralistic society. His manifesto *Au-dessus de la mêlée* was a severe rebuke of the insanity of war and an appeal to the intellectual elite of Europe to stay 'above' the nationalist frenzy of the crowd. Denouncing war and nationalism, he envisioned a world based on universal humanistic values. Deeply distressed by the world war and disillusioned by Europe, he turned to India for solace. Rolland considered East and West as the two sides of the coin and complimentary. He criticized the era of nationalistic parochialism and envisioned a world of international understanding and harmony. His books like *Mahatma Gandhi*, *Ramakrishna*, *Vivekananda*, and his correspondence with several Indian personalities like Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Kalidas Nag, etc., testify to his genuine love for India and make him the spiritual ambassador of India. The article focuses on his relations with many eminent personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Amiya Chakravarti, and Kalida Nag.

Rolland found in India what he needed for spiritual fulfillment. His interest in Indian philosophy and its active proponents like Tagore, Gandhi, Raja Rammohan Roy, and Swami Vivekananda helped French readers understand the modern Indian awakening. Besides being a novelist, essayist, critic, and musicologist, Rolland has also left behind a rich corpus of thought in the form of letters. So I shall delve into the letters between Rolland and the Indian personalities.

Keywords: war, nationalism, spiritual, internationalist, Indian philosophy

I. Introduction

Romain Rolland was a French writer, art historian, thinker, great novelist, essayist, and a man of high moral principle with a deep religious sense who became a symbolic figure for internationalists in the First World War. Born at Clamecy in the district of Nievre, he received his early education at Clamecy and later in Paris. He wrote the biographies of Millet, Beethoven, and Michel Angeles and also explored the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Ramakrishna,

and Vivekananda. The work with which he shot into fame was *Jean Christophe*, the biography of a German musician. The book is in ten volumes. This work earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1915. Rolland had unswerving devotion to the doctrine of human kindness, and that was the keynote of Rolland's work.

His life aimed to help men understand one another and destroy the prejudices of hatred, ignorance, and intolerance that create a disparity between them. He had preached to the world the values of truth, respect for right and justice, the struggle for freedom and the liberation of humankind, and the rejection of violence in all its forms. He once remarked: " I have devoted my whole life to promoting mutual understanding amongst men "(Klein 22). Being a pacifist, he consistently denigrated war and lived a secluded life in Switzerland instead of France till 1937. His belief in nonviolence made him praise the Gandhian idea of revolution through his several books on Hindu thought. He believed in the true freedom of the human spirit transcending all restrictions and boundaries imposed by any race, religion, or nation. His writings are philosophical reflections of his quest for peace and harmony, pacifism, oceanic feeling, mystical experience, and meeting the East-west polarity. His works reflect the conscience of a great humanist. The universality of man was his life-long credo.

II. Rolland: An Internationalist

Rolland became best known for

his pacifist stance during the First World War and his emphasis on the importance of universal humanistic concerns over the blindness of nationalism. The catastrophe of the world war of 1914 made him admonish his fellow citizens for their patriotic excesses. His essay *Au-dessus de la 'melee* (Above the Battle) was published in *Journal de Geneve* on 15 September 1914. The essay denounces war and nationalism. It opens with an ode to the young fighters. (Rolland38)

Rolland criticizes the nations' intellectual leaders and reprimands them for not attempting their duty with sincerity. He compared Europe with Hercules. As Hercules destroyed himself, Europe was heading toward its ruin. He urged his fellow citizens to rise above narrow nationalism and reject war, and he was criticized as a traitor on that score. Deeply disturbed and distressed by the First World War, he turned towards India, ' the beehive of its ancient mind, its divine polyphony'(qt in Guha, *Bridging East and West*, 3) for nourishment and hope. Thus after the catastrophe of the First World War and disillusioned by Europe, he found spiritual solace in India. In a letter to Kalidas Nag on 17 June 1922, Rolland wrote: "Europe is falling, like a stone." (Guha, *The Tower, and the Sea*, 20) Thus his approach to India was guided by the urgencies of his European soul. He intended to entwine the two cultures in his search for the universality of man. He envisions "Asia is working for Europe as Europe is working for Asia. Europe and Asia are the two halves of the

soul. Man is not yet. He will be.” (Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda* 262) In a letter written on 26 August 1919, Rolland wrote to Rabindranath Tagore:

It is not only a question of justice; it is a question of saving humanity. After the disaster of this shameful world war which marked Europe's failure, it has become evident that Europe alone cannot save herself. (Rolland, *selected letters* 13) In a preface to the biography *Prophets of New India*, he asserted, 'there is neither East nor West for the naked soul.' (Rolland, xvii)

Though Europe had attained a stable position on the political, economic, and social front by denying the socialists and communists any decisive influence on the state, Rolland was quite upset as he knew that Europe was not a reassuring sight. Romain Rolland, an agent of cultural exchange, ranks among Europe's most prominent writers of the interwar years. Rolland participated in numerous international conferences and gathered pacifist intellectuals from all over Europe. The Declaration of the Independence of the Mind he drew up in 1919 was signed by distinguished scholars, including Bertrand Russell, Rabindranath Tagore, and Albert Einstein.

In an Introduction to *Above the Battle*, C.K Ogden quotes Mr. Lowes Dickinson:

"M. Rolland is one of the many who believe, though their voice for the moment may be silenced, that the spiritual forces that are important and ought to prevail are the international

ones; that co-operation, not war, is the good destiny of nations; and that all that is valuable in each people may be maintained in and by friendly intercourse with the others. The war between these two ideals is the greater war that lies behind the present conflict. Hundreds and thousands of generous youths have gone to battle believing that they are going to a 'war that will end the war and is fighting against militarism for the cause of peace. Whether, indeed, it is for that they will have risked or lost their lives, only the event can show.'"(10)

III. Rolland as a spiritualist

It is a conviction that all human beings, all forms of terrestrial life, and the world of countless stars are but the elements of divine unity, as tightly linked together as the cells of a living organism and undergoing a process of permanent creation...Rolland extends the same conviction to spiritual life and enlarges it to the whole universe. (Melet 138-39) Like Tagore, Romain Rolland was also inspired by personal spiritual experience. He named it an 'oceanic feeling'. Rolland's biographer David James Fisher writes in his book *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*:

The oceanic feeling was connected with an energy that surpassed the traditional categorizing of time, space, and causality. It transcended limits, empirical boundaries, and scientific definitions. It had nothing to do with organized religion or faith in personal salvation. It promised to be a

spontaneous source of action and thought that might regenerate decadent Europe and the world's underdeveloped nations. (10)

Sri Ramakrishna and his chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda, also experienced the same spiritual experience and revealed an aptitude for thought and action which proved intensely regenerating for their country and the world.' In *The Life of Vivekananda: And the Universal Gospel*, he summed up the Vedantic ideas into two main principles: the divinity of man and the essential spirituality of life. He had devoted himself to the mission of human service; he wrote: "A religion which will give us faith in ourselves, a national self-respect, and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around me....If you want to find God, Serve man!" (Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda*, 7) Rolland undoubtedly looked forward to a world where competition and inequality would be replaced by fraternity and harmony. To Rolland, Asia and Europe were the two parts of one soul, and he took up the cudgels to unify them on a spiritual plane while retaining his own identity and roots.

IV. Rolland and India

Romain Rolland, a great novelist, essayist, and dramatist, was an ardent admirer and friend of India. His books like *Mahatma Gandhi*, *Ramakrishna*, *Vivekananda*, and his correspondence with some Indian personalities like Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Kalidas Nag,

etc., testify to his genuine love for India and make him the spiritual ambassador of India. He revered them as fiery personalities who had unraveled a lofty system of thought which was at once religious and philosophical, moral and social. He gave the world its message for modern humanity to prevail over the outworn creeds of nationalism and individualism.

Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy initiated the first direct contact with India. He was an Indian art historian who wrote an article in the issue of *The New Age* entitled "A World Policy for India" dedicated to Romain Rolland wherein the author wrote:

"We must destroy the idea that civilization is a product to be exported from one part of the world to another, a lame excuse for any Empire—British or German. We must replace it with the whole world cooperating towards the evolution of a new, national and international humankind, with a diverse culture according to each location but one that should be the civilization of all, created by all in full awareness." (qtd in Albertini 65)

Rolland also received two books by A Coomaraswamy, an abridged edition of the *Bhagwadgita* and the other about the arts and crafts of India and Ceylon. On reading these books, he wrote:

Leafing through the illustrated pages, I feel delighted. This is too rich, too full a world. My chest will burst. It is too small to hold it all. Should I be granted to live another ten or twenty

years....I should like to lead the thoughts of my fellow beings towards the higher riches of the world they have not even had a glimpse of. Oh, God! Life is too short. We die when we at last hold the key to the garden—that garden out of which Adam and Eve were cast naked.(Albertini 65)

Many personalities in India found an affinity with Rolland. One of them was Amiya Chakravarti, a close associate of Tagore. In a letter written on 31 January 1917, he mentioned that his own life experiences found an echo in Jean-Christophe. In response to the above letter, Rolland wrote to Amiya Chakravarti on 18 March 1917. He wrote: "To me, it is proof of the universal fraternity of souls. This fraternity is something I believe in, and I am working towards establishing a profound awareness of it among men of all nations and all races. Most particularly, for the last few years, I have been feeling an urgent need to bring the spirit of Europe close to that of Asia. Neither the one nor the other is self-sufficient. They are the two hemispheres of thought. They have to be united. May that be the great mission of the coming age! He further wrote: I admire your Rabindranath Tagore because in him I already feel some resonance of that harmony. May my eyes (like my mind) someday drink this light of India, which I see through your lines when you describe the light surrounding you!"(Rolland, Selected letters 7-8)

Rolland considered East and West as the two sides of the coin and complimentary. He criticized the era of nationalistic parochialism and envisioned a world of international understanding and harmony. Rabindranath Tagore also influenced Rolland. Tagore and Rolland exchanged almost 46 letters and telegrams between 1919 and 1940. The East could and should defend the spiritual nature of man, 'infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of modern civilization,' and make the world problem our own. Three years later, on 10 April 1919, Rolland wrote a letter to Tagore requesting him to sign the Declaration of the Independence of Mind. He wrote:

I admire you for contributing to it more than anyone else. In conclusion, how dear to us is your wisdom and art? (Guha, Bridging East and West, xxvii)

Rolland became attracted to Indian culture during the world war when he sought ways out of the tenacious grip of a dreadful situation. Another important correspondence of Rolland was with Mahatma Gandhi. In the biography of the "Father of the Nation," he has expounded on the life of the saintly figure from his birth till the attainment of the title "Mahatama." Being a contemporary figure, Rolland gave a fascinating and objective analysis of Gandhi's life. He has also highlighted the criticism by eminent figures like Tagore and Andrews. In a foreword to Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence, Jawaharlal Nehru writes: though he was so different from Gandhi, I sensed a specific communion

of spirit between the two. These two men with diverse backgrounds and experiences met on a higher level and recognized each other. Perhaps in this correspondence, we can get to some extent since this community of spirit of two great men. (viii)

Kalidas Nag, who served as the mediator between Rolland and India, was vital in synthesizing the Indian chapter of Rolland's life. Nag, an ardent admirer of Rolland, was a rational, receptive and honest soul who even analyzed the dissensions between Tagore and Gandhi so amiably without disrespecting either one. Nag and Rolland exchanged almost 134 letters from 1922 to 1938. In his letter to Nag, written on 6 December 1926, he mentioned perhaps the real reason for not visiting India. Though he was conscious of the dangers of the nation-building exercise prevalent worldwide, he ascribed his unwillingness to the differences of opinions between the followers of Gandhi and Tagore. He wrote:

I can understand how today's Europe---blood-stained as it is---is a dangerous territory for a foreigner who ventures to go there out of curiosity without sufficient precautions. Perhaps India, too, would be the same for me if I happened to go there. But that is why I don't go there, for I don't want to get entangled in the debates which still exist between the followers of great men like Tagore and Gandhi---not to speak of the bottomless chasm opening between the Indians and the Britishers (but here my

choice would not be difficult, I have made it: it is for you). (Guha, *The Tower and the Sea*, 209) He wanted India to resume her seniority in social and moral life.

Stefan Zweig wrote in 1929 to Romain Rolland: "A country which has produced within fifty years Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Tagore is not decadent or passe, as European arrogance would have us believe." Zweig went on to say that in the West, "on an intellectual level, we shall become more universal in our range than ever." (Qt in Bhattacharya 34) Despite being such a fervent admirer of India, he never happened to visit India his entire life. The question of his inability to visit India has been answered in his letters. He still had to visit India his whole life. He has attributed this to his deteriorating health and his old father, who could not be left alone. In a letter written to Tagore on 11 June 1923, he mentioned these reasons: The two reasons which prevent me are my old father, 87-year old, whom one cannot well leave alone, and my health, which has been somewhat affected after I voyaged to England. My sister, who will be my traveling companion and my interpreter, cannot give an equal share of attention to my father and myself, and we have no other near relatives left. (Rolland, *Selected Letters*, 48-49) Rolland found in India what he needed for spiritual fulfillment. His interest in Indian philosophy and its active proponents like Tagore, Gandhi, Raja Rammohan Roy, and Swami

Vivekananda helped French readers understand the modern Indian awakening.

V. Conclusion

To evolve a universal culture or a world of Rolland's vision, it is necessary to consider the myriad inequities and discrepancies that characterize our world today. The unfathomable chasm between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the deprived, one nation and the other, block the emergence of one world culture. Considering the complex contemporary situation, Rolland's 'oceanic feeling' may free an individual from the narrow constrictions to develop a cosmopolitan outlook. He is regarded as one of the most daring thinkers of the twentieth century. In a message dated 26 November 1928, he wrote to the president of the Indian National Congress:

I address my respectful and affectionate greetings to India, assembled today in its Indian National Congress. As it beholds this meeting, the world feels the exact great expectations as when the French state's General met in 1789, opening for humankind a new era. Let today be the inaugural day of the period that will retain for history the name of Indian Independence. . . .

The time has come when bound Prometheus shall stand up free on the Himalayas. Let Prometheus unbound remain, whatever may happen, faithful to himself, to his past, to the ideals which he suffered for, to justice, to the Universal Soul he holds within himself—Atman Brahman—to the high mission of

humanity which is the reason for its life! (Qt in Melet138)

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How to cite this article?

Sonia Kathuria " Romain Rolland and the Eastern links: An Intercultural Discourse" Research Journal Of English(RJOE)7(4),PP:235-242,2022, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.26