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Spiritual Significance of Tagore's *Gitanjali* for the Learners of Today

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ABSTRACT

Since long twin functions that have been attributed to literature include entertaining and educating the audience. It was the Roman poet Horace who more than thousand years ago claimed literature to be 'sweet' and 'useful'. Since then it is believed that the primary role of literature is to delight and instruct. However, it is not always that a piece of literature is composed by the artists with that effect in mind. More often than not, it is their way of expressing the innermost thoughts and desires creatively. Thus, we have literature dealing with various values drawn from the diverse spheres of life and society viz. environment, social justice, mysticism and the like. Rabindranath Tagore as a renowned and prolific Indian poet was inspired by the spirituality in oneself and thus his poetry reflects his love for creation and mysticism. He could equate his love for nature with the love for god and like a true romantic seeks spiritual enlightenment in them. The paper analyses his collection of songs, *Gitanjali* to explore spirituality in his songs and the way he achieves spiritual gratification by dwelling on the world of the divine.

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Introduction

Literature in any era or territory serves dual functions-to educate and delight. It was the Roman poet Horace who more than thousand years ago claimed literature to be 'sweet' and 'useful'. Since then it is believed that the primary role of literature is to delight and instruct. If its creativity aims at delighting, the expression serves to educate by instilling values among its readers. A lot many values can be infused in the young minds through works of literature since fine creations composed by an artistic mind with an outpour of emotions may not only please the souls but also transform the way one thinks or acts.

In the present changing times the youth is getting perplexed by the dichotomy of the morality resulting out of the western pull and weakening of the eastern roots. Literary pieces imbued with varied values can channelize such perturbed minds by showing them right direction and easing out the emotional tension. In this paper, I have taken up Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* as an artistic piece, which I consider rich in spiritual content and significant for its Indian ethos of the divine, thus a perfect text for the learners of today.

The paper is an attempt to explore spirituality in these songs and the way Tagore achieves spiritual gratification by dwelling on the world of the divine. Born in the affluent family of Debendranath Tagore, this Bengali bard, Rabindranath Tagore inherited spiritual qualities from his father. Rabindranath Tagore as a renowned and prolific Indian poet was inspired by the spirituality in oneself and thus his poetry reflects his love for creation and mysticism. He could equate his love for nature with the love for god and like a true romantic seeks spiritual enlightenment in them. Rabindranath is the first Asian to have been awarded with Nobel Prize for his song offerings, *Gitanjali*, a collection replete with his creative spirit of mysticism. Though lacking any formal structure, this collection reflects his inclination towards God in a unified form.

Tagore believed that "True knowledge is that which perceives the unity of all things in God." (qtd. in Gupta). His

works reflect this belief through his immortal verses contained in *Gitanjali*. His journey towards seeking ultimate union with god begins with his complete surrender at the feet of god. We find him offering himself physically as well as emotionally to the divine as he says

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. (*Gitanjali*, I)

Tagore also reflects on his own smallness as compared to the supremacy of the Lord and articulates it thus

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.

Though its colour be not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and pluck it while there is time. (*Gitanjali*, VI)

For Rabindranath, this world is the manifestation of the almighty, thus he derives pleasure out of it and many of his verses celebrate this joy of creation. He believes that by dwelling in the beauty of the nature with purity of soul one can easily reach to God. In song no XLV and LXVII, he writes thus,

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes

In the rain gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes and the same idea continues in the latter one also

Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

"While Browning could dare to say that God's in his heaven and everything's right with the world, Tagore believes, all that is

incomplete from his side has already been accomplished skillfully. The bud which fell on the earth before it could bloom and the river which lost its way in the desert-sand are not lost." (as qtd. in Mitra)

In the next phase of his quest and yearning for union with God, Tagore considers himself to be a beloved waiting for his lover to come and meet him and leave a token of his love. V.Ramamurthy, in his introduction to *Gitanjali* states: One cannot "Love" the Infinite but one can love Krishna or Christ as remembered in one's own mind. There are so many approaches to the divine. But the highest and the most intimate is that of a beloved for her lover. This is known as "Gopibhav" or "Madhurabhav". [11].

Thus, in song XLI, we observe Tagore desperately waiting for his lord, the lover as he says,

Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows?

But time glides on and still no sound of the wheels of thy chariot

This wait and anxiety continues further as Tagore using some strong symbols of intimacy between the lovers, reflects on his affinity with the God

Thus I waited for the morning, when thou didst depart, to find a few fragment on the bed

Ah me, what is it I find? What token left of thy love? (*Gitanjali*, LII)

His spirit of mysticism stretches further as he perceives the divine in different roles and finite and infinite forms like that of a lover "who walked with secret steps, silent as night, eluding as watchers" (Song XXII), a king, "who came down from the throne and stood at the poet's cottage door (Song XLIX) , a poet "who gets delight in seeing this own creation through poet's eyes and stands at the portal of his ears silently to listen to His own eternal harmony" (Song LXV), "morning with the golden basket", "evening carrying cool draughts of peace" and "infinite sky".

Another very important moral preaching conveyed by Tagore through his devotion towards God is the lesson of universal brotherhood:

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. (*Gitanjali*, XI).

He firmly believes and sermonizes that the divine dwells in the heart of poor. He loves those who work in the muddy fields and earn bread with the sweat of their brow.

Towards the end of the *Gitanjali*, Tagore refers to Death as a messenger which would take him to meet the Ultimate, his lord, the creator and benefactor. "Death, thy servant, is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home" (Song LXXXVI). Death to Tagore is an auspicious moment to provide him an opportunity to return to the original home. "O thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!" (Song XCI) In this phase of his pursuit of God we see his longing like that of lover in anticipation of the arrival of the lover and in the case of Rabindranath Tagore, his own death

Unlike Donne and Hardy who looked at it as something ghastly and fierce, Tagore speaks of death as a mystic. Death is his inseparable companion and for him embracing death implies consummation like that of a bride and groom, "Day after Day I have kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life."

Like a true ascetic, he also reflects on the ultimate truths of life that when we depart from this world, all our possessions are left behind and the only assets that we can carry with ourselves are our deeds of distinction and excellence. "Ask not what I have with me to take there. I start on my journey with empty hands and expectant heart." (Song XCIV). Tagore also emphasizes on the inevitability of death and as such one should not be afraid of it rather welcome it since it is a vehicle to carry you to the abode of the Divine.

When I give up the helm I know that the time has come for thee to take it. What there is to do will be instantly done. Vain is this struggle.

Then take away your hands and silently put up with your defeat, my heart, and think it your good fortune to sit perfectly still where you are placed (*Gitanjali*, XCIX)

The collection ends with a note of complete surrender at the feet of the God leading to his supreme union with the Almighty "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." (Song CIII)

In the introduction to this volume, W.B Yeats wrote, "..... (the poems) have stirred my blood as nothing for years...." This clearly reflects the depth of the work and its importance as a documentary on Indian religion and spiritual values. Even a lay reader with no feel for poetry will be able to recognise how these verses though framed in the simplest of vocabulary, manage to articulate thoughts and feelings of the highest order.

Such texts high on spiritual quotient can lead the minds towards the world of metaphysics and also help them comprehend the platonic existence. Swami Adiswarananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, in his preface to 'Tagore: The Mystic Poets' writes, "The inner-seeking spirituality of India infused all of Tagore's writing. He wrote in many genres of the deep religious milieu of Hinduism. The values and core beliefs of the Hindu scriptures permeated his work." Says the Swami: "Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture, and nationality. In his writings, the poet and mystic takes us on a spiritual quest and gives us a glimpse of the infinite in the midst of the finite, unity at the heart of all diversity, and the Divine in all beings and things of the universe." Such philosophical verses carry boundless appeal and thus can certainly help in fulfilling the purpose of literature by instilling in youth strong moral and spiritual values helping them grow up to be stable, responsible individuals.

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