
Gitanjali: A Venture through European Philosophy

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Abstract

The fundamental duality of European philosophy presented by Thomas Mann, who has dwelt at length on the principle of opposition working in the Olympian health of Goethe and in the sickness of Schiller in terms of the 'godly' and 'saintly', in my opinion can quite successfully be traced in Rabindranath's *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. The 'two worlds', traced by Buddhadeva Bose in *Gitanjali* can quite successfully be analysed in the light of the fundamental duality, traced by Mann.

The very existence of these two worlds, however philosophical or spiritual, brings out the dichotomy, which is fundamental to the creative process of Rabindranath. There is a contradiction between these two worlds of existence. It is an exemplary aspect of progress through contraries, though it does neither conform to the model of Blake nor to that of Hegel. Hence, the grand reception of *Gitanjali* in the West is like a dialogue between two distinct dimensions of human-civilization. William James has discussed these two dimensions in his essay, 'The Present Dilemma in Philosophy'.

Keywords: *Gitanjali*: Rabindranath Tagore, *Song Offerings*, European Philosophy, Thomas Mann.

Introduction

The world Rabindranath imagines to belong to in *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, is primarily a field of care in which he participates with all the overtones of his lived experience. This is the world of concrete human existence in which he is born, he exists and engages himself in his chosen projects. Both in subjective and objective realms that world is the widest and the most original horizon and the language by which he expresses it is immensely rich. It is filled by terrifying ambiguity, contradictions and surrounded by mystery. William James in his essay, 'The Present Dilemma in Philosophy' clarifies the idea of this world:

"The world of concrete personal experience to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy professor introduces you is simple, clean and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outline; logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of temple shining on a hill. In point of fact, it is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addiction built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which the rationalist fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and Gothic character which mere facts present."¹

This world incorporates both the East and the West. A wide range of 'unresolved contradictions' traced by Janne Hustache in the creative paradigm of Goethe 2 can

be traced in Gitanjali: Song Offerings and in my opinion these contradictions contribute a lot to enhance its richness. About Goethe, Thomas Mann observes,

“...the European German, who turns towards the world a face which is indeed plainly German but towards his own nation a face which is European.”³

In the opinion of Buddhadeva Bose, the poems of Gitanjali are

“lined on the edge, on the frontier between two worlds as it were; they move and change places without being secure at any one point.”⁴

The very existence of these two worlds, however philosophical or spiritual, brings out the dichotomy, which is fundamental to the creative process of Rabindranath. There is a contradiction between these two worlds of existence. It is an exemplary aspect of progress through contraries, though it does neither conform to the model of Blake nor to that of Hegel. Hence, the grand reception of Gitanjali in the West is more like a dialogue between two distinct dimensions of human-civilization than that of a voyage, however Orphic it may appear.

In the same way we can say about Rabindranath that his identity as a ‘Mystic of the East’, the initial observation of Europe and the identity as a ‘Bengali poet’ coexist and maintain a balance to give birth to the identity as the ‘visva-kavi’(universal poet). The process of this coexistence of the contraries begins in 1878 as he undertakes a voyage to Europe through Ahmadabad and Mumbai. During and after this voyage Rabindranath gradually gets exiled from his prevailing habits of mind and his religious sensibility starts assuming oblique and

subterranean forms. His romantic imagination starts following its spools ultimately to the threshold of existential anguish, in a way somewhat similar to the psychic domain of Dostoevsky, though operating in a completely different way. However, the making of Gitanjali, Song offerings, can be traced as long back as 1878, while visiting Europe for the first time at the age of 17, whereas the actual process of translating the chosen poems from Gitanjali, Gitimalya , Naivedya, Khea et.al starts in 1912 in quite a playful mood as a result of Rabindranath's incapability to engage himself in any serious literary endeavour and the repeated requests of Rothenstein in the house-boat at Silaidaha while recovering gradually from severe sickness after failing to start for Europe.⁵ At this juncture, Rabindranath's self of a Bengali poet withdraws and the self of a prophet to preach the philosophy of the 'Untroubled Orient' to the turbulent West emerges. Several references of the whisper, 'A Prophet, A Prophet' among the audience of the West, gathered to listen to some of the talks,⁶ Rabindranath delivered in the West during his third visit to the West in 1912-13 can be traced in Rathindranath's On the Edges of Time.⁷ His calm eyes, white-chest-long beard and the self-designed dress-code, which is rare in the West also contribute a lot to the process. Even in 1879, being just a young chap of 17, he comes by the comment in Paris that his appearance does match with that of Christ, as is usually imagined. However appearance, in this regard play a negligible role and the actual process of appropriating the self of a prophet to the West begins in the house-boat at Silaidaha , as Rabindranath starts translating the Gitanjali poems. To support my opinion , I would like to take up just

a couple of lines from the poem no. 26 from Gitanjali :

“He came and sat by my side, but I woke not, /
What a cursed sleep it was, O! miserable me! ...” 8

The Bengali version goes,

“Se je pase ase bosechilo, tobu jagini,/ Ki ghum
tore peachilo, Hotobhagini!...”9

The insinuations brought about by ‘Hotobhagini’ are partially absent in ‘miserable me’ and the musicality of the Bengali version is hardly present in the English one, which brings out the relationship between God and a devotee, whereas the Bengali version unfolds the insinuations of a love relation too. Such changes are brought about by Rabindranath for his doubt, if the West can at all be able to comprehend such a blend of spiritual and amorous relationships, which is a major influence of Vaishnavite philosophy on him. Such changes are brought about quite frequently not only in case of Gitanjali, but while preparing any of his texts for the West before 1924. In a letter to Ajit kumar Chakravarty, dated 12-10-2012 he admits the fact that such translations have been possible only because the poems are of his own¹⁰. This realization, in a way discards the usual idea that Rabindranath’s lack of mastery over English language has caused such translations. In this context we should also keep in mind the ‘playful mood’ and the ‘physical incapability to involve in any creative endeavour’¹¹ as the reasons behind the translations of Gitanjali poems. In several of his letters Rabindranath has mentioned his experience of translating these poems. Bikash Chakravarty in *Ingrajite Rabindranath : Ingraji Gitanjalir Prashtuti (Rabindranath in English: Preparation for English Gitanjali)*¹² has discussed them

exhaustively. Hence without entering into these details I would like to concentrate round his realization that these translations have failed to do justice to his own creativity and have helped the West to appropriate his works in their own terms. In a letter to Coomerswami dated 13-03-1924 he discusses it in detail and takes up a project to exhibit the differences between translations and paraphrases.¹³ The most prominent outcome of this project is Seshher kobita, that starts to be serialized in 1928. Amit Ray in a way rejects the essentiality of the sort of openness that is tagged by Rabindranath with the translations of the Gitanjali poems and as results we get a host of translations which are 'transcreations' if the theory of Prof. P. Lal is taken into account¹⁴. Say for example,

“Bloweth over my garden, O! the wind of the southern sea / That very hour my love cometh and calleth me.”(Chumia jeo tumi amar banabhumi, dakhina sagarer samiran,/ Je subhakhane mamo ashibe priyatamo, dakibe nam dhari akaran.)¹⁵

Rabindranath's first visit to Europe is merely the beginning of the process of amalgamation, that though ultimately fails to satisfy his visionary capability, helps him in developing a creative paradigm, that is originally Ravindrean in nature. His Europe Prabasir Patra, (Letters from an Exile in Europe) ¹⁶ written at the age of seventeen brings out the possibilities of his future maturation. But in My Reminiscences, when Rabindranath is fifty, disapproves certain aspects of these letters and even suppresses certain parts of these letters and they are never translated into English in his lifetime:

“Now it is beyond my power to call them back.

They were nothing but the outcome of youthful bravado. At the age the mind refuses to admit that its greatest cause for pride is in its power to understand, to accept, to respect; and that modesty is the best means of enlarging its domain. To admire and praise becomes a sign of weakness or surrender and the desire to cry down and hurt and demolish with argument gives rise to a kind of intellectual fireworks. These attempts of mine to establish my superiority by revilement might have amused me today, had not their want of straightforwardness and common courtesy been too painful.”¹⁷

From this self-criticism it is quite apparent that Rabindranath disapproves the tone, not the subject-matter of those teenage letters. At the same time, his observations about that stay in England for around sixteen months differ greatly in *My Reminiscences* from *Letters from an Exile in Europe*. Hence the memories of his niece Indira Devi, daughter of Satyendranath has to be used as the third source of information. The middle-aged Rabindranath seems to have disavowed the gay young Rabindranath, ignoring the parties and dances and fashionable ladies that preoccupy the teenage letter-writer, who has presented different attractive situations in different letters. While publishing the letters, previously published in *Letters from an Exile in Europe as Paschatya Bhraman (Journey to the West)*¹⁸, he further edits the letters very substantially and he is quite right in considering these letters pointed as they could have made both English and Bengali readers wince. But at the same time, their genuine quality of amusing readers and their uniqueness as records of the Anglo-Bengali cultural collision at the zenith of the British

empire. The ignorance of the common people of England about India and the Indians is quite thoroughly criticized by him. If we penetrate deep enough into the heart of such criticisms, we can evidently trace cultural conflicts. There is a description of a fancy-dress-ball, in which he dresses as a Bengali Zamindar and gets ignored by the girls, present there. Ultimately the situation becomes favourable as he takes off his false moustache and beard. He describes the girls, present there, with a remarkable enthusiasm as one was dressed as a snow-maiden, another as a Muslim girl, yet another as an Indian lady and so on. As the girls in England find him attractive, he gets elated. We do even find the hint of the favour of Miss Lucy Scot for him.

Rabindranath's letters also bear certain clear instances, of his irritation, disapprobation and pity for some of the women, he meets in England. At the same time there is an instance of his attraction towards the only dark-skinned lady in a dance. He is quite sure that the lady must be an Indian. So when he comes to know that she is British, he loses the nerve to introduce himself, which he has prepared himself for. Along with such involvements with women, Rabindranath has memorable dealings with 'Dr. M____', a middle-aged general practitioner whose name has never been mentioned by Rabindranath and Mr. Barker, the coach. 'Dr. M____' once explains to him, how great an invention a watch is that too in front of a watch-shop and a huge crowd gathers to increase his embarrassment. 'Dr. M____' also attempts to make him understand how a photograph is produced. He even fails to realize how one can have read Shakespeare, who does not know what a 'muff' is. Unfamiliarity of that dress in India is

beyond the grasp of his imagination.¹⁹

But his most pungent criticism Rabindranath reserves for his own countrymen in London. He calls them by a name, coined by Dwijendranath, an elder brother of him: 'ingabangas', the anglomaniacs. He banters their hypocrisies, mocks their imposed manners and satirizes their predicament, though with evident sympathies. As a contrary to that he watches Satyendranath, an elder brother of his, delivering a speech at a meeting of the National Indian Association in February 1879. He explains the reasons behind the failure of the British to understand the Indians. He emphasizes on two prime reasons, the first of which is the superior stance of the English in India, as they belong to the ruling class, whereas, the second is the insular habits of John Bull and his refusal to forego his customs and habits. He does also specify that without a proper realization of the variegations within the Indians, it is nearly impossible to understand them. But the speech is not properly welcomed in the minutes of the meeting and Sir William Muir, Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India attempts to lessen the importance of the arguments of Satyendranath and emphasized the conservatism of the Indians, especially the restrictions, imposed on Indian women as the most prominent hindrance at the face of the possibility of free-mixing between the English and the Indians.

During and after his first visit to Europe Rabindranath attempts to develop a relationship between experimental data and the metaphysical constructs and finally, the status of values. It is to some extent a Quest for a creative standard by accepting all the positive aspects of

the East and the West. It is evidently the other side of Descartes's rejection of both the realms of dream and wakefulness in the second Meditation. Valmiki-Pratibha (The Talent of Valmiki)²⁰ and Sandhyasangeet (The Evening Song)²¹, written just after his first visit to Europe, bear witness of the creative standard, I am trying to analyse. The duality, inherent within the creative process of Rabindranath incorporates the fundamental duality of European philosophy and his process of harmonizing does definitely work through 'Upanishadic' quest for the 'Self'. Here, the creative standard and the 'Self' for Rabindranath do hardly differ.

For explaining the fundamental duality of European philosophy, I would like to refer to Thomas Mann, who has dwelt at length on the length on the principle of opposition working in the Olympian health of Goethe and in the sickness of Schiller in terms of the 'godly' and 'saintly'. Such contradictions can be traced within the Russian pair Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Along with Dostoevsky, Baudelaire and Nietzsche represent the category of Schiller more powerfully. According to Berdyaev two patterns can be traced in human souls,

"..... The one inclined toward the spirit of Tolstoy, the other towards that of Dostoevsky."²²

In the opinion of George Steiner, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky exemplify an unending controversy in which two sets of assumptions, two fundamental conceptions of existence confront each other. This confrontation alludes to the fundamental duality within Western philosophy reaching back to the Platonic dialogues. And Rabindranath uses the philosophy of 'Advaita Vedanta' to incorporate both within

his creative paradigm.

When we think of the two worlds, present in Gitanjali, which I have already discussed, we find that the open space, left by Rabindranath in the world of 'Self', rather that of the 'Orient' has quite comfortably been occupied by the 'West' and this process started with the Introduction of Gitanjali by W.B.Yeats. It seems to be a sort of wish fulfilment for him to trace in Gitanjali all the positive qualities he has always aspired in his poetry. This process of cultural confluence does not remain one-sided as Rabindranath traces out his favourite group from the friend-circle of Rothenstein that conformed to his idea of the spiritual England as he has discussed in his essay, 'Yatrar Purbapatra'.²³ This group is identified by Stopford Brooke as that large, quiet and silent group of English people who do not talk against any form of materialism, but think and feel apart in stillness of the eternal matters. If a different opinion about this group has to be found, it is better to take up Pound's sarcastic reference to its members as the 'pious nonconformists.' However, the legacy of the eighteen nineties and their distinct identity during the crucial years before the World War I are their best possible identifications. They are more or less linked with the aesthetic movement of the nineties, especially by carrying over some basic notions of the aesthetes into their writings e.g. the essentiality of maintaining the purity of poetry. The essence of poetry for them is uplifting, solacing beauty. According to Robert Bridges 'the artist and the poet is the man who is possessed by the idea of beauty.' Although they bear the notion of the aesthetes, they do also link the Beautiful with the Ethical. Descending from Plato

through the feeding rills of Romanticism, the notion of beauty retains for them the ethical idealism of the Romantic Platonism. This is the specific aspect that Rabindranath does also conform to though with certain differences of approach. It is generally accepted by the group that Beauty is unknowable and indefinable, but always present to a sensitive mind. While relating beauty and poetry Thomas Sturge Moore refers to the notion of Harmony and comments, "Harmony is more explicit than any language, it alone informs the soul, begetting the temper which welcomes knowledge and achieves peace."²⁴ Rabindranath does definitely find commonness between the world of his self and that of this group and the only contemporary English poet, he praises is Thomas Sturge Moore. Even in 1932 in his essay 'Adhunik Kabya'²⁵ he attempts to avoid responding to the complexity of modernist poetry in English. The three poets, he chooses to discuss, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot are of American origin and are presented with certain commonness of their poems. Rabindranath found their poems drab, dry and deliberately ugly. He does also clearly state that the warm welcome, he used to get from European literature of the previous ages is strikingly missing in that of his contemporary age.

If we take up the reviews of Rabindranath's works published in 1912-13, they do predominantly follow Yeats's introduction to Gitanjali. Rothenstein along with Yeats contributes a lot to the image of Rabindranath in Europe constructed during his third visit to Europe. Mary Lago comments,

"Rothenstein, all unconsciously, sums up

emphases that were to become attached to Tagore in his future relations with the West: he was to be regarded as a compendium of all the civic and cultural values, an unofficial ambassador and an embodiment of a kind of mystical perfection rendered impossible by the Western pursuit of material things. Above all he was to be regarded as Saint and as seer.” 26

This process of myth-making starts with Yeats's introduction to Gitanjali as he projects Rabindranath as a Saint 'who did not refuse to live' and end with the Nobel Prize, that somewhat confirms the myth. As a further step of the same process the myth gets dogmatized into the image of the culture-hero, and internationalist and an apostle of peace. All of these are predominantly supported, however unkindly by the publications of Rabindranath in Europe during 1912-13. The review, published in The Times Literary Supplement comments,

“... in reading them [the poems of Gitanjali] one feels, not that they are curiosities of an alien mind, but they are prophetic of the poetry that might be of emotion and idea.”(7 November 1912). 27

The response of The Nation appears to be quite generalized in nature,

“Mystic poets are presented to contrive a specific community and Rabindranath is considered to be one of the most prominent members of it: The theme of their [the mystic poets] lyrics and odes is not, as some have imagined a thing strange and remote from us, but, on the contrary, something so near – so closely interwoven with the stuff of our spirits – that we cannot stand away from it...” (19 November 1912).28

Lascelles Abercrombie in The Manchester Guardian, dated 14 January 1913 comments,

“In fact, there is no radical difference between his [Rabindranath’s] lyrical art and that of Europe.” The strangeness we find in him is entirely in his matter and impulse; he does not give the sense of a strange art which practically all other oriental lyrics give. In a word Rabindranath seems to be an Oriental profoundly influenced by European thought...we should rather say that the European influence has been completely Orientalised in him.”²⁹

Along with these responses several other enthusiastic responses can be traced in The Nineteenth Century (April 1913) by Ernest Rhys, in The Nation (May, 1913) by Evelyn Underhill, in The Hibbert Journal (April 1913) by T.W.Rolleston, in The Daily News and Leader (27 October, 1913) by R. Ellis Roberts and so on²⁸. These responses do evidently represent the cultivated British response to Rabindranath in the pre World War I years. It is more a fascination for the distant and the exotic than any serious literary approach. Just as the other side of the coin we can take up Rabindranath’s reply to the welcome accorded to him at the Trocadero restaurant on 10 July 1912,

“East is East and West is West- God forbid that it should be otherwise- but the twain must meet in amity, peace and understanding; their meeting will be all the more beautiful because of their differences, it must lead both to holy wed lock before the common alter of humanity.”³⁰

This is the way the two worlds come to a sort of confluence not only in Gitanjali, but also in the pre World

War I creative domain of Rabindranath.

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