

Tagore's Gitanjali and "self-transcendence."

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore occupies a frontline position in the galaxy of the prophets of Humanism. He was the first Asian writer to be awarded a Noble Prize in 1913 for translated version of his cycle of song – poems, 'Gitanjali'. Tagore's 'Gitanjali' reflects his desperate efforts to see the world to live in peace and harmony. He tries to foster the values of humanity and bring the happiness in the land by encouraging the masses to love one another, live in peace and lead a harmonious life full of contentment. He shows ways of freeing human soul from all bondage and pettiness of the world and thereby transcending itself into a search for universal love and brotherhood that the Lord provides to the mankind. In 'Gitanjali', Rabindranath Tagore has offered the ways and means of attaining the ultimate purpose in human life – that is to become one with the infinite. Thus we can say that in 'Gitanjali', Tagore concentrates on self-transcendentalism

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"Gitanjali", or Song Offerings, is a collection of poems translated by the author, Rabindranath Tagore, from the original Bengali. Self – transcendence helps us to understand aspects of the moral life which includes development of wisdom, the practice of moral praise, and psychological well – being. Self – transcendence is linked to virtue in different religions and spiritual traditions. K.R Srinivasan Iyenger opines that 'Gitanjali' is a spiritual journey towards the Supreme Soul. His poems is not poems of exclusion but of all inclusion. 'Gitanjali' or Song offerings offers all the possible human and spiritual values a person needs to be in harmony with himself, with society and with the world, the universe at large. Tagore reflects how we can find joy in our lives. The songs are meditative, reflective and remarkable for their spiritual character.

Tagore speaks about God's infinite gifts in the first song of 'Gitanjali'. The poem mentions the grace of God to a human being. The poet considers human body as a frail vessel. The poet tells that God intermittently prepares its damages and fills up it with fresh life. God takes care of his people and helps them to solve their problems. Tagore considers himself as a flute and the poem that comes out of his mouth as an eternal melody which is new forever. He even feels that God will save him, protect him and bless him.

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 hast carried over hills and dales,
and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.
At the immortal 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.

Tagore is a highly devoted person who just wants to please God. He feels that to remember God at the time of pain and agony is much easier than worshipping Him during the moments of success and happiness. The poet does give importance to self – transcendence. He wants every moment of his life to be dedicated in praising and pleasing God. This is very well brought out in poem 4 of 'Gitanjali'.

Life of my life, I shall ever try
to keep my body pure, knowing that thy living touch
is upon all my limbs.
I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts,
knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled
the light of reason in my mind.

I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart
and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat
in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions,
knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act.

The poet advocates life in nature and in the open as the best means of spiritual progress, for in nature the religious eye will see the infinite lying stretched in silent smiling repose. According to Tagore the best to derive inspiration is to lose oneself in the contemplation of nature. It is only perfect harmony between man and everything else in nature would enable man's soul to comprehend the mysteries of reality and realize the infinite. According to him, man must experience the freedom of consciousness.

To know oneself is to understand the world around. First of all man must know how to segregate his soul from his self. The self is the body that causes him pain and suffering, greed and pride, fear and death. However true greatness lies in the realisation of the fact that we are not just the physical self or body but our soul is part of the larger consciousness. It is only the soul which by its very nature can overcome all limits, and finds its affinity with the Supreme One.

The very goal of life is to move from imperfection to perfection. Tagore is a romantic. He is the worshipper of beauty. This is reflected in his 'Gitanjali'. His happiness in the midst of the nature's beauty is obvious when he writes:

Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not!
I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust.
It may not find a place in thy garland, but
honour it with a touch of pain from thy hand
and pluck it. I fear lest the day end before I am aware,
and the time of offering go by.
Thought its colour be not deep and
its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service
and pluck it while there is time.

Tagore says that the Lord walks in the midst of the poorest, the lowest and the lost people who have no hopes. He feels that the Lord is there with them to love and take care of them. He also feels that he has to become good and try to overcome the pride and only then he can follow the Lord.

Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet
where live the poorest, and loveliest, and lost.
When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance
cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest
among the poorest, and loveliest, and lost.
Pride can never approach to where
thou walkest in the clothes of the humble
among the poorest, and loveliest, and lost.
My heart can never find its way to where
thou keepest company with the companionless
among the poorest, and loveliest, and lost.

Rabindranath Tagore has consideration towards those who are being targeted by the social systems. He cannot stand the injustice done to the downtrodden people of India. He wants the country to make a new one where corruptions and evil deeds are not seen. This can be seen in 'Gitanjali' 37

I thought that my voyage had come to its end
at the last limit of my power,
that the path before me was closed,
that provisions were exhausted and
the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that thy will knows no end in me.

And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders.

According to Dr. S.Radhakrishnan, Tagore's poetry is, "a light that fills the mind, a song that stirs the blood and a rhyme that moves the heart. The voice of Rabindranath vibrating with the passion of genius, and glorifying all his race, instils into the sinking heart of India faith in herself, faith in her future and faith in the world". Tagore's vision of good education led him to open Visva – Bharati University. According to him, a good education was not about facts and dates, but about enlightenment of the mind. He felt, "Education means enabling the mind to find out that ultimate truth which emancipates us from the bondage of dust and gives us wealth not of things but of inner light, not of power but of love. It is a process of enlightenment. It is divine wealth. It helps in the realisation of truth."

The songs of 'Gitanjali' can purify our body and mind. It makes us to get closer to our God. The God of Rabindranath Tagore is the God of beauty, wisdom and perfection, not a rigid deity prescribed by religion or tradition. Throughout the 'Gitanjali' collection, Tagore expresses emphasis on devotion, faith and an individual's relationship with the divine in contrast with the official rules and practices of orthodox religion. Though Tagore is a firm believer in the union of Man and God he has no faith in absolute identity. Tagore is a dualist who believes in a mysterious identity in difference. That is why in his poetry, there is a constant synthesis of opposites. Thus freedom means freedom from bondage, but it can be realised only through bondage. See, how nicely the very idea is expressed in the following sweet lyric from 'Gitanjali'.

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 colours and fragrance,
filling this earthen vessel to the brim.
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 doors
of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing
and touch will bear thy delight.
Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy,
and all my desires ripen into fruit of love.

Self-transcendence is a determining feature of all mystical experience. A mystic is essentially a transcendentalist As A. Srinivasa Raghavan says "mysticism posits eternal values such as Truth, Beauty and Goodness, which are all infinite, and which transcend any system of human relations, but it finds these actualised in concrete human situations and experiences. God as Truth safeguards society's pursuit of knowledge and broadens the horizon of human concepts, attitudes and affections. God as Beauty assures the promotion and conservation of values in the world of art. God as Goodness and Love guaranties man and society all that is worth maintaining and developing in social life and relations. God as the Person of Persons conserves the supreme values of personality of all men and in all human situations. Finally, God as the Transcendent Being or the Real Self stands for the conjunction of the values of Truth, Beauty and Goodness." To study Rabindranath Tagore is to know the essence of mysticism in his poems. It also gives a glimpse of Indian artistic traditions. As the poem follows, Tagore expresses a strong desire for God's company. He says to God:

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that
my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face,
and tears come to my eyes.
All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts
into one sweet harmony – and my adoration
spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.
I know thou takest pleasure in my singing.
I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far spreading wing of my
song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.
Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself
and call thee friend who art my lord.

The poet further tells that God is not a creator but also take care of everything on this earth. God is bound to his duty forever. There is no other way than hard work to attain God. The poet asks the worshipper to come out from his meditation. He says that God could not be found through meditation or through offering flowers and incense. All these efforts are futile. The poet further says that there is no harm if our clothes gets dirty and stained. If we want to attain God we have to stand by him with all those people who work hard throughout the day to earn their living. The whole idea of the poem is that hard work itself is worship.

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!
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the path – maker is breaking stones. He is with them
in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down
on the dusty soil!
Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found?
Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds
of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.
Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and
incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered
and stained?
Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

In 'Gitanjali' Tagore's longing for communion with God proves mysticism in the poem. Poem after poem Tagore looks forward to meet God, to stand before God or to have a spiritual communion with God. There are many poems in which he expresses this longing, this hope and even this conviction. For instance, in one poem Tagore asks if the time has come when he may see God's Love and offer to him his silence.

Through Tagore's 'Gitanjali' we get a glimpse of the poet's true nature and his spiritual feelings. Embodied in this work is his very soul. This pious poet's prayer will continue, kindle in generations of poets the desire to lead a life of humility and set oblivion. In the first verse of the poem, Tagore says that he worships his creator in the dust of the earth. Humility, devotion and love are the key which determines the tone of his work.

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 hast carried over hills and dales,
and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.
At the immortal 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,
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Tagore's poems are a celebration of the joy of living, of love towards all human beings, especially to the lowest in the society. The highest ideal which Tagore envisages for human beings is – to find fulfilment in creativity and in the dedication of one's life to the service of others. Among the elements of Hinduism he lays special stress on love which is the basis for all change towards good. In understanding Tagore that is the most vital truth. He calls it joy, which is at the root of all creation. This is the underlying idea of 'Gitanjali'.

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