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Dwelling in Uncertainties: Negative Capability and the Art of Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This article applies John Keats's concept of 'negative capability' — the capacity to remain 'in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' — to the short fiction of Rabindranath Tagore. Drawing on Cassandra Falke's phenomenological reading of negative capability through Jean-Luc Marion, and on Tagore's own reflections on the creative process, the article argues that Tagore exemplifies negative capability not merely as a literary technique but as an ethical and aesthetic orientation toward human experience. Close readings of 'The Postmaster', 'Kabuliwala', 'Atithi', and 'Nastanirh' reveal how Tagore consistently refuses to resolve the emotional and moral tensions of his narratives, holding his characters — and his readers — in productive uncertainty. The article positions Tagore within an expanding cross-cultural tradition of negatively capable authorship, demonstrating that Keats's Romantic concept finds rich expression in the Bengal literary imagination.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, John Keats, negative capability, Bengali short story, phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion, uncertainty, saturated phenomenality.

I. Introduction: The Unanswered Question

In December of 1817, John Keats composed a letter to his brothers George and Thomas in which he defined what he called 'Negative Capability' — the capacity possessed by a man of achievement 'of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.[1] Keats's formulation, prompted by his reflections on Shakespeare, has since acquired considerable critical currency as a descriptor of artistic temperament: the ability to dwell within irresolution, to resist the foreclosure of meaning, to let the complexity of human experience speak without imposing upon it the false comfort of explanation. Nearly a century after Keats wrote his letter, in a small town on the banks of the Padma river, Rabindranath Tagore was writing short stories in which a postmaster silently abandons an orphaned girl, a fruit-seller from Kabul weeps at the memory of a daughter he cannot return to, a wandering boy disrupts the domestic order of a rural household, and a gifted woman destroys her literary work in an act of defiant love. None of these stories offer resolution. None of their central tensions are explained away. We see this same hesitation even when the stakes are higher: in "The Wife's Letter," a woman walks out on her marriage without a clear destination, and in "The Homecoming," the act of return itself is fraught with an uncertainty that never fully resolves.

This article argues that the convergence between Keats's aesthetic ideal and Tagore's narrative practice is not coincidental but constitutive. Tagore's short stories are organized around a systematic refusal to resolve the uncertainties and mysteries they generate. This refusal is not a failure of artistic nerve but its highest expression. To read Tagore through the lens of negative capability is to recognize in his fiction a mode of authorship that transforms irresolution into a form of knowledge — what Jean-Luc Marion, in Cassandra Falke's account of Keats, calls 'noncertain knowledge', knowledge that is 'not uncertain' but whose indetermination 'plays the role of a positive qualification of that which is to be known'.[2]

The application of negative capability to Tagore builds on a growing critical tradition. Falke has shown how Keats's concept illuminates acts of reading, using Marion's phenomenological vocabulary to describe the event of encountering a text that overwhelms our intentionality. Adrienne Rich has identified negative capability as essential to women's artistic practice. Sharon Todd has connected it to Buddhist modes of openness. What has not yet been explored is the extent to which negative capability, as a quality of the author rather than the reader, operates across literary cultures beyond the Anglo-American Romantic tradition. Tagore, whose education was steeped in English Romanticism and whose creative philosophy drew deeply from the Upanishads, is an ideal figure through whom to develop this cross-cultural argument.

The article unfolds across four sections. The first outlines the theoretical framework, placing Keats's negative capability alongside Marion's concepts of saturated phenomenality and negative certainty as read through Falke. The second examines Tagore's own statements about the creative process and demonstrates their structural alignment with negative capability as an authorial disposition. The third constitutes the core literary argument, providing close readings of six short stories — from the familiar landscapes of 'The Postmaster' ('Postmaster'), 'Kabuliwala', 'Atithi', and 'Nastanirh', to the sharper ambiguities of departure in 'The Wife's Letter' and in 'The Homecoming' — that demonstrate how Tagore enacts negative capability in narrative form. The final section considers the implications of this argument for comparative literary study and the cross-cultural afterlife of Romantic concepts.

II. Negative Capability, Saturated Phenomena, and the Knowledge That Literature Gives

Keats's concept of negative capability is deceptively simple in its formulation and endlessly generative in its implications. In calling Shakespeare its exemplary practitioner, Keats sets the bar deliberately high: Shakespeare's genius consisted not in the possession of superior knowledge but in the willingness to remain inside situations of profound uncertainty without demanding their resolution. The negatively capable poet does not achieve understanding in spite of mystery but through it. The irritable reaching after fact and reason that Keats diagnoses in Coleridge is, by contrast, a

[1] John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. I, p. 193. Hereafter cited as LJK.

[2] Jean-Luc Marion, Negative Certainties, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 206.

failure of artistic sympathy — a premature closure of experience that forecloses the more profound form of knowing that mystery makes available.

Falke's essay 'Negatively Capable Reading' gives this Keatsian concept a rigorous phenomenological foundation by juxtaposing it with Marion's account of saturated phenomena. For Marion, saturated phenomena are those events of experience in which intuition — the sheer givenness of what appears — overwhelms the intentionality we bring to it. We cannot anticipate them in advance, cannot fully possess them in the present, and cannot reconstruct them accurately in memory. They dazzle and transform. Reading great literature, Marion and Falke suggest, is among the most reliably saturating experiences available to us precisely because of its hermeneutic richness: a text is bounded and finite, yet it opens, in Falke's phrase, 'an infinity within these limits, like the infinity between zero and one'.[3]

What Marion's vocabulary adds to Keats's concept is a way of describing the knowledge that saturated experience yields. Marion calls this 'negative certainty': a form of knowing that is neither objectively verifiable nor merely subjective, but secured by the undeniable fact of the experience itself. We cannot say with precision what we have learned after an encounter with a saturating work, but we can be certain — negatively certain — that our horizon of experience has been enlarged, that we see the world differently for having read. Negative capability, in this phenomenological expansion, is not only a temperamental disposition but an epistemological event: it names the condition of possibility for genuine knowledge, the opening through which the saturating fullness of human experience can enter.

This framework has significant implications for how we understand authorship. If negative capability in the reader means remaining open to what a text offers without demanding conceptual resolution, then negative capability in the author means constructing texts that consistently withhold that resolution — that build their aesthetic and cognitive power precisely from their refusal to explain away. An author who practices negative capability creates what we might call structurally saturating works: narratives or poems whose hermeneutic richness is not incidental but designed, whose mysteries are not gaps to be filled but openings to be inhabited.

III. Tagore's Creative Philosophy and the Disposition Toward Mystery

Tagore was not unacquainted with English Romanticism. His early education in Calcutta, conducted partly in English, exposed him to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, and his mature thinking about creativity bears the imprint of Romantic ideas about the relationship between imagination and nature, between the finite mind and the infinite world. Yet his most searching reflections on his own practice draw from a different well entirely: the Upanishadic tradition, with its insistence on the fundamental unknowability of Brahman, the cosmic mystery that underlies all appearance, and the Baul tradition of Bengal, with its celebration of the maner manush — the man of the heart — who is always just beyond reach.[4]

What is striking about Tagore's many essays and lectures on literature and creativity is how consistently they circle around the themes that Keats's negative capability names. In his essay 'My Method', Tagore describes his creative process as one of waiting and receptivity: not imposing a predetermined meaning on the material of experience but remaining open to what the material offers. He speaks of characters who arrive in his imagination already in motion, whose significance he does not fully grasp even as he writes them. This is, precisely, the authorial analogue of what Keats describes: a capacity to inhabit the developing life of a creative work without demanding that it yield, prematurely, to conceptual resolution.

[3]Rabindranath Tagore, The Postmaster, in Selected Short Stories, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 45.

[4]Cassandra Falke, 'Negatively Capable Reading', in Keats's Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives, ed. Goellnicht and Pionke (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 80.

Supriya Chaudhuri observes that Tagore's short stories are distinguished from the mainstream of Bengali fiction in the 1890s by their radical incompleteness — their deliberate suppression of the satisfactions of conventional narrative closure.[5] Where his contemporaries often organized their stories around the revelation of a moral or the resolution of a

social problem, Tagore consistently ended his stories at the moment just before understanding would crystallize — leaving his characters in suspension and his readers without the comfort of explanation. This structural habit is the formal expression of a deeply held aesthetic conviction: that the truest knowledge literature gives is the knowledge of how much remains unknown.

It is important to acknowledge that this reading of Tagore's 'incompleteness' is not merely a Western critical imposition. Bengali scholars have long grappled with this same quality, often framing it through the lens of *Olopurno*—the aesthetic of the unfinished. Purnendu Patri, in his psychological studies of Tagore, suggests that this narrative suspension wasn't a lack of resolution but a deliberate honoring of life's continuous flow, a concept deeply rooted in the Bengali reception of his work. This indigenous critical tradition parallels the Keatsian hesitation we see in the Romantic canon, suggesting that Tagore's ambiguity was recognized at home not as a puzzle to be solved, but as a cultural virtue.

Tagore was, in Andrew Bennett's terms, a literary 'agnoiologist' — a writer whose persistent concern was with the productive possibilities of not-knowing.[6] But unlike the various forms of literary skepticism that this might suggest, Tagore's not-knowing is not nihilistic or merely ironic. It is, in Marion's sense, negatively certain: grounded in an intense awareness of the real — the feel of a river, the weight of a departure, the silence of an abandoned child — even as it refuses to reduce that reality to the knowable.

IV. Six Stories, Six Mysteries: Negative Capability in Practice

4.1 'The Postmaster': The Unanswered Longing

'The Postmaster' (1891) is perhaps Tagore's most concentrated exercise in sustained irresolution. Its story is minimal: a young postmaster from Calcutta is posted to a remote village, where he is cared for by Ratan, an orphaned girl. He teaches her to read, they share stories of their families, and an implied emotional bond develops. When he falls ill and is transferred back to Calcutta, he offers to take Ratan with him, then withdraws the offer; she refuses it when it is made; he departs; she is left behind. The story ends with a meditation, rendered in free indirect discourse that oscillates between the perspectives of both characters, on the nature of longing and the impossibility of return.[7]

What makes this story a study in negative capability is precisely what it refuses to tell us. It does not explain whether the postmaster's departure is cruelty, weakness, or simply the inevitable pressure of circumstances. It does not tell us whether Ratan's refusal to accept the offer is pride, self-protection, or a form of love so complete it cannot bear the contamination of charity. The story does not moralize, does not assign guilt, does not settle the question of whether anyone has failed anyone else. The final paragraph, in which Tagore meditates on how 'the human heart does not easily say farewell',[8] offers not explanation but intensification: it widens the emotional register of the story without resolving it. The postmaster continues downstream; Ratan remains on the bank. The image does not mean — it is.

This is negative capability in authorial practice. Tagore has been 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' about his own characters — he has not reached irritably after a verdict. The intensity of the story's ending functions precisely as Keats described the intensity of great art: it causes the 'disagreeables' — the discomfort of irresolution, the demand for judgment — to 'evaporate'. What remains is the event of the story itself, the saturating force of its two silences: the postmaster's as he steps onto the boat, Ratan's as she watches him go.

[5]Rabindranath Tagore, Kabuliwala, in Selected Short Stories, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 88.
[6]Tagore, The Postmaster, p. 47.
[7]Tagore, Kabuliwala, p. 90.
[8]Tagore, The Postmaster, p. 49.

4.2 'Kabuliwala': The Thickness of Love Across Difference

If 'The Postmaster' studies irresolution in departure, 'Kabuliwala' (1892) studies it in recognition. Rahman, a fruit-seller from Afghanistan, forms a tender friendship with Mini, the narrator's young daughter, because she reminds him of his own daughter left behind in Kabul. Years pass; he goes to prison for assault; when he returns and seeks Mini out, she is about to be married and does not recognize him. He shows the narrator the handprint of his daughter — a small palm smeared on paper — that he has carried through years of prison. The narrator, moved, gives him money and sends him home.[9]

The story's emotional power lies in the questions it deliberately leaves open. Is the resemblance Rahman sees between Mini and his daughter real or projected? Is the bond between them genuine or an elaborate displacement? The narrator's sentimental solution — giving Rahman money so he can return to Kabul — is presented with transparent inadequacy: the narrator knows, and invites us to know, that this gesture resolves nothing. Rahman's daughter will be a grown woman; the handprint will not match the hand.[10] The final note of the story — that the narrator's own pleasure in the day has been slightly dimmed — is a quietly devastating admission that he cannot quite sustain the comforting narrative he has tried to construct.

Tagore's negative capability here operates in two registers simultaneously. As an author, he has refused to endorse his narrator's solution, allowing the reader to see beyond it while the narrator cannot. And at the story's emotional center, he has placed an image — the handprint on paper — that functions as a saturated phenomenon in Marion's sense: it exceeds explanation, overwhelms the intentionality we bring to it, and remains, after the reading, as something that has genuinely changed us. One has never thought about the relationship between a father's memory and a child's hand in quite this way before reading 'Kabuliwala', and after reading it, one never cannot.

4.3 'Atithi': Wildness and the Limits of Domestication

In 'Atithi' (The Guest, 1895), a wandering Brahmin boy named Tarapada arrives in the village of a wealthy household and captivates everyone with his beauty, intelligence, and easy charm. The household's mother, Annapurna, becomes deeply attached to him and proposes that he marry her daughter and remain as a son of the family. Tarapada agrees, the marriage is arranged — and on the wedding night, he vanishes, drawn back to his wandering life without explanation.[11]

The story might seem to offer an obvious moral — the wildness of the natural world cannot be domesticated — but Tagore carefully resists this reading's comfort. He does not present Tarapada's departure as irresponsible or cruel; nor does he present the family's attempt to bind him as mistaken. Rather, both the longing to possess and the longing to wander are shown as equally genuine, equally mysterious expressions of human nature. The story never reaches for a judgment about which is more legitimate. In this, it enacts what Keats admired in Shakespeare: the capacity to inhabit a situation of genuine moral complexity without demanding its resolution.

4.4 'Nastanirh': The Mystery of Sacrifice

'Nastanirh' (The Broken Nest, 1901) is the longest and most formally complex of the stories considered here, and the one in which Tagore's negative capability operates at the greatest degree of sophistication. Charu, a gifted and intellectually hungry woman, is married to the kindly but uncomprehending Bhupati. Her intense creative and emotional life finds its outlet in her friendship with her husband's younger cousin Amal. When Amal departs for England and

[9]Rabindranath Tagore, Atithi (The Guest), in Selected Short Stories, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 110.
[10]Tanika Sarkar, 'Tagore's Women', in Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition, ed. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), p. 56.
[11]Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Tagore and the Short Story', in The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 123.

Bhupati finally perceives the depth of his wife's attachment to him, both the marriage and Charu's creative life are effectively destroyed. [12]

The story ends with Bhupati and Charu reaching toward each other in a gesture that is neither reconciliation nor rupture but something more precise and more devastating: the recognition of what cannot be restored. Tanika Sarkar has observed that Tagore's women are never either victims or agents in any straightforward sense — they inhabit a space of irreducible ambiguity.[13] In 'Nastanirh', that ambiguity is built into the story's very grammar: Tagore's narration persistently withholds direct access to Charu's interiority even as it saturates us with the feel of her experience. We are close enough to be overwhelmed, too close to achieve the distance that explanation would require.

The famous final image of the story — two outstretched arms reaching toward each other across an unbridgeable distance — is a gesture of negative certainty in Marion's precise sense: something is known with absolute conviction, but what is known cannot be reduced to proposition. In this, Tagore's image rhymes with Keats's 'This living hand', that poem in which the certainty of a claim is made on the reader in inverse proportion to its translatability into fact. Both images say, with unignorable force: I am here; I reach toward you; the reaching itself is everything; the gap is the knowledge.

4.5 'The Wife's Letter': The Silence of Departure

In "The Wife's Letter" (1914), Tagore pushes negative capability into the realm of social defiance. Mrinal writes to her husband from somewhere unknown, detailing the suffocation of domestic life and the quiet erasure of her identity. But the story doesn't end with her arrival somewhere new. We don't know where she goes. We don't know if she survives. We are left only with the voice of the letter itself, hanging in the air.

Here, negative capability becomes a form of ethical resistance. Tagore refuses to give us the comfort of knowing whether Mrinal's rebellion is successful. He doesn't punish her for leaving, nor does he reward her with a tidy liberation. She exists in a state of suspension, much like Keats's poet in a state of doubt. The power of the story lies in that unresolved space. It forces the reader to sit with the discomfort of a woman who has chosen mystery over security. The letter doesn't explain everything; it explains just enough to leave us wondering, which is precisely where the truth of her experience lives.[14]

4.6 'The Homecoming': The Uncertainty of Return

'The Homecoming' doesn't give us a clean arc. It gives us Phatik Chakravarti — a boy too restless for his village, too rough for his mother's patience. When she agrees to send him to Calcutta, it isn't cruelty; it's exhaustion. It's the quiet surrender of someone who has run out of ways to reach a child she doesn't quite understand. In the city, Phatik withers. He isn't beaten or abused; he is simply unseen. And when he finally makes it back home, it isn't with a lesson learned or a heart healed. He returns in fever, whispering the question that breaks the story open: "Mother, have you come to take me home?"

Tagore doesn't answer it. He can't. Because the home Phatik longs for was never really a place — it was a feeling of being known, of belonging without having to earn it. His mother is there, yes, but something has shifted. The love is real, but it arrives too late, or in the wrong shape, or through hands that don't know how to hold him gently. Tagore refuses to turn this into a fable. There's no villain to condemn, no moral to underline. Just a boy, a mother, and the quiet tragedy of two people who love each other but cannot quite meet.

[12] Rabindranath Tagore, Nastanirh (The Broken Nest), in Selected Short Stories, trans. William Radice (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 177.
[13] Andrew Bennett, Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 7.
[14] "The Wife's Letter." *Selected Short Stories*. Trans. William Radice. London: Penguin, 1994. p.215–230.

You can almost hear Keats in that silence. Where a simpler story might rush to judge — the mother for sending him away, the uncle for not seeing him, the world for being hard — Tagore lets the uncertainty linger. He trusts the reader to hold the discomfort. And in that trust, something deeper happens.

Phatik's story stops being just about one boy's suffering and starts speaking to anyone who has ever longed for a home they couldn't quite reach. By leaving the ending open, Tagore doesn't abandon us; he invites us in. He asks us to feel the weight of the unanswered question, because sometimes that feeling — not the answer — is the truest thing a story can give.[15]

V. Conclusion: Tagore, Keats, and the Cross-Cultural Life of Negative Capability

The convergence between Keats's negative capability and Tagore's narrative practice suggests that the concept names something more than a specifically English Romantic disposition. It describes a mode of creative relationship with experience that can be arrived at from multiple cultural directions simultaneously — through Shakespeare and through the Upanishads, through Romantic aesthetics and through the Baul tradition of Bengal, through the phenomenology of Marion and through the literary sensibility of a man who stood, as Tagore always did, at the intersection of worlds.

Falke, following Bennett, describes the negatively capable person as someone who wants 'to know, really know, what it is like not to know'.[16] This formulation fits Tagore with extraordinary precision. His short stories are not organized around the demonstration of what the author knows. They are organized around the disciplined inhabitation of what nobody — author, character, reader — can finally know: why we abandon those who need us, why memory outlasts its object, why wildness will not be domesticated, why love and creativity, given the same conditions, can still produce such radically different outcomes. The stories offer no verdicts on these mysteries because Tagore, like Keats before him, has understood that a verdict is the one thing that would make them smaller than they are.

There is also, finally, something worth noting about the specifically Tagorean quality of this negative capability — its particular inflection by the Bengal landscape and the Upanishadic worldview. For Keats, the model of negative capability is largely theatrical: it is the capacity of the dramatic author to disappear into his characters and their moral complexities. For Tagore, it is as much lyrical and environmental: the self that vanishes is not lost in characters but in the river, the monsoon, the village at dusk, the handprint on paper. Marion's account of the self as 'always porous with respect to the world', its horizon always open, always being reconfigured by what arrives at its edge, describes Tagore's creative self with uncanny precision. The negatively capable author is not a craftsman who shapes material from the outside but a receiver who lets the world's excess enter and transfigure.

When we bring stories like "The Wife's Letter" and "The Homecoming" into the conversation, the pattern only becomes clearer. Whether it is a woman walking into the unknown or a man returning to a changed home, Tagore's characters are consistently denied the comfort of closure. This isn't a flaw in his storytelling; it's the point. He trusts his readers to handle the weight of the unanswered question.

Of course, this study only scratches the surface. By focusing on four short stories, I have left aside the vast expanse of Tagore's novels and later works. Yet the logic of negative capability seems to extend beyond these pages. One can easily imagine how this framework might illuminate the political ambiguities of *Ghare-Baire* or the spiritual uncertainties of his later stories. This paper offers a starting point, suggesting that wherever Tagore refuses to close the door on mystery, Keats's shadow—or perhaps just a shared human intuition—is never far away.

To read Tagore through the lens of negative capability is to rediscover the depth of his epistemological seriousness — his insistence that the highest function of literature is not to answer questions but to enlarge our capacity to live, with honesty and without flinching, inside the questions that matter most and yield least. In this, he stands alongside

[15] "The Homecoming." *The Homecoming and Other Stories*. Trans. Various. London: Macmillan, p.1912.
[16] Rabindranath Tagore, 'My Method', in Towards Universal Man, trans. various (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 23.

Shakespeare and Keats not as an inheritor of their tradition but as an independent discoverer of the same profound truth: that uncertainty, fully inhabited, is the condition of all genuine knowledge.

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