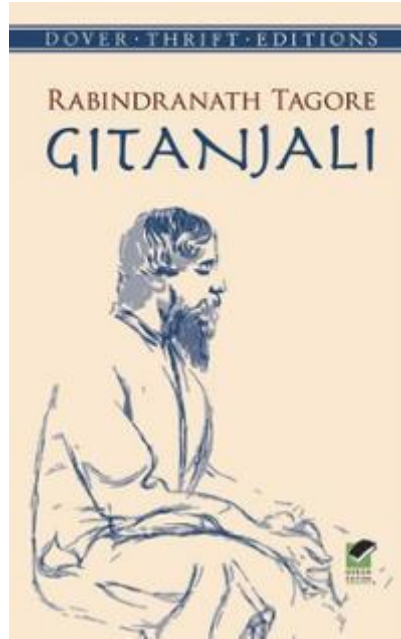


Mystic Vision and Cosmopolitan Outlook in *Gitanjali*

Dr. S. Chelliah



Abstract

This article is an attempt to understand the universally acknowledged versatile genius of Rabindranath Tagore and his writings which got permeated with a rich fund of creative imagination by rendering his vision and experience freely and spontaneously into his transcreations. It throws light on his mystic vision and cosmopolitan outlook by stating that Tagore is a poet of humanity par excellence. Tagore is a harmoniser trying to build a durable bridge of understanding between man and nature, man and God.

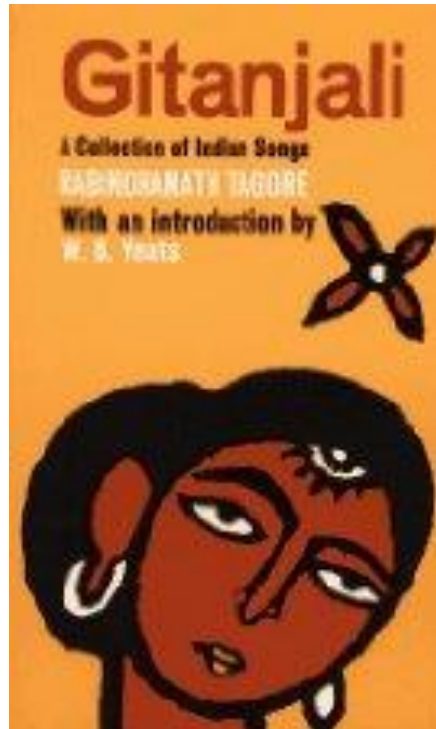
Key words: Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, mystic vision, cosmopolitan

Transcreations

Universally acknowledged as a man of versatile genius and achievements, Rabindranath Tagore may be regarded as the first Indian poet cum writer who gained for modern India a permanent place on the world literary map. No doubt, he was a poet par excellence who mainly wrote in English and translated his own creations into English. It is generally held that almost all his English renderings called transcreations and all his writings

– plays, short stories, novels, essays, etc., are out and permeated with a rich fund of creative imagination. His extensive travels, his understanding of different principles and philosophical notions of people far and wide and his varied experiences of life and culture enriched the world in general and the literary world in particular with the rich reservoir of knowledge and wealth of wisdom.

Gitanjali



Tagore was born in Calcutta on 7th may 1861, as the youngest son of Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, the great social and religious reformer. His literary outpourings began from his sixteenth year and his very first poem was published in 1867 in a magazine called *Jnanakur*. Tagore's greatness as a poet was recognized by the West when in 1912 he published an English rendering of some of his Bengali poems under the title *Gitanjali*. These verses with their delicate lyrical loveliness and deep mysticism, took the Western world by storm. Overnight Tagore became a world poet. The very next year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. As a truly religious poet, he sang of the infinite mercy of God and as a poet of humanity, he sang of love and equality for all beings in the world. As a prolific writer, he is said to have produced a flood of literature by pouring forth a steady stream of poems and songs, dramas and farces, novels and short stories. No doubt, there is a triple strand in Tagore's literary creations. Love of man, passion for Nature and yearning for God do suffuse all his writings.

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A Home Teeming With Creative Activity

Tagore was born in a home teeming with creative activity. He himself stated one: “we wrote, we sang, we acted, and we poured ourselves out on every side”. He himself wrote once as: “we wrote, we sang, we acted, and we poured ourselves out on every side”. In the Tagore family, the East and the West met under the influence of his grandfather who is said to have introduced European paintings, Western furniture, Italian statues and Western ways and manners. But the family did not lose its sanctity and continued to observe the religion of the Upanishads. The poet’s boyhood days were spent and passed in this melange of East and West and as he grew up, he became aware of their unity and he did his best to present the need of international unity and universal brotherhood in his poems, plays, essays and speeches.

The Tagore family was revolutionary completely breaking with obsolete traditions. Like his father, Rabindranath Tagore was deeply influenced by the Upanishads and Buddhism. No doubt, Tagore’s birth coincided with the dawn of Indian Renaissance finding fullest expression in three different movements - religious, literary and national. These three currents of Indian Renaissance did tremendously influence Tagore’s personality and found superb expression in his poetic creations. The words of Edward Thompson attest to this fact as:

“so that Rabindranath, from his earliest days grew up in the one house where all the surging tides of the Indian Renaissance could flow round his daily life, and full the air he breathed with the exhilaration of their freshairs” (P10)

Realization of God in the Heart of Humanity

Tagore lays focus upon realization of God in the heart of humanity and puts stress on the essential unity of man, God and Nature almost in all his poetical works. All discord and disharmony get resolved into unity and harmony. That is why it has been neatly said of his as; “to read one line of Tagore is to forget all the troubles of the world”.

A Rare Combination of Simplicity with Sublimity

Truly speaking, Tagore’s poetry soothes, consoles and strengthens, because it is an expression of his firm faith in the principle of unity, rhythm and harmony. As a great poet of man and humanity, Tagore, in the first of his career, sings of man in relation to nature, in the

second phase, sings of man in relation of God and in the third phase, sings of man in relation to other man or society. Making his lyrics a rare combination of simplicity with sublimity and intensity with spontaneity, Tagore proved himself to be a poet par excellence just because of the fact that as a singer of peace and unity, in the world, he has sung in glory of progress of humanity through ages, cosmopolitanism and universal brotherhood. He is out and out horrified at the various evils of materialism and industrialism leading to decay of spiritual values. There is no exaggeration in calling him a “pure poet” for he himself stated once: “I am a poet and nothing else”.

The end of poetry, according to Horace, is to give joy to the mind. For Longinus, the end of poetry is ‘enthralment’. To Coleridge, “a poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science and to Wordsworth, “poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, while Ruskin defines poetry as nothing but “supreme moral truth”. Tagore’s conception of poetry has much in common with these opinions for poetry leads us in higher and healthier ways than those of the world, teaching the lessons of nature and the mystery of God. Tagore even falls in line with the idea and conception of Matthew Arnold who said:

“Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life – to the question: How to live ... A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life”
(Ramaswami 53-54)

Rejection of the Art for Art’s Sake Theory

Tagore rejects “the art for art’s sake theory” and says that the significance of art lies in enriching human life for Art”, according to him, “is the illumination of feelings”. He is of the opinion that the very object of poetry is to elevate man’s soul from materialism and to establish a perfect communion between man and his surroundings and the ultimate reality. According to Tagore, a poet is one who should aim at achieving creative unity of the individual with the universe. Creation is the *sumum bonum* of a poet. In his words, “construction is for a purpose, it expresses out wants, but creation is for itself. It expresses our very being” (Tagore’s Lectures and Addresses 59) Poetry, says Tagore, reveals truth and the poet reveals the creative unity of the individual as well as of the universe.

Lyrical Quality and Poetic Vision

No doubt, Tagore's poetry is the epitome of Indian Culture and has been accorded international recognition for Tagore is not only a poet of India or Asia but a world-poet as well. His originality and variety of themes, his mysticism and romanticism, his conception of life, his peerless lyricism, his humanity and the flawless perfection of his technique and versification have made him one of the greatest poets, who has freely and spontaneously rendered his vision and experience into his transcreations. In spite of his translated work being a new creation in itself, his poetic achievement primarily rests on his English **Gitanjali** and other transcreations of his poems. He has to his credit publication of such remarkable works as 1) **Gitanjali** 2) **The Gardener** 3) **The Crescent Moon** 4) **Fruit Gathering** 5) **Stray Birds** 6) **Lover's Gift** 7) **Crossing** 8) **The Fregitive and other poems** 9) **Fireflies and Poems**, all of which attest to his lyrical quality and poetic vision. Even Ezra Pound and Crane were greatly influenced by him. In the words of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, "... he presents his Bengali poems in a kind of English which in itself self-conscious simplicity of diction and syntax went very near preciosity" (p. 13)

The critics like Yeats found in the poems of Gitanjali a signal characteristic as the result of the wedding of poetry to life, for poetry is closely in contact with the fundamental things of life-leaves and grass, flowers and rivers, birth and death. In the poems of Gitanjali, one can easily visualise the existence of harmony between emotion and idea, between religion and philosophy. This is rightly pointed out by W.B. Yeats in the lines that follow:

"A tradition where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble" (P XIV)

One can find a purpose in Keats' **Hyperion** but in the poetic world of Tagore, not even a single lyric is found without a purpose. In this respect, Tagore stands on par with the great poets of the world. Buddhadeva Bose rightly says:

"The range of his verse technique will carry us from Wyatt and Surrey across Spenser, Dryden, Shelley and Swinburne, right upto the early Ezra Pound... his

ballads excel Scott's; his child-poems, more abundant than Blake's innocence with almost sophisticated humour" (Bose 1)

Recreation in English

Taking liberty with the originals, he did his best not to attempt a literal translation but to recreate or rewrite in English. In his own imitable style, he did his best to create something of the subtle sensibility and music of the original in his creations. Endowed with boundless love for liberty, fraternity and equality, Tagore emerged as a singer of the smiles and tears of human life. His poems open "with a surging love of life and a mighty desire to merge into the rushing stream of humanity; Like Wordsworth's, Tagore's thoughts by slow gradation had been drawn to humankind and to the good and ill of human life" (Mukherji 16). Tagore's love for mankind is all pervasive. In poem after poem, Tagore appears as "an insurgent poet of humanity". In early poetry, his humanism does not assume spiritual significance, but in nature poetry, his humanism has spiritual orientation. He did sing in glory of the greatness of life and the whole of humanity. Sarojini Naidu pays her tribute to Tagore's humanism as;

"Tagore's song is the lyre of Heaven, emitting out the note of Eternity; it is the voice of all mankind, like the murmuring breeze of springdawn, Tagore's poetry soothes and embalms the heart of humanity" (P40)

A Variety of Themes and Originality

Tagore's vast poetic output is characterized by variety of themes and originality in thought and expression. No other Indo-English poet either before or after him did show as much freshness and fecundity of imagination as Tagore in glorifying the common objects of nature, human life and the human society and in this respect, Tagore stands supreme that too, in front rank in Indo-English romantic poetry. It is universally understood and accepted that **Gitanjali** is the greatest contribution of Tagore to Indian poetry in English.

Tagore is said to have cultivated to the core an idea of the grace and harmony of the entire universe for which the profound companionship of his father with a mystic outlook did a major part in such a way to instilling his mystic outlook and also did the study of the Upanishads and understanding of the ancient wisdom of India. To mould his mystic vision, the philosophical learnings of the Upanishads did a lot. Both mysticism and romanticism get

fused together in Tagore's poetry, issuing from the common sources-the Upanishads, the Vaishnava poetry, Sufism, Buddhism and the works of Kalidasa. Truly speaking, his romanticism stems "from the multiform-streams of Upanishadic and Vaishnavic thought of his own country" (Mukherjee 4)

Tagore's Mysticism

The very important point to be noted here is that Tagore's mysticism is neither a creed nor a philosophy but a practical way of looking at the world with a pure soul. His mystic vision lies in purifying the soul and realizing the inherent unity with all. His romantic imagination is primarily mystical. As a true mystic, Tagore does express the great Indian tradition of spirituality in his own vivid phrases and homely metaphors and shows its relevance to modern life. In a world of spiritual chaos, Cosmic despair and atheism, he is the one feeling convinced about the value and validity of the spiritual life and ideology as projected in the ancient classics of India. Mysticism is, no doubt, a striking feature of Tagore's poetic world for he was fortunate enough to have lived a life of inward excitement and passion due to his innate mystic or spiritual experience. Commenting on Tagore's mysticism, S.B. Mukherji is right in writing:

"It is a mysticism of limpid clarity, a vision made concrete, even sensuous". (P123)

The vision of unity or oneness in all things-of the 'one Inseparable' in the separate phenomena of the universe-was the mystic experience of Rabindranath Tagore;

"Nature's mystery, the mystery of the primordial unison of the soul with her, the joy and wonder of it-all are woven into the texture of the poems and vivified with an imagination that can externalize an intuitive vision with symbols and images startlingly new" (Mukherjee 123)

Unlike the Western romanticists who found themselves in spiritual wilderness, in an aimless, meaningless, godless world, Tagore has proved himself to be truly 'a mystic and romantic' – two rolled into one for "Tagore's poetry gains an immediacy, a spiritual significance that the modern world cannot afford to ignore" (P xiii). As a mystic, Tagore feel

and senses the diverse elements of the visible world of “eye and ear” being animated by an invisible spirit. That invisible spirit not only animates man but also the different aspects of nature and sees “one undivided changeless life in all lives, one inseparable in the separate”. The world-known philosopher Dr. Radhakrishnan rightly remarks:

“Being a poet, Rabindranath uses the visible world as a means of shadowing forth the visible. He touches the temporal with the light of the eternal. The material world becomes transparent as his spirit moves in it” (PP 137-138)

A Lyric Poet

Tagore is primarily and pre-eminently a lyric poet whose poems are nothing but poetic offerings expressed in sweet and unique melodies, dazzling and imperishable in beauty. **Gitanjali** is a collection of such hundred odd lyrics. Music and melody, cadences and rhythms, spontaneity and brevity are excellently blended together in his lyrics. The variety and suggestiveness of imagery in Tagore’s lyrics, most drawn from nature is unsurpassable in the entire range of Indo-Anglian poetry. The cardinal feature of Tagore’s lyrics is their song-like quality. They are both meditative and reflective and they are remarkable for their spiritual character. As Edward Thompson has rightly put it,

“Tagore is essentially a lyricist and the beauty of his religious lyrics is adequately presented by the English Gitanjali and that will stir men as long as the English language is read” (P15)

Just as Sarojini Naidu hailed as “the Nightingale of India” composed lyrics on a variety of themes, Tagore too composed lyrics on God, love, nature, love of the world and humanity. Mostly his poems are ‘prose poems’ in which he is found using musical language and incantatory rhythm. In the words of C. Paul Verghese,

“His greatest contribution is the importation of an incantatory rhythmic prose which he almost perfected as a medium for the rendering of his own poetry into English by which ---- he demonstrated that the English language could be as suitable vehicle of Indian sentiment, thought and imagery” (P 54).

Tagore's lyrics are universal in their appeal. They reveal emotions and feelings out and out true to all ages and climates.

Musical

Tagore is as great in music as in poetry. Like Chaucer's fore runners, he writes music for his words and anyone can so easily understand the fact that Tagore is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion that nothing seems strange and unnatural and he feels content to discover the soul in everything and surrender totally himself to its spontaneity for he has always cherished in his life the ideal of "Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram" – Truth, piety and Beauty. He does not simply seek the salvation of the individual but he cherishes the ideal of the collective happiness and freedom of the human race for the essence of his poetry is the intensity of his felt experience.

Spiritual Unity of Humankind

As a true citizen of the world, Tagore aimed at the mystic vision of the spiritual unity of humankind getting himself averse to all that was narrow, parochial or dogmatic with the sole intention of transforming the kingdom of earth into "a genuine blissful kingdom of heaven" (Sharma 33). His originality mainly lies in creating a synthesis between modern European thought and traditional Indian philosophy. In his two thousand odd songs, he sings and writes on God, devotion, love, nature, childhood, motherland, beauty, truth, humanity, social evils, spiritually etc. In **Gitanjali**, many such themes are interwoven together like flowers in a beautiful wreath. Its hundred odd lyrics open 'four worlds' before as – 1) God and the human soul 2) God and Nature, 3) Nature and the soul 4) the soul and the humanity. **Gitanjali** is a prayer to God and also the soul's voyage to Eternity. Truly speaking, the theme of **Gitanjali** is the realization of God through self-purification, love, constant prayer and devotion, dedication and surrender to God through service to humanity. In reality, he is a full fledged committed poet of hope for mankind. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan rightly remarks in his **East and West in Religion** as

"When we are weighed down by the burden of defeated hopes and when our mind loses its moorings and sense of direction, he comes to us instilling hopes into our hearts and courage into our minds" (P 130).

The poet begins his 'song-offering' in **Gitanjali** in a spirit of absolute humility bring home the point of fact that human soul is eternal and immortal and human body is like a weak vessel which can be easily broken and filled again and again by God Himself and through such a process, human life is constantly renewed, making man die and be born again in another shape;

“Thou has made me endless
Such is thy pleasure
This frail vessel thou emptiest
again and again and fillest it
ever with fresh life” (Gitanjali P-1)

God is present everywhere in Nature and ever a source of inspiration to true devotees like the poet. As a mystic poet, whatever poetic talents he possesses or imbibes, he owes them to divine inspiration or influence. When he is inspired by Divine power, he starts singing with inexpressible joy and in such moments of divine inspiration, he forgets his physical balance and loses his personal identity in his union with the infinite. Immediately afterwards is visualized the mystic union of man and God, making him scatter His gifts in wild profusion through all objects of Nature. No doubt, God's gifts are infinite and man has neither enough greatness nor enough wisdom to make use of those gifts.

Concrete Imagery

Tagore is a poet gifted with the power of using concrete images drawn from the world of everyday experience to communicate rather richly even abstract concepts. That is why the body is first compared to a 'frail vessel' and the 'soul' to the water filled in it. Then God is compared to the flute-player and the human soul to a 'flute of reed'. This mingling of the concrete and the abstract runs through **Gitanjali**. The epithets 'flute' and 'reed' bring out the full humbleness and humility of the poet. Under the influence of divine inspiration, what is found to be discordant, ugly, foul and wicked in the human soul gets reduced to harmony and peace descending on the human soul. Mystic bliss issues only when one devotes oneself and power fully to the worship of God. This is very well achieved in Gitanjali by Tagore. In rich moments of mystic inspiration, the poet hopes to touch His feet with the out-stretched wings of his soul, keeping himself pure and free of all evils so that his body, mind and heart may be

the temple of God in the real sense of the word. God is visualized by Tagore as the life of his life, 'Maker of his joy', 'source of his life and soul'. According to Tagore, God is 'truth' and it is He who illuminates the mind of man with the light of truth, wisdom and knowledge and that is why he tries his level best to reveal his greatness and glory through all his actions and to make himself worthy of union with God, the universal soul. As he feels tired of all human activities, he yearns and longs for mystic union with God and deep contemplation of the divine. Contemplation of peace, harmony and beauty of nature, deep communion with God are the hall marks of Tagore's mystic vision. It is only through wide experience and spiritual discipline that the truth of divine immense can be realised:

“The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end”
(Gitanjali 12)

Man cries out in despair and in ignorance he asks, “Oh, Where is God?”. It is only through wisdom gained after long and varied experience that his question is answered and he is assured of the fact that God is in every object of nature. A traveller has to cover a long distance to reach his destination. Similarly, the human soul has to travel a great deal for attaining 'God head'. A truly religious and serene soul, according to Tagore, no longer argues and infers but meditates and waits for light and enlightenment. This is stressed upon rather clearly in **Gitanjali** by Tagore.

God's Mercy

Tagore is of the view that God is one who has shown His mercy all through his life, not only by making him more worthy of enjoying his manifold gifts which we scattered all around him but also symbolizing the beauty of nature, his own body, his mind and life as all noble gifts of God given to man like him rather unasked, that too, in abundance.

Tagore entirely relies on His mercy and love for the acceptance of his humble offerings in the poetic form of 'songs'. Just like John Donne, Tagore is seen using rich imagery and phraseology to express his love for the divine. The secular and the spiritual are fused into one. The longing of the lover thus becomes the longing of the human soul for re-union with the divine. The poet is the beloved and God is the lover. Just as the night with her

starry eyes, and with her head bowed down waits patiently for the light of day, so also he will wait for God, his lover. Just as the waiting of the night is rewarded with the dawn of day, so also his patient vigil will be rewarded and God will speak to him in His golden voice. In this way, the divine message of God will come to him through the sweet and harmonious songs of birds and the full blooming of flowers in the groves proclaiming melodiously the glorious vision and splendour of God in everything on earth. Now only, Tagore has come to realize one universal fact that fragrance of spiritual experience comes from 'within' and never from 'without'.

Humanism

No doubt, Tagore is a spiritual humanist visualizing spiritual element in the common place activities of life to find God in all humble cottages and not in temples. He out and out condemns castes and creeds working for division of mankind and pins faith in the dictum that all human beings are equal to the creator. In **Gitanjali**, Tagore reveals this firm conviction that the supreme being is imminent in common things and in the hearts of common people. His poetry is derived from his faith in the vastness of Nature and man's life is always viewed in relation to the vast life of Nature. S.B. Mukherji rightly observes:

“The vision sweeps down upon the sordid present and dwells upon the insults of humanity in the name of caste and creed to the humble and the lowly who are denied the sacred rights of man. The pained vision rouses the poet-prophet” (P 117).

Tagore's insurgent humanism asserts itself against all religious orthodoxy. Like all religious man, Tagore has intense love for the oppressed and the persecuted, for the misfits, for the non-conformists, for the homeless and the rejected. Man is the image of God. One has to love every creature, the naked and the hungry, the sick and the stranger:

“Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest and lowliest and the lost” (Gitanjali 37)

Being a poet of the people, Tagore's heroes and heroines are drawn from the ordinary people and their simple joys and sorrows are rendered for humanity in rich musical language with extraordinary insight and depth of emotion:

“The simplest human affections, the child-heart of the young and innocent, the simplest domestic joys and sorrows, the purest and simplest yearnings of the soul for God-these go to form the unity towards which Rabindranath’s poetic utterance is striving” (Ghose 17)

In his poetry; Tagore stresses on the value of the cordiality of human relations. Dr. Radhakrishnan rightly comments:

“Human relationships are the mainspring of spiritual life. God is not a sultan in the sky but is in all, through and all over all” (P 138)

As a poet of bright hope, Tagore envisions a better future for mankind despite present sorrows and sufferings of life at present.

To Conclude

To conclude, it may be said that Tagore is a poet of humanity par excellence and also the champion of equality among all men, singing of the whole humanity and praying to God to make him strong enough to bear easily all the joys and sorrows of life and also to serve others with love and sympathy. He also prays to God to make him spiritually strong so that he may always befriend the poor and protect them from the oppression of the mighty. In short, all poetry, according to him, is nothing but a desperate attempt to express man’s relation to his fellow-men, to Nature, to God – man and the circumambient universe and he can be called as a harmoniser trying to build adurable bridge of understanding between man and nature, man and God.

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