

“Tagore as Philosophical Explorer - A Critical Study of Gitanjali”

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Abstract

This short article deals with disparate perspectives and aspects of the *Gitanjali* original book of poems in Bangla or Bengali language from the *Nobel Prize* winning book *Gitanjali* (1912) in English comprising 103 selected prose-poems. This book has a separate period of aura and energy (1900-1912) which had reflections of maturity. I personally was deeply moved by philosophical, spirituality, peace and harmony in his poetry and I firmly believe the *Gitanjali* is not worth a *Nobel Prize* but a *Nobel Prize* is worth for *Gitanjali*. Moreover, it consists of the detailed and critical analysis of the *Gitanjali* with few explained verses which in itself shows the dynamic, flexibility and rigidity of his thoughts. It also covers the style of writing words and lines of poems. In the end why is *Gitanjali* loved and how it critically evaluates *Indo-Anglian* literature as well probed by Indian literary critics.

Keywords: *Nobel Prize, The Gitanjali, Indo-Anglian Literature, Love, Hymn, Style*

Introduction

It's been more than a century since a *Nobel laureate* poet Rabindranath Tagore¹ (first non-European in 1913) received the greatest laurels of the literature world.² *Gitanjali* (a great read for literary enthusiast) is a collection of poems (originally 157 from Bengali) culled from ten books (*kabyagrantha*) also containing special poems known as “mind without fear” (most famous poems by Tagore); all translated from original Bangla to English by the poet himself in 1913 and later in different languages by many writers.

Gitanjali means “*prayer offerings of song*” as the title suggests the poems are “*offerings,*” or devotionals to the creators. It was appreciated and loved at first sight for its creativity by European critics such as W.B. Yeats³ (also he introduced this manuscript to the first gathering), Ezra Pound⁴ and many others. Moved by the poems in *Gitanjali* William Rothenstein⁵ gave the poems to W.B. Yeats to read. Yeats wrote “*I have carried the manuscript of these translations with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and*

¹ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), was a Bengali poet, composer, writer, philosopher, painter and social reformer.

² “Gitanjali.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 2 Jan 2021, 06:38 UTC. 11 Apr 2021, 16:18 <<https://simple.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gitanjali&oldid=7245588>>.

³ William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), was an Irish poet, dramatist, prose writer and one of the most famous figures of 20th-century literature.

⁴ Ezra Weston Loomis Pound (1885-1972), was an expatriate (residing in a country other than native country) American poet, critic, and a major figure in the early modernist poetry movement.

⁵ Sir William Rothenstein (1872-1945), was an English painter, printmaker, writer on art and lecturer.

I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me.” It received critical acclaim worldwide.

Gitanjali for many of the people is a collection of general truth of love, ‘the ultimate beauty of the erotic.’ And, for many others it is philosophy and poetry of a work in the highest order, reflecting the back sounds of a cosmic truth of Upanishads.⁶

The *Gitanjali*

“*Gitanjali song offering*”⁷ is a collection of 103 prose poems selected by Tagore, from his 157 Bengali poems as mentioned earlier and he himself translated in English and published in 1912. It is a relationship between humans and the divine. In this song offerings the philosophical thoughts and mystical longings have been expressed most successfully with a simple language which can be easily grasped mentally.

The *Gitanjali* period (1900-1912 originally in Bengali) was a fruit of Tagore’s meditation on nature, on man, and on God against the beautiful background of *Shantiniketan* in which he founded (*Vishva Bharati*) a world university. On the religion of Tagore’s poems H.M. Williams⁸ pointed out that though the poem is ‘lyrical and vague,’ it regards the universe as a manifestation of God and with echoes of Hindu Vaishnava poetry and even of Christian religious feeling for God as redeemer in the Old Testament.

However, Williams does not agree that *Gitanjali* contains any mysticism⁹ and in this connection he writes, “*Unfortunately the exotic flavor of the poems and the vagueness of European knowledge of Indian religion led to their labeled as mysticism, with exasperating results for the poet who was embarrassedly his new-found reputation as an Oriental Guru.*”

The Nobel Prize

The editors of the English writing of *Gitanjali* “wrote in the introduction of volume 1” that the *Nobel Prize* in Literature was awarded to Rabindranath Tagore on 14th November, 1913 for *Gitanjali* (1912) and ‘*The Gardener*’ (1913). The citation of the award praised his ‘Profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West.’ Whether he indeed made his poetic thought a part of the literature of the West is a different proposition. But

⁶ It is a part of a series of late vedic Hindu scriptures and texts which form the foundations of Hinduism.

⁷ Mukhopadhyay, Aju. “Tagore’s *Gitanjali*: A Critical Appraisal.” *The IIS University - Journal of Arts*, 20th December 2014, <http://iisjoa.org/sites/default/files/iisjoa/2014/PDF/2%20Aju%20Mukhopadhyay.pdf>.

⁸ Michelle Hale Williams was an American author. His famous books are *The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties in West European Democracies* and *The Multicultural Dilemma*.

⁹ It is a vague spiritual belief that a connection can be obtained with God or the spirits through subjective experiences such as insights, meditation or thoughts.

with his English translation his transition from a Bengali writer to a world figure became complete. Though *Gitanjali's* main source was *Vedas*, his work on the part of the west made the Biblical anthem as his source.¹⁰ In this context many times saints realized that meaning in the same things and sometimes their expressions are in use the same way. Tagore had knowledge of both.

The work in *Gitanjali*

Song offerings or short poems: “Per Hallstrom, the member-secretary of the Nobel committee” put forward his opinion that, “It is certain however, that no poet in English since the death of Goethe¹¹ in 1832 can rival Tagore in noble humanity.”¹²

When we enter “into the heart of *Gitanjali*,” we find that:
“Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that
Thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens,
Where would be thy love if I were not?”

Gitanjali - 56

It is a very heart touching song we have heard many times. In Tagore’s famous book religion of man, he concludes chapter 13-Spiritual Freedom with a song of the Baul Sect of Bengal, which reflects the back sounds in the above poem.

“It goes on blossoming for ages, the soul-lotus, in which I am bound,
as well as thou, without escape. There is no end to the opening of its petals,
and the honey in it has so much sweetness that thou, like
an enchanted bee, canst never desert it, and therefore thou art bound,
and I am, and ‘mukti’ is nowhere.”

This means there can be no ‘*mukti*’, because it is an interrelation which makes truth complete and eternal bond between the infinite and finite soul. ‘*Mukti*’ is an old age Indian idea related to the ‘*Nirvana*’ of Buddhism parlance meaning that the soul is merged with the divine essence, so that it comes back to this dull world again. The idea is that truth is neither form can be in pure *vidya* or *avidya*, and have to be in their union. But Tagore wrote:

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the pathmaker is breaking the ground

¹⁰ *supra* note 7, at 12.

¹¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German poet, novelist, scientist, critic, amateur artist, statesman. His notable works are *Frost*, *Elective Affinities*, *Zur Farbenlehre*.

¹² *supra* note 7, at 15.

Gitanjali - 11

This is in dissonance with the above idea that we have to see God and not to seek beyond to merge with him. In the first poem in collection of his book he realized,

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

Gitanjali - 1

It concluded with the man losing his identity in the union of God and man, the everlasting soul gets absorbed in infinite. He believed that man is nothing without God and is an instrument in the hands of God. God perceives in every part about the whole of 'human existence.' But still Tagore never wished to get himself exclusively merged in God.

“Deliverance is not for me to renounce. I feel the
embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.
My world will light its hundred different lamps with
thy flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.
No. I will never shut the door of my senses.”

Gitanjali - 73

It means despite Tagore's deep *Vedantic* background he was against any “world-negating asceticism.”¹³ The barrier between man and the God or cosmic beloved is created by the unending man desires and concludes that the true joy lies in mankind.

Gitanjali Song offers stylistic analysis¹⁴: In general it defines the author's stylistic expression of specific words. Each of Tagore's verses has specific meanings and purpose. Stylistic analysis¹⁵ brings out new interpretations which challenge the existing one for the same text. For instance, a linguistic feature in the first poem of *Gitanjali*, the most frequent use of the personal pronouns that were 'thou' 'thy' 'I' 'me' and 'my' that consider a lot of things to convey. These words used (below in bold) here present the ardent wish to stay closer to his master and experience the ecstatic pleasures.

¹³ It is the practice of living a simple life with severe-self discipline by abstinence from sensual pleasures and all forms of indulgence in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal, typically for religious reasons.

¹⁴ Saha, Sukanya. “*Stylistic Analysis of Tagore's Song Offerings in Gitanjali*.” vol. no. 2, AestheticS, 2017. *Bharatiya Pragna: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Indian Studies*, <http://www.indianstudies.net/V2/n1/v2n101.pdf>.

¹⁵ It is the patterns and usages in speech and writing. It enhances the way of thinking about language and examines the creativity used in the language.

“THOU hast made me endless, such is **thy** pleasure.” (1)
...**I** look to thy faces, and tears come to **my** eyes. (2)
I ASK for a moment’s indulgence to sit by **thy** side. (5)
HE came and sat by my side but **I** woke not. What a cursed
“sleep it was, O miserable **me!**” (26)

These are important “personal messages to God” which are “expressed candidly.” The personal pronouns aim at establishing a relationship between individuals and the divine. These emotions impact in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult to disassociate one’s own thought process from that of Tagore.

Second stylistic analysis is “active voice.” Tagore mainly uses the active sentences (S+V+O)¹⁶ in these songs. With respect to the previous arguments of personal pronouns ‘Thou’ or ‘He’ are the ‘subjects of these active structures’ which have strong verbs, command, etc. The interpretation is in such a way that it establishes a supremacy of God. He enforces his belief that God is the creator and his power’s moves all beings, instills energy into everything and begins the life of mortal existence.

In song 34 of *Gitanjali* he pleads in saying something again and again “to God for retaining a little of his being before surrendering everything.” He repeats the passive structures (above in bold) that are very empathetic to God’s urge. It can be easily seen that these sentences beginning with the ‘causative verb’ ‘let’ with the ‘capital letters’ are in the form of a plea to God. Through these capital letters Tagore ensures that every expression of emotions acquires a very natural shape without any attempt at excessive praise in these songs.

“LET only that little be left of me whereby I may name thee my all.”

“Let only that little be left of my will whereby I may feel thee on every side, and come to thee in everything, and offer to thee my love every moment.”

“Let only that little be left of me whereby I may never hide thee.”

“Let only that little of my fetters be left whereby I am bound with thy will, and thy purpose is carried out in my life - and that is the fetter of thy love.” (34)

¹⁶ Subject + Verb + Object. This is a linguistic typology used in the sentence structure.

Why is *Gitanjali* loved?

The quintessential tone of the poem where the poet “*begs for a moment indulgence to sit by the side of the eternal in order to sing a dedication of life in the overflowing leisure and silence.*” Scattered things with beautiful translations of Tagore, the critique becomes a public praise in speech to *Gitanjali*. These instances of such profuse and unconditional praise are rare to find in the current times. The translations from the verses are reminiscent and intriguing. This book offers a tempting reading of Tagore, a reading that chooses to remove coarseness. In the book whether Tagore was writing for European sensibility or not has become the matter of endless postcolonial debates. It also chooses to focus only on the aesthetic and disdain politics, the author pointedly situated this book within the expression of eulogies. The poet’s response to a poetic genius as he clearly prefers to leave such combined anxiousness to the scrutiny of other intellectuals. Indeed, it is a great read for literature admirers.

***Gitanjali* in critically evaluating the Indo-Anglian literature:** The critical study of the *Gitanjali* in evaluating the Indo-Anglian literature¹⁷ is very important. Its aspects have the essence and the very spirit of Tagore’s philosophy of life. All the poetry of this book is in the feeling and tone, and the prose-poetry which itself means written in its ordinary form or in a natural flow in writing is simple and adaptable. The prose-poetry for preserving the poetic qualities like imagery and pervasiveness is taken from Nature and Indian mythology. H.M. William says that Tagore’s mastery of the English language as a literary medium was an amazing achievement. “Some of the finest hymns are those in which the poet’s longings for the divine to refresh his ‘arid heart’ are clothed in the metaphor of the Indian seasons” as like the verses of the *Gitanjali*’s poem no. 40.¹⁸

Conclusion

“Though *Gitanjali* seems to be full of hymns and songs of love to God,” its purpose and earnest aspiration of the poet was to see India free with its people perfectly humane. Poet’s concern for his country was strongly for its freedom by repeating the poem which may be no less relevant in today’s India, though we are now officially free. As written in the introduction Tagore’s most famous poem was “Where the mind is without fear...” represents his main aim of arousing the Indians from darkness of oppression and becoming free in spirit and status with the light of independence and freedom.

¹⁷ In the context of the sole purpose of writing. It refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language can be one of the various languages of India.

¹⁸ De, Ardhendu. “Critical Study of Tagore’s *Gitanjali* in evaluating Indo-Anglian literature.” *AD’s English Literature*, 2014.