

## A Short View of *Gitanjali* (Selected Poems from *Song Offerings*)

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### The Context

- *Gitanjali* : Selected Lyrics(1912) by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)
- The English translation of *Gitanjali* was published as *Song Offerings* in 1912.
- The volume contained translation of 103 poems collected from different Bengali volumes of Rabindranath's works namely, *Gitanjali*, *Gitimalya*, *Kheya*, *Shishu*, *Naivedya*, *Achalayatan*, *Chaitali*, *Kalpana*, *Smaran* and *Utsarga*.
- Soon after the publication of *Song Offerings* Tagore's poetic genius was globally acclaimed and he was bestowed with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

### Tagore's Translation of *Gitanjali*

- Two years after the publication of Bengali *Gitanjali* (1910), before Tagore sailed to England in May 1912, he spent quite some time at Shelidah to recover his health.
- It was during this time that he started translating the lyrics of *Gitanjali* and some other poems.
- He carried that small exercise book of translated poems along, while he was on board in the ship. To escape his boredom in a long sea-voyage he translated some more poems.
- On reaching England, when he met the British artist William Rothenstein, he gave the latter the manuscript of translated poems to read.

### Tagore and W. B. Yeats

- Rothenstein greatly appreciated these poems and gave that manuscript to W. B. Yeats, the most prominent literary figure of early twentieth-century England.
- Reading them Yeats realized the immense potential of this sage from the East.
- He took initiative of the publication of those poems and by writing a comprehensive preface to the anthology Yeats introduced Rabindranath Tagore to the Western world.

### Excerpts from Yeats' Introduction to *Song Offerings*

- "These lyrics— which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention,—display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long."

  
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- “The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries...”
- “Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer’s forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence.”
- “A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image”
- “Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity.”

#### **‘Leave this chanting and singing’**

- This particular poem is a marker of Tagore’s socialist and humanistic standpoint as he identifies god with the toiling people.
- Through embracing humanity one would attain God’s grace within one’s heart.
- Deliverance could not be attained through worship and renunciation of this world. It is rather achieved through loving God’s creation. Thus ‘Karmayoga’ or ‘worship through work’ becomes the ideal way for attaining God’s grace.
- Traditionally the priest-class is scornful of the poor and the lowly-born and they avoid these people as ‘untouchables’. But this purity is only a taboo of the surface, whereas their soul is still covered with dust of superstition.
- Once a man mingles with other men, the soul overcomes its barrier and deliverance is attained thereby.
- This is a deliverance from superstition, class-consciousness, and social-taboos.
- By relating the image of God with that of the toiling multitude Tagore introduces the Indian philosophical concept of ‘Nara-Narayana’, or ‘divinity of man’.
- Many other lyrics of Tagore relate to the same idea: “My deliverance is not in renunciation/ I shall rather taste it by succumbing to fetters of love and joy.”
- This particular lyric of Tagore establishes him as a humanist and a poet-saint.
- His call for leaving of ‘chanting and singing’ indicates a departure from the Hindu Brahminical priest-dominated religious tradition to the Bhakti cult of medieval India, where the ‘sants’ preached an unconditional love for fellow humans.

- In this way Tagore revived the humanistic approach of the medieval Bhakti cult in the poems of *Gitanjali*.

#### **'Art thou abroad in this stormy night'**

- The poem begins with a vivid natural description of a stormy night with its wailing sky and swelling rivers.
- The natural storm soon becomes a metaphor for the storm within. It is compared to psychological distress of the poet that longs for his divine lover, the 'Friend of my Heart' (Poran-sokha).
- 'Poran-sokha' is an awareness within man and his journey indicates the spiritual journey of man and the poem becomes a 'hymn' (a devotional song').
- In this particular poem the poet introduces the Vaishnava concept of 'Abhisar' (meeting with one's love, Radha's journey to meet Krishna).
- It is interesting to notice that in this poem, it is not the poet who travels to meet his Divine Lover but the Divine Lover comes to meet him, which is a marker of his humanistic stance.
- Thus in this lyric secular love is transformed into the poet's spiritual yearning and his journey towards the Greater Soul.

#### **'Where the mind is without fear'**

- This poem is an example of Tagore's nationalistic dream.
- Written in the heydays of Indian Nationalism the poem portrays Tagore's concept of the ideal nation.
- He envisions a country, where men can live without fear and with self-respect, where the states can communicate freely, where people abide by honesty and truth, where reason is applied in action, and freedom of thought and creativity are encouraged.
- Behind all these positive assertions Tagore implicitly indicates all the drawbacks of his contemporary Indian society, that is infested with communal tension, caste-barriers, lack of education and superstition, indicated by the phrase 'sand of dead habit'. The poet's dream thus contains his latent despair at the state of his captive country.
- In the vision of an 'enlightened country' Tagore incorporates the European discourse of the 'Enlightenment' that emphasized on the cultivation of Knowledge, the application of Reason and free-thinking.
- At the end of the poem the poet invokes the patron God of the country and visualizes Him as a pitiless entity like the Antichrist figure of the Doomsday, who would strike the country out of its slumber through a harsh blow.

- The 'heaven' in this poem denotes the 'awakened consciousness' of his countrymen.

### **'Obstinate are the trammels'**

- This poem of *Gitanjali* expresses the poet's introspective journey towards Freedom. The idea of 'freedom' plays a vital role in *Gitanjali*.
- In Tagore's view existence and freedom are not different from each other. Freedom is not the renunciation of this world but the internalization of the harmony of the universe within oneself. That is why the poet's heart aches, as he tries to break the trammels.
- What are these trammels? The bonds of duty, love, and life. The poet is aware that his failures are great and his shame is secret and heavy and yet he seems to cherish this conflict within.
- Each line of the poem expresses the poet's conflicting mind. He desires freedom, but is ashamed to think of it. He is aware of the priceless nature of God but is unable to overcome the fetters of human existence.
- In this poem 'my room' is a very significant phrase that symbolizes the poet's heart.
- Tagore does not follow the traditional ascetic path of rigorous meditation and renunciation, because as a poet he cannot deny his emotional faculties.
- This mortal life is covered by a shroud of dust and death. Here Tagore alludes to the biblical concept of Man as constituted of dust & death. Tagore's translation seems to be more explanatory than his original Bengali poem. The poet hates this shroud and yet hugs it in love.
- Thus for Tagore freedom is an inclusive concept, that is achieved by incorporating all apparently conflicting principles into a harmonious whole.

### **Predominant Themes in Selected Lyrics of *Gitanjali***

- Themes of humanity, love, freedom, spiritual ardour, nature and nationalistic impulse recur in lyrics of *Gitanjali*. The four selected lyrics of *Gitanjali* represent most of these concepts.
- The humanism of Tagore shines through the lyric 'Leave this chanting and singing'.
- 'Art thou abroad in this stormy night' is an expression of spiritual love.
- The lyric 'Where the mind is without fear' is a representative poem of Tagore's nationalistic dream.
- 'Obstinate are the trammels' aptly explains his philosophical concept of freedom as an all-inclusive assimilative force.