

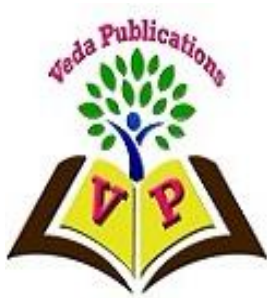
TAGORE'S *GITANJALI*: SONGS OF DIVINITY AND HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT

It goes without saying that Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the most outstanding and the most widely-known among Indian poets. As a poet Tagore seems to have been influenced by the ancient Indian texts such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* as also by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It is natural that he imbibed a good deal from these sacred and venerated writings, and the kind of cosmic vision, spiritual profundity and a sincere search for truth that we get in them may very well be associated with Tagore's poetry. It is rightly pointed out to us that Tagore was influenced to a great extent by such philosophical poets as Chandidas, Nanak, Kabir and Meera, and there are positive traces of their influence in his poetry. Significant poets like Jaidev, Chandidas, Kabir, Tukaram and Surdas made lots of contribution to the growth and development of Bhakti or devotional poetry and *Gitanjali* is written in this tradition. Tagore is a humanist and his *Gitanjali* is steeped in humanism. No doubt, *Gitanjali* is a religious poem, but the greatness of this religious poem lies in its humanistic appeal.



Keywords: *Spiritual, Soul, Quest, Divinity, Vision, Humanity.*

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Tagore, we must remember, was not only a poet, he was also a novelist, a short story writer, a dramatist, a painter, a musician and a critic of distinction. He wrote a large majority of his poems originally in Bengali, and translated some of them into English, but it is also on record that he wrote a few poems originally in English. Tagore's novels and short stories are rightly looked upon as social or sociological documents because what he seeks to give us through them is a picture of the contemporary human society. In spite of the element of romanticism that we get there we may describe them realistic in their own right. His poetical writings, however, belong to a different level of impression and experience, and, as such, Tagore, the poet seems to be rather fundamentally different from Tagore, the novelist and short story writer. At any rate, we can say with a reasonable degree of confidence and assurance that he is one of the pioneers of the literary movement and renaissance in India. Tagore's dramas necessarily form an integral part of his poetical writings inasmuch as the spirit that infuses his verse writings does inspire his dramatic compositions too.

Tagore wrote *Gitanjali* originally in Bengali and trans-created it into English himself and, thus, contributed a lot to the twentieth century English literature. The introduction to this collection of poems was written by W. B. Yeats who was deeply influenced and affected by the devotional tenor of the poems. It goes to the credit of the famous English poet W.B.Yeats to have made Rabindranath Tagore widely known through the world as a poet. This does not, however, mean or signify that Tagore's eminence or reputation as a poet depends only on what W.B.Yeats wrote about him. W.B.Yeats got fascinated towards his poetry because in it he saw the full and perhaps the finest flowering of Indian or Oriental genius. There are certain striking qualities in Tagore's poetry which have their own peculiar appeal or charm to the readers even today. It is really surprising that this Nobel Laureate did not write any epic poem as Milton did in his own time. It is absurd to say that Tagore was not capable of writing epic poetry, and the explanation that he offers in this connection is both informative and enlightening. Instead of writing a massive and composite epic

poem he wrote hundreds and hundreds of beautiful lyrics which cast their own spell and magic on the readers. Rabindranath is not an ordinary song-maker, he has created a cult in the music world. All his poetry is in the nature of a melting melody, and therefore he stands here as a maestro of music in poetry in a land of lyricism, a land where the Supreme reveals Himself in the élan of elating rhyme, and where devotion is not duty, but love which is itself the thrill of the soul passed into music.

As a poet Tagore seems to have been influenced by the ancient Indian texts such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* as also by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It is natural that he imbibed a good deal from these sacred and venerated writings, and the kind of cosmic vision, spiritual profundity and a sincere search for truth that we get in them may very well be associated with Tagore's poetry. It is rightly pointed out to us that Tagore was influenced to a great extent by such philosophical poets as Chandidas, Nanak, Kabir and Meera, and there are positive traces of their influence in his poetry. Significant poets like Jaidev, Chandidas, Kabir, Tukaram and Surdas made lots of contribution to the growth and development of Bhakti or devotional poetry and *Gitanjali* is written in this tradition. Tagore is a humanist and his *Gitanjali* is steeped in humanism. No doubt, *Gitanjali* is a religious poem, but the greatness of this religious poem lies in its humanistic appeal. The present paper aims at finding out the elements of divinity and humanity in the songs of *Gitanjali*. As W.B. Yeats rightly observes, the lyrics of *Gitanjali* are "the work of a supreme culture, and they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the bushes."¹

As and when we go through the poems collected in *Gitanjali*, we come to realize that here is a collection of poems which may be looked upon as an expression of an illuminated human soul, of a continuous and sincere quest of the truth, and of a deep awareness of the fundamental values of life. It is no wonder, therefore, that Tagore is regarded primarily as a philosophical poet whose real and main domain of exploration is human soul. The poet's soul is full of prayer and he receives whispers from the almighty, the prayer evoking the response, or the



whisper provoking the prayer and always prayer and whisper rhyming into song. *Gitanjali* is full of such poetry. Let us listen to the opening song-

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou haste carried over hills and dales, and haste breathed through it melodies internally new.

At the moment touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

(Stanza I)

Gitanjali is a new song of the soul of the universe, the song of regeneration as well as of thanks giving. God is at the very center of the poem as the creator of creators. It is to Him that the spontaneous songs of the God-intoxicated poet are offered and to whom he surrenders himself completely. The poet says:

My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music. (Stanza VII)

The same sentiment of self-surrender is expressed more explicitly a little latter when the poet sings with full-throated ease:

This is my prayer to thee, my lord-strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.

Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.

Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.

Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.

Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.

And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love.

(Stanza XXXVI)

In poem after poem Tagore keeps on telling us in a highly formal manner that there exists an essential kind of link between man and god, the visible and the invisible, humanity and divinity. In the modern world of tension and turmoil, logical derivations and scientific rationalism the poet tries to transport us to the serene world of supreme peace and joy. His first major achievement as an Indo-Anglian poet is to make his contemporaries painfully aware of the cramping limitations that surround them and at the same time to impress upon them the absolute necessity of discovering and realizing the transcendental glory of over soul.

The songs of *Gitanjali* are songs mainly of the closest personal relationship between the poet and the Eternal. They present the ups and downs in the drama of the human soul in its progress from the finite to the infinite. And, as Srinivasalyengar observes "the progress is necessarily conceived as a battle, as a journey and a continuing sacrifice, culminating in a total offering of all self-surrender, so that by losing all one may gain all."²

Gitanjali is not a *Waste Land* or a *Sailing to Byzantium*; it is not the *Bible*, nor exactly its Gospel; it is a true picture of India only through the poet's single-minded evocation. The Bible presents the all-seeing Lord and God the Son; there is the Father and also the Son. The scheme is that of a spiritual government, which Milton has sensed in Book III of *Paradise Lost*. To implement the scheme of the Revelation, the Father sends His Son with a Sealed Book to reclaim the lost world. Rabindranath does not plan it in *Gitanjali*, nor does he sense it like Milton. What he does is the excellence of *Gitanjali* and his contribution to world literature. The Bible does not present God as an everyday playmate, but *Gitanjali* presents God as an everyday playmate with the barrier demolished at once between man and his God, all the curtains withdrawn, God brought down not only to this earth but to every creek and corner of human existence, in loving contact and awful suspense of separation, as a friend as well as an enemy, in the sweetest songs as well as in the saddest sobs. The communion of a man with God and a new understanding of man's relation to the world are conveyed to us in masterly efforts which are intensely mystic. As D. V. K. Raghavacharyulu puts it,



"*Gitanjali* dramatizes the trials of the self and the ordeal of consciousness in the intricate web of love and pain, joy and loss, union and separation, set against the landscape of nature, the inscape of the psyche and the circumambient mystery of cosmic reality."³ Thus, Tagore appeals to our inmost feelings of love and longing for the supreme creator as our beloved who transcends this world of man and nature and yet remains immanent in it.

The songs in *Gitanjali* form a mighty piece of prayer and pleading and exultation. Integral with the main musical theme, other notes too are occasionally heard. Idolatry and blind worship are castigated and the poet indignantly tells the devotee:

"Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!" (Stanza XI)

The poet is a sincere humanist and in tune with his humanistic creed he does not wish to bid farewell to the world. He does not want to seek salvation or deliverance through renunciation. He makes this very clear when he says;

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colors and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim."(Stanza LXXIII)

He firmly believes that he can establish relationship with God by union through love with humanity itself. He sincerely realizes that God is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones (Stanza XI). He is of the opinion that it is by being mingled with such laborers that we can truly mingle with God. He is also fully aware that God's "feet rest among the poorest, the lowliest and the lost" (Stanza X). Above all, he strongly feels that no one should be cautious of being a part of "the great fair of common human life" (Stanza VIII).

As a humanist Tagore appeals to us that faith from humanity and benediction from divinity are needed to end the waywardness of man and human wretchedness of his country, praying to God to let his

country awake into that heaven of humanism and freedom:

Where the mind is without fear and head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

.....
.....

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (Stanza XXXV)

It is equally remarkable that in his poems Tagore presents to us beautiful pictures of Nature that are available to us in India. In this respect he invites comparison with Sarojini Naidu for the simple reason that she too describes the charms and splendor of the Indian scenery in her poems. The difference between the two, however, is deep and wide ranging. In spite of all her descriptive brilliance Sarojini Naidu seems to be confined only to the visible; all that is seen constitutes the beginning and the end of her rapture. Tagore, in his own turn, makes this amply clear to us that the glory of the Indian scene is only a garment, a manifestation of the supreme beauty that informs every particle of the universe. There is necessarily a journey from the outer to the inner, from the circumference to the center in Tagore's poetry with the result that even his descriptive poems acquire well-defined philosophical and spiritual overtones. As S. Radhakrishnan points out, Tagore uses "the visible world as a means of shadowing forth the invisible and he touches the temporal with the light of the eternal."⁴ In many songs of *Gitanjali* Tagore explores the relationship of God, man and nature. Nature is the manifestation of the divine. Perfect joy reigns supreme in the realm of nature. The poet expresses his mystical vision of the union of God, man and nature through highly suggestive and picturesque symbols and images. Birds, flowers, sky, stars, sun, moon, sea, river, stream, light, darkness, Indian seasons, clouds, rain, and several others occur again and again in the *Gitanjali* and are suggestive of spirituality and mysticism. All his metaphors, imagery, diction and association of ideas are colored by his spiritual attitude. He culls metaphor of uncharted ever-speeding voyage, a sailing boat, a pilot who strikes a



high bargain beyond his means for ferrying the river he would cross to reach the shore of his beloved, just in the Vrindaban tradition of bewitching price to pay; the nature imagery too thoroughly Indian yet universal, of sunshine and darkness, lights and shade, night and day, earth and sky, flowers and leaves, plants and foliage, friends and dales, hills and heaths, and of all kinds of everyday emanations of this life and world, all made use of to form the frail delicate link between his solitary soul and that awaited supreme source of solace. The message that constantly comes either awakes him to a soft music or keeps him in eternal alertness of eager impatience. So, the original diction of his own language lends a supreme grace to his ever melting mood. Tagore is, indeed, a great poet first because of his philosophical and spiritual quest, secondly because of his meaningful love for God, man and nature, thirdly for his artistic skill and poetic craftsmanship, fourthly for his scrupulous and happy choice of idioms, images and symbols, fifthly for the evocation of music in his poetry, and lastly for the kind of transcendental atmosphere that he seeks to create in his poetical writings.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia, 1963), p.14.
3. D. V. K. Raghavacharyulu, "Tagore and Sri Aurobindo: Prophets of the Awakened Consciousness," *Essays in Criticism of Indian Literature in English*, ed. M. S. Nagarajanet. Al. (Madras: S. Chand, 1991), p.24.
4. Narsingh Srivastava, "The Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore", *Indian Poetry in English*, p.56.