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Tagore's Gitanjali as Humanist Poem

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The emergence of Rabindranath Tagore into the world of English literary circles coincides with the publication of the English version of Gitanjali for the first time in November, 1912. At that time it was profusely praised by the best literary minds of England including W.B. Yeats and A.C. Bradley. In November, 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize by the Swedish Academy and this gave him a place among the greatest men of letters in the modern world. He won universal recognition through his monumental literary achievement 'Gitanjali'. An appreciation of Rabindranath's poetic genius in the west has for a long time been based upon the assumption that Gitanjali is the crowning achievement of his life. But the truth is that Gitanjali does not mark the summit as Rabindranath's poetic career; it marks only the beginning. In a critical appreciation of his poetry, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty says that Rabindranath, the poet of Sonar Tori and Chitra, is also the poet of Gitanjali and Gitimalys. The same poet of Nature, who once sang the song of human love and life, is now singing the songs of divine love".

Referring to his translation of Gitanjali into English Tagore observes:

"Once in an unguarded moment, I translated my Gitanjali into English prose. At that time distinguished English writers accepted my translation as a part of their literature. May, they spoke so highly of it that I felt embarrassed as I thought it to be an exaggeration. I am a foreigner. There was neither rhyme nor metre in my poetry. Even then if they found some aesthetic pleasure in it, I could not but accept their verdict. It occurred to me then that I lost nothing by giving poems a shape of prose. On the contrary, if I had translated them in English poetry, they would probably have been censured and looked down upon (preface : Gitanjali).

The poems (song-offerings) were written to be sung; but they sang themselves. The book has spoken to countless hearts, has been a revelation of what they felt and experienced, and cannot ever be forgotten.

Edward Thompson says : It brings us very close to a religious experience which is universal yet intensely individual; an experience which is one with the writer's life, no alien dress but the natural growth of his days". Further he goes on to say that, His poems have led him to God: his sorrows and failures have shown him to God. His restlessness, of which his words speak, is in the book, deepening the minor tone. His anxiety to mix with the simple life of men, wherever he can find it at its fullest, is also here". The songs of Gitanjali are songs mainly of the closest personal connection between the poet and Eternal, as lover and beloved, wife and husband, servant and master, friend and friend, as if the poet were trying to approach reality in a personal way through personal relationship. They are songs constructing out of themselves their own wondrous – world in, which dawns and eves and languorous means, vagrant tints as the skies and glorious horizons, flowers and birds, beggar-maids, pilgrims and messengers with tidings – man and nature jestle, with one another and unite at a point in the inner heart of the poet and raise these persons of love, and longing for the ever-far, and yet ever-near Master of the whole.

Gitanjali is a confluence of romanticism, mysticism and humanism. The deep subjective note characterizing romantic poetry sounds through his songs and poems giving them the necessary emotional content without which religious poetry fails to make an impact. We find in his poems the Nature – worship of Wordsworth, the reformist fervour of Shelley, the sensuous verbal felicity of Keats and the consummate artistry of Tennyson. His poems are remarkable for their simplicity and spontaneity, brilliant imagery and striking originality. In spite of his romanticism, Tagore is no scorner of the earth like Shelley's skylark, but he resembles Wordsworth's skylark which is true to the "Kindred points of Heaven and Home".

According to Tagore

Spirituality does not mean an escape from the problems of life or a complete negation of life. It is not where we begin but where we end, how conclude and culminate that matters most. It is with this mystic vision that Tagore beheld God in the tiller, in the toiler, in the child on the sea-shore of endless worlds, and in the panorama of nature's beauties.

Tagore's Gitanjali spread his fame across the horizon of Western life like a rainbow. Sarojini Naidu said that 'Gitanjali' to the west went as a simple direct immortal and memorable message. 'Gitanjali' thrilled Yeats, as no other work of imagination had done, and he spoke of these lyrics as 'a work of supreme culture. They yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes".

As Tagore approached the age of forty, life brought him many sorrows and this reflected itself in some of the poems of that period. They are contained in his Gitanjali. His attitude to the world becomes more profound. He begins to find God a

comrade who soothes him by His healing grace. There is a calm and joyous acceptance of Death as the Messenger of God. While on the one hand his poems persistently proclaim that life is meant to be lived, on the other, he is always conscious of the deeper meaning of life.

It is quite aptly that Dr. Gurumurthi says: "The Gitanjali contains some of the finest expressions of his mystic experience and has a place equally in the mystic literature of the world as the finest poetry of our time". (Tagore- An Essay)

The communion of man with God, a new understanding of man's relation to the world, are conveyed to us in masterly efforts which are intensely mystic. His religious poetry as found in the Gitanjali breathes a noble devotion. As Rabindranath Tagore interprets it, the religious man has to take a share of the World's burden and not to try to run away from the world. In that very famous poem beginning with the line 'Leave this changing and singing and telling of beads' he points out that God is to be found in the hard toil of daily life, and not away from the haunts of man.

Further we are able to see the poet communing with the divine essence of life in the spirit of a comrade, nature forming the background for human joys and sorrows. His joyous acceptance of death as the gateway to a fuller life links Rabindranath again with the greatest mystic poets. As an expression of the deepest devotion we may take the poem beginning

'Day after day, O Lord of my life, shall I stand before thee face to face'.

In another poem he says:

'In one salutation to Thee, my god let all my senses spread out and touch this world at Thy Feet. Like a rain cloud of July hung low with its burden unshed showers, let all my mind bend down at Thy door in one salutation to Thee. Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to Thee'.

Dr. Fallon feels that "The Western Gitanjali, although lacking much of the musical beauty and evocative power of the original Bengali, is yet 'a jewel', even a jewel of English religious poetry".

The Icelandic novelist Halfoe Laxness has also acknowledged the profound impression made on him by Gitanjali. "The form and flavour of the Gitanjali had the effect of a wonderful flower we had not seen or heard before"

After the English Gitanjali was published, there was some discussion on the supposed influence of Christianity on Tagore's work. Edward Thomson opines that direct influence was very slight, and his attitude towards Christian doctrine was hardly friendly. He seems to have made no direct study of the New Testament. J. H. Cousins says that "his religion is without the theology though not without personality; his philosophy is without argument though not without rationale. The outstanding quality that shows in every line of his poetry is life".

Tagore's sympathy for all forms of life was real and rich. "God and religion", according to him, "got betrothed to each other long before he ever became aware of their existence in himself. But there is an unmistakable message in his works". The very first line of the opening song of 'Gitanjali' seems to have the power to set the heart ablaze: Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. The human body is considered the soul and the human soul is the temple of God. God is indeed man's friend, lover and protector. Dr. Iyengar feels Gitanjali is verily the recordation of the vicissitudes in the drama of the human soul in its progress from the finite to the Infinite. And the progress is necessarily conceived as a battle, as a journey and as a continuing sacrifice, culminating in a total offering of all self-surrender, so that by losing all one may gain all. Darkness involves ignorance and the approaching threat of Death. But Light brings knowledge and the promise of life's renewal and immortality. God comes to the rescue of man with His light and thunder when desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust. Thus his best pieces bring enlightenment and heighten our sensibility and awaken men to the sheer delight of existence. The traditional Vaishnava element is evident in many of the Gitanjali songs. They are mainly poems of 'Bhakti'. Tagore believes that tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection. He is not afraid of death and because he loves this life, he knows that he shall love death as well. Tagore is a devotional poet and his 'Gitanjali' is a devotional poem in its essence. The theme of this poem is union with God. His heart longs to join in His song, but vainly struggles for a voice. Gitanjali shares richly the renaissance spirit. All devotional songs are said to be sung. The various moods in which Tagore is visualizing God are vividly seen. Renaissance means the freeing of the mind from its bondage of gloominess or darkness. He thinks of human life as a quest in the world and God as the only source of Light. The way to achieve immortality is through the path of self-surrender. When the human beings, develop unbounded love, they will realize the intensity of God. This sort of unlimited love is possible only through devotion towards God.

God with the Golden touch of His feet has kindled the light of reason and lamp of love in his mind. The light of God's music illumines the universe. God is the life of life, Truth of truth, Love of love, power of power and king of all kings, The songs of Gitanjali thus are songs mainly of the closest personal connection between the poet and the Eternal, as lover and beloved, wife and husband, servant and master, friend and friend, as if the poet were trying to approach Reality in a personal way – through personal relationship. The poet calls God the receiver of our offerings and asks him not to accept unholy sacrifices, through unclean hand, but accept only whatever sacred lover offers. God will be with the poorest, lowest and lost as they will be quite humble. God is within us. He is omniscient and Omnipresent. The gifts given by god to the poet go back to god again. The seeking of God is not the negation of life. While man brings sorrow as his offering to God, God rewards man with His Grace. He prays to God to give him the strength to raise his mind high above daily trifles, to surrender with love his strength to His will:

Give me the strength 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;

All these songs from a mighty piece of prayer and pleading and exultation.

Idolatry and blind worship are castigated. If some people are blind and seek Him in the wrong places or in the wrong way, others are crushed by their own cowardice.

Faith from below and Grace from above, are needed to end the way-wordiness of man and human wretchedness. He articulates a prayer for India's redemption, imploring the Father to let India awake into that heaven of freedom:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words came out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection.

Krishna Bagchi's observation :

Whatever may be the changes, as times pass, in people's reaction to it, travelers again and again will hum Gitanjali's songs on the highway, and men rowing upon rivers and lovers murmur them, because the songs meet the need of the elemental man's the pure naked man's soul. Its appeal would always be to the 'essential man'; it may not be to a mind encrusted with thinking. The songs are there not to be intellectually understood, but to be heard and felt by the heart within; awareness is stirred by them to sense the touch of someone from afar". W.B. Yeats rightly called the Gitanjali 'a work of supreme culture' and justly regarded the song 'as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes.

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