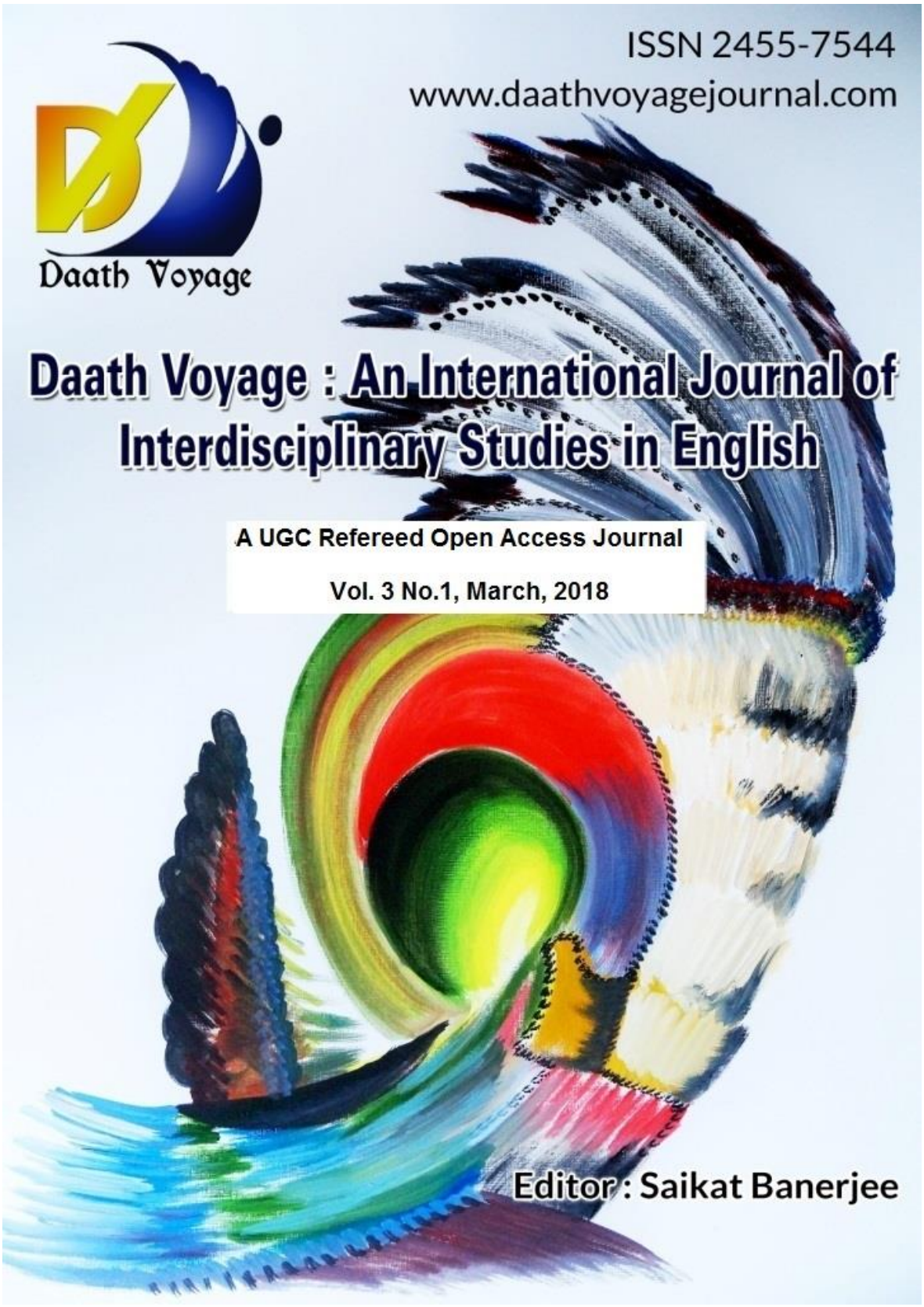

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. Deconstructing and Going Further: Tagore's "The Home-Coming"

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Abstract: Deconstruction is an excellent reading strategy. But recently critics and theorists have felt that it is lacking in certain aspects because of which it turns out to be greater in theory than in practice. As a result, the deconstructionist does offer several tentative ways of reading a text in an impressive manner but is being charged with leaving some part of literary appreciation unattended. This paper therefore uses Deconstruction to read Tagore's short story, "The Home-Coming" and it shows how easy it is to misunderstand its basic ideas and premises. The paper then goes beyond Deconstruction to read Tagore's story. It makes use of the views of some recent critics such as Richard Eldridge, Bernard Harrison and Paul Ricoeur before it touches upon theories such as Intertextuality and the Anxiety of Influence. The net result is that the reader is taken beyond Deconstruction, into the arenas of the pressures under which authors write fiction.

Key Words: Rabindranath Tagore, "The Home Coming", Deconstruction, Intertextuality, The Anxiety of Influence, Paul Ricoeur, Richard Eldridge, Bernard Harrison.

Deconstruction is a great reading strategy and it offers what was quite unknown to the reading of texts earlier. But as some contemporary critics and theorists have noted, it has also affected the appreciation of literature. As a result, there are those such as Richard Eldridge, Bernard Harrison and Paul Ricoeur and others who have tried to go beyond what deconstruction offers. Paul Ricoeur is one of those critic-philosophers because of whose efforts literature will continue to have renewed meaning because his work has an underlying unity that stresses ethics. What is remarkable about him is his respect for rather than a slavish adherence to Deconstruction and other Poststructuralist theories. He is even critical of Derrida because for Derrida "all metaphor is dead metaphor, and since all language is essentially metaphorical, all language is 'dead'" for Derrida

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(Simms 128). For Ricoeur, literature has "life" very much at its centre, just as was the case with earlier traditional critics such as Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis. Deconstruction is a tool that can go on renewing textual meaning and helping in taking out more and more peals of connotation from the same text, which is good, but that kind of reading also has its problems. Peeling apples endlessly without using them as food can be frustrating. The paths of these recent critic-philosophers and Deconstruction therefore seem to have some common ground but they part ways after a point. They suggest that textual and discourse analysis must go hand in hand. Paul Ricoeur sought in academic discourse what he hoped for in society – co-operation; a bridging the gap between certain theories and disciplines. This paper tries to do that by going beyond Deconstruction while making use of its strategies to analyse a short story written by Tagore.

Deconstruction can turn out to be a very rewarding way of reading a text because it can continue taking the reader to the points, or processes, where a text is getting constructed. It can lead the mind to the absences in a text and the contradiction(s) contained within it which can undo the very basic premises of the text and therefore, ironically, reveal the very reasons that drew an author to construct it. Authors, in moments of creation, are many different things at the same time. For instance, they are obsessed with an idea or ideas, they are thinking of how readers would respond and what objections they would have to the ideas contained in the text, besides they are gripped by whether they are ending up writing too much like some earlier author(s) and would therefore be considered derivative. Then, they can write with a self-consciousness of their nationality, culture, colonial or post-colonial status, and the like. They can be conscious of the representation(s) they project in the text they produce.

Deconstructionist strategies can help in seeing which of these psychological pressures or forces are at work while the text is being created and lie in a hidden form within it. But in order to study a literary story one needs to take into account certain theories of narrative, of culture, of existence and of ethics. Rabindranath Tagore's short story, "The Home-Coming", seems to work well with a deconstructionist reading supplemented with other non-formalistic considerations. This

paper attempts to put together Deconstruction, on the one hand, and other ways of looking at texts, on the other, in reading "The Home-Coming". Though a SHORT story indeed, it contains several traits that make it an apt text for the kind of approach advocated by Richard Eldridge in *Literature, Life and Modernity* (2008) as well as Bernard Harrison in *What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored* (2014).

This paper is divided into two parts. The first is a deconstruction of the story and the second a reconstruction with the help of other theoretical approaches. In order to deconstruct this story, the first significant thing is to go beyond the enjoyment of the story; the delight it provides. The story is very gripping indeed and the way Tagore handles the changing mindsets and attitudes of his child-hero, Phatik, are so moving and imposing that one is initially lost just in that. In that frame of mind it is difficult, or nearly impossible, to deconstruct the story. Hence Step (1) would mean recovering from the force of Tagore's fiction and then trying to map the method and mind behind the show, or art of the story. What are the various tricks involved in the art that make the story so gripping? Hence to begin with it, it is necessary to remember that first and foremost, Deconstruction is a reading strategy that slows down the reading process. This slowing down happens in the successive readings after the first; readings in which one notes the absences, the contradictions, the binary opposites that are perceivable in the text, the "play" as well as the "center" in and of the text respectively, the devices like metaphors used and the role they are made to play in the text. What the deconstructionist needs to do is to pay attention to the fact that certain inputs have been made in the text, consciously or unconsciously, to grip the reader. The content could have been sacrificed, or kept in a state of postponement, at points, for the formal or artistic effects. To consider merely what the text seems to say could be a disaster, when the content is necessitating the form. Thus what might be done is to provide an alternate way of looking at the story, one which has no permanent status but has resulted from stopping to read the lines slower, noting the various images/ideas/words/devices along with their opposites or binary oppositons to see which way the text moves.

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Tagore, like some other literary authors, seems to be a structuralist without knowing it. What he has done in "The Home-Coming" is to put some signifieds in a way that they emerge in the form of binary opposites in the basic design of the story. These opposites are not just words but can be images, ideas, tropes or other literary devices. If the story is to have a meaning, that meaning is of a highly temporary nature because it arises out of an inlaying of these oppositions into the text and remains no longer than the moment in which these oppositions co-exist in the mind. The structure of the story is designed by these oppositions. Derrida has stated clearly that the stronger binary violently pulls the weaker towards itself and the weaker is merged with and lost in it. The process of the generation of the meaning is perhaps for that reason always fluid as there is a tug-of-war continuously on between the binary opposites. The binary opposites begin with the title of the story itself. The story may be called "The Home-Coming" but in fact there is no home-coming in the story. The idea of home-coming is much more powerful than the idea of not coming home. Therefore the former settles into the mind in spite of the fact that the text contains an absence of home-coming. If at all there is home-coming, it will take place much after Phatik has recovered and if his mother permits him to return with her, allowing him to ruin his schooling at Calcutta in the process. The last few lines of the story merely hint at a possible home-going for Phatik, which can by no means be considered a definite happening in the story. There is a contradiction here: the reader if he reads quickly in the grip of an emotional empathy for Phatik gets a first impression that Phatik will return home with his mother when the text actually does not state whether he does any such thing. Phatik is merely in a state of delirium and imagines that he has escaped his cruel aunt and reached home during the holidays. Here are the last lines of the story, in which Phatik's uncle, Bishamber, has taken the boy's mother to visit her ailing son in the hospital:

> Bishamber tried to calm her agitation, but she flung herself on the bed, and cried:
>
> "Phatik, my darling, my darling."
>
> Phatik stopped his restless movements for a moment. His hands ceased beating up and down. He said: "Eh?"
>
> The mother cried again: "Phatik, my darling, my darling."

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> Phatik very slowly turned his head and, without seeing anybody, said: "Mother, the holidays have come." (31)

It must be noted that nowhere in the text is it mentioned that Phatik will return home before the holidays begin. The boy's aunt does suggest to her husband that he should be sent home but he is never actually sent. This is what the aunt says: "What a heap of trouble this boy has given us! Hadn't you better send him home?" (30) Phatik has tried to escape home but he is dragged back by the police and not allowed to leave Calcutta. Hence the title of the story is a signifier that does not match with what has happened in the end. It is, however, a title that leads to a misunderstanding regarding the story.

In deconstructing "The Home-Coming" it is first necessary to point out the contradictions within its text and then see the other meaning that arises temporarily from the contradictions. After taking note of the contradiction in the title itself it is necessary to proceed to the other contradictions. The major contradiction of this story lies in the characters as projected initially by the text. The characters of the brothers, Phatik and Makhan, begin in a way that prepares the reader's mind to misread what they are finally made out to be.

Phatik is introduced, in the very first sentence of the story, as a "ringleader", capable of having his way with the other boys in the village. In suggesting that the boy is capable of leading his gang in pushing away the log from where it lies, and thus annoying its owner, the text is making a claim which it is hardly able to live up to. The claim falls flat in a moment when the younger brother, Makhan, decides to sit on the log and ruin the elder brother's plans to have fun at the cost of the log's owner. Yet Phatik is introduced as a "ringleader" (24), with "regal dignity" (24). What is absent from this description of the boy is that he is actually absolutely by himself and wretched, with no one but his miseries as companions. The word-centric interpretation involves a "play" that needs to be taken into consideration. Only a few sentences later, Phatik is shown as one whose "courage failed him at the crisis." Within a few days after the opening of the story, Phatik cannot dream of being a leader or a regal figure in any sense of the terms. He is to become its binary opposite. Deconstructing the text makes it possible to wipe out descriptions of the boy with which

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we encounter him in the beginning and bring in different oppositional measures of perceiving him. Then again, there is an attempt to raise the status of the protagonist; there is mention of Phatik's "fertile brain" (24). "His fertile brain, however, rapidly seized upon a new manoeuvre which would discomfit his brother and afford his followers an added amusement" (24). He then gave a "command" to roll the log on. This is in keeping with the earlier ideas of leadership and regal behavior. Thus the text constantly constructs Phatik's image and then deconstructs it with a contradictory image. The "fertile brain" that we hear about is later belied by the discovery that he is a student who cannot cope with his studies in Calcutta. His image as a commander is soon challenged with its opposite. Phatik is said to be a little frightened even while the other boys are delighted:

> All the other boys shouted themselves hoarse with delight. But Phatik was a little frightened. He knew what was coming. . . . He [Makhan] rushed at Phatik and scratched his face and beat him and kicked him . . . (49)

This sends a weakened Phatik to the river bank to sit alone and perhaps ponder on his real strength. But just when the reader begins to see the ringleader as a follower rather than leader, we are once again brought back to the leader, the bully and the aggressiveness in Phatik:

> When Phatik entered the house, his mother saw him and called out angrily:
>
> "So you have been hitting Makhan again?"
>
> Phatik answered indignantly: "No, I haven't! Who told you that I had?"
>
> His mother shouted: "Don't tell lies! You have."
>
> Phatik said sullenly: "I tell you, I haven't. You ask Makhan!" But Makhan thought it best to stick to his previous statement. He said: 'Yes, mother, Phatik did hit me.'
>
> Phatik's patience was already exhausted. He could not bear this injustice. He rushed at Makhan, and rained on him a shower of blows: 'Take that,' he cried, 'and that, and that, for telling lies.' (25-26)

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His mother took Makhan's side in a moment, and pulled Phatik away, returning his blows with equal vigour. When Phatik pushed her aside, she shouted out: 'What! You little villain! Would you hit your own mother?' (26)

An awareness of the tenets of Deconstruction makes the reader better grasp the reversal in Phatik's behaviour. If he is to be seen as a leader in the opening of the story, that image of him must revert to its binary opposite. Once that reversion has taken place, it must quickly change to its opposite again, bringing him back to the original position of the stronger of the two brothers. After these quick reversals the reader learns (thanks to Deconstruction) that there is no stability in a final image of Phatik's being. He is one thing in one moment and quite its opposite in the next. In the next three lines, once again Phatik's image is changed to that of a "sheepish" boy. At one moment one aspect of his being is more pronounced and that pulls the weaker out of existence till the weaker becomes stronger and emerges visibly. This kind of a response to the story decenters the stable pillars of meaning on which the story seems to stand.

Almost along with Phatik, we are introduced to his younger brother, Makhan, who is the antagonist, or even the villain, of the piece. For no rhyme or reason Makhan acts in opposition to the protagonist trying to be a killjoy for him and his friends. However, to understand Makhan, with the help of the significations provided by the initial part of the text, is futile. Just as happened in the case of Phatik, Makhan too does not emerge to be what he seems in the beginning. The contradictory kind of images through which we later get to know him makes him somewhat different. If Phatik is described initially as dynamic or seemingly so, Makhan is shown as one who seems to be a boy of few words and more action. He does rather than say much. Here is how he is presented quite like his brother who is one moment in command and in the next a victim:

> But just as the fun was about to begin, Makhan, Phatik's younger brother, sauntered up and sat down on the log in front of them all without a word. . . . He appeared like a young philosopher meditating on the futility of games. . . . He [Phatik] gave the command to role the log and Makhan over together. Makhan heard the order and made it a point to stick on. .

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> . . At the word "go" the log went; and with it went Makhan's philosophy, glory and all. . . . And sure enough, Makhan rose from Mother Earth blind as Fate and screaming like the Furies. He rushed at Phatik and scratched his face and beat him and kicked him, and then went crying home. (24-25)

What the narrative in this story is substantially doing is to present us with one side of the children's character while keeping the other absent and then coming up with the other weaker part of their beings, contradicting the previous versions of what was presented but hardly able to defeat the first impressions. The initial impressions are more powerful and therefore stick to the mind a little more solidly than what follows. The traces are there, as if apparently absent but actually always already present in the characters of the brothers. Then there is a similarity between the brothers which is cleverly kept hidden by Tagore, again as an absence in the narrative. Both of them are no saints; they are mischievous. Each wants to give some kind of displeasure to the other and finds some kind of fun in the other's annoyance. Even as they appear to be dissimilar, the brothers are in fact quite similar. Though the text is silent on the issue of genetic transmission of human traits, a slower reading and understanding of the text could suggest that the two brothers are ultimately like their mother; she shares with her sons in not being quite fair in what she does. She has not been just to Phatik. She alleges that Phatik is a liar, when Makhan complains against him, without trying to investigate the matter at all. She even beats up Phatik:

> When Phatik entered the house, his mother saw him and called out angrily: 'So you have been hitting Makhan again?'
>
> Phatik answered indignantly: 'No, I haven't! Who told you that I had?'
>
> His mother shouted: 'Don't tell lies! You have.' . . .
>
> Phatik's patience was already exhausted. He could not bear this injustice. He rushed at Makhan, and rained on him a shower of blows: 'Take that,' he cried, 'and that, and that, for telling lies.'

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> His mother took Makhan's side in a moment, and pulled Phatik away, returning his blows with equal vigour. . . . she shouted out: 'What! you little villain! Would you hit your own mother?' (25-26)

After deconstructing "The Home-Coming" one has done textual analysis of a certain nature with regard to this text. But what this article strives to do is to go beyond textual analysis, into the realms of the text's discourse and intertextuality. The combination of the textual and the discursive is what sane minds like Paul Ricoeur and other significant critics have voted for. The rest of the article will deal with the discourse contained in this short story. Going beyond the strategized readings is necessary because otherwise we will remain within the maze of the language employed by Tagore. It is necessary to do this because, as Harrison has suggested, Derrida simply demonstrated that:

> . . . language trumps intention, so that a speaker cannot by putting his signature to a text, establish any right to rule out as inadmissible, as inconsonant with his intentions, all but a chosen subset of readings, since in the end how we understand what we read depends not on private intentions of the writer, but on the potentialities inherent in the public language in which he has chosen to write. (511)

It therefore becomes necessary to go beyond the play in the language of Tagore's story into other considerations which can be vital in coming to terms with significant ways of reading the story. Perhaps going towards some psychological factors would be worthwhile. Taking the help of Harold Bloom's theory of the anxieties authors suffer seems to be necessary for this story's analysis. It is more than probable that Tagore was anxious about not writing too much like Rudyard Kipling when he wrote "The Home-Coming". Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (as mentioned in Mehta 199) and others have suggested that when writing *Gora* (1908), Tagore was thinking of *Kim* (1901) and this paper suggests that Tagore's writing of other narrative texts like "The Home-Coming" could have the ghosts of some of Kipling's other writings. Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) is the story of a child brought up by animals in the purer, de-socialized world of the forest. Tagore's "The

Home-Coming" could be seen as a reversal of Kipling, as a story about a boy sent from a village or natural setting to the urban town of Calcutta where he cannot thrive in the socially advanced but unnatural situation. If Deconstruction reveals certain contradictions in the text along with certain absences, it is possible to go beyond and see how the author was writing in a frame of mind that made him write the story with a particular colonial master in the background and thus give birth to a child-hero like Phatik who like Kipling's Mowgli would develop more healthfully in his rural and natural setting, where he has been trying to implement the laws of the jungle, using brute force to get what he desires and collapsing when he is forced into the urban world and the schooling of Calcutta. In this, Phatik is portrayed almost like an animal that would not be able to take the burden of living in a big city. Merely deconstructing the text would impoverish the text's appreciation.

In addition to the above, it would be appreciating the text more completely if we considered Representation as a criterion that is present in the text. Homi K. Bhabha has suggested that in authors of the Third World, inequities in the modes of representation play a large part. A village boy such as Phatik can well be a victim of a hybrid feeling living in Calcutta, even though he is still in his own country. The third space (which involves what Bhabha calls "hybridity") of the life in the village has been possibly vital in Tagore's writing this story. Bhabha's views of "third space" are to be found in an interview (Huddart 126). Besides, Richard Eldridge, whose work could help in reading this text, better believes:

> Modernity is understood through the duality Kant investigated in his third Critique, between concepts of nature and concepts of freedom—between an outward natural world of law (the sensible) and a world of human values and ideals (the intelligible). For Eldridge this duality establishes a tension which brings about anxiety, crisis, and a sense of hopelessness. (Searle 1244)

For Tagore to have thought independently, as one who loved the villages of Bengal as much he did the urban settings, is quite natural to present Phatik almost as a symbol of nature. He was one of the few Indians of his time who understood the soul of rural India even as he appreciated the

richness of Western civilization. Phatik could well be Tagore's idea of the soul of rural India that needed to be protected from the encroaching West and from urbanization.

Deconstruction is undoubtedly a great aid in reading a text like Tagore's "The Home-Coming" because it helps us to see that the language of the story cannot be taken at its face value. But there are other weighty reasons for taking into consideration other contemporary modes of reading in order not to miss the discursive aspects of the master author's text as well as its intertextuality. This paper without denying the relevance of Deconstruction as a contemporary reading strategy pleads for the relevance of some other theoretical modes that should not be abandoned in the reading of great texts.

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