

Temporal and Spiritual Issues in Tagore's Gitanjali

Abstract

Tagore expresses his spiritual vision and mystical feelings in a very lucid way in his great work Gitanjali. He is a mystic poet who presents the worldly things in a sublime colouring. There are uncountable temporal and spiritual issues in his Gitanjali. Truly, all the songs of Gitanjali, are firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian saint poetry where both of these aspects of life - temporal and spiritual, are treated equally and a deep relationship between both of these aspects of life is established.

Keywords: Temporal , Spiritual , Ancient , Tradition, Saint Poetry.

Introduction

*When I go from hence, let it be my parting word,
That what I have seen is unsurpassable.
I have tasted the hidden honey of lotus that expands
On the ocean of light, and thus, I am
blessed – let this be my parting word.*

-Gitanjali, Song 96

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Rabindranath Tagore is the most gifted writer of the Indian Literary Renaissance which had its origin in Bengal in the nineteenth century. His poetry transcends the narrow boundaries of cultural diversities and it rightly establishes him in world literature as a poet of cosmic vision. His outlook on life and religion is broad and liberal and he offers the Indian Vedantic religion in a fresh and modern way in Gitanjali which makes him the ambassador of friendship between the East and the West. The present paper is an attempt to explore the relationship between the temporal and the eternal issues of life through his mysticism, romanticism and humanism. Tagore's liberal approach towards religion gives him the status of a world prophet. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks, "Tagore was the one writer who gained for India a place on the World literary scene".

Rabindranath, the fourteenth child of his parents, Debendranath and Sharda Devi, was born on May 7, 1861 in his ancestral home Jorasanko in Central Kolkata. His mother often remained busy in managing the affairs of her large family, so he grew up under the care of domestic servants. He always felt interested in the world of nature and often went into the countryside miles away from Kolkata to enjoy nature. Edward Thomson says that the world of nature "Sent him into a world of ecstasy particularly at sun-rise and sun-set."

Rabindranath grew up at a time when the country was shaking off its centuries old isolation, backwardness, ignorance, rigidity and orthodoxy. The western culture had intruded into the Indian mind and the country was passing through a cultural upheaval. Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, known as "Prince", was a man of progressive ideas. He joined the Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and soon became an authentic leader of this liberal religious movement. Dr. Radhakrishnan rightly says that Tagore's yearning for God "is a sigh of the soul rather than a seasoned account of metaphysics."

Gitanjali is Tagore's immortal creation containing 103 lyrics mainly on the theme of divine love. Originally written in Bengla, these lyrics were translated into English rhythmical prose by Tagore himself in 1912. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for this work in 1913, he shot into fame and became a global figure. W.B. Yeats, the reigning poet of the day, remarked in the introduction of the inaugural edition of Gitanjali : "The lyrics of Gitanjali display in their thought a world I have dreamt of all my life."

Gitanjali has rightly been called a mighty prayer. Dr. Radhakrishnan says that the songs of this book are "the offerings of the finite to the infinite". The famous French philosopher, Romain Rolland (1866-1944), maintains that here Tagore "expresses the relationship

between the temporal and the eternal." The poet's mysticism, romanticism and humanism find expression in Gitanjali. Some of the songs are informed with a spirit of patriotism.

M.K. Naik says, these songs, firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian saint poetry, yet reveal a highly personal quest for the divine, characterized by a great variety of moods and approaches".

Here Tagore presents God as supreme power which is eternal, all pervasive and inscrutable, but otherwise a benevolent spirit. The poet addresses him as his master, at other places his friend, still at others God is seen as his lover for whose intimacy the poet yearns. The poet is grateful to God because God has given him life. God renews human life again and again. The poet says in the very opening lines of the first song of Gitanjali:

*Thou hast made me endless such
is
Thy pleasure. This frail vessel.
Thou empiest again and again
And fillest it ever with fresh life.*
(Song-1, Page-17)

For Tagore the universe becomes the arena in which God has arranged a festival, and man has been invited to participate in it as an honoured guest. "The essential unity of God with man and nature" has been beautifully stressed again and again by the poet. In song number 38, the poet expresses his yearning for his merger with the Almighty in an eloquent manner. He cries out that "I want thee, only thee, let my heart repeat without end." The poet takes a solemn pledge in song number 4 that he will endeavor to keep his body and mind chaste in order to please God whose touch alone give vitality to his body. The hymn-like quality of the song affects the reader deeply:

*I shall ever try to keep all untruths
out from my thoughts, knowing that
thou art that truth which has kindled
the light of reasons in my mind.*
(Song-4, Page-19)

There are quite a few songs which are resonant with the spirit of humanism. Jawaharlal Nehru rightly remarked that Tagore is the greatest of the humanists that India has produced. In song number eleven, Tagore denounces the dogmatic ways of worship and declares that God dwells not in temples but with ordinary humble folk who work in the fields and earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. He condemns the isolation of the preachers from their fellow men and advises them to give up their chanting and telling of beads. He advises the priests to merge with common humanity because God lives with them:

*He is there where the pillar is tilling
the hard ground and where the
path-maker is breaking stones.*
(Song-11, Page-22)

In addition to his humanistic feelings, Tagore expresses his patriotism also in these lyrics. He presents in song number 35 a picture of India of his dreams. He prays to God that his countrymen should be free and fearless. He prays to God to instill the feelings of fearlessness in his countrymen. He wants

that they should rise above casteism and racial prejudices. He prays to God to make his countrymen fully enlightened and sincere. He says in this song:

*Where the mind is without fear and head is
held high,
Where knowledge is free,
Where the world has not been
broken
Up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls,
Where words come out from the
depth of truth (Song-35, Page-36)*

Tagore shows not only his romance with life but also shows his romance with death in the lyrics of Gitanjali. Death is shown variously as traveller, as trader, as helmsman, as bridegroom and as lover or beloved. Quite interestingly, the poet's soul becomes the bride and the Lord of death becomes her bridegroom. The expectation of his soul's meeting with her bridegroom fills the poet's heart with joy. A sense of romantic rapture overpowers him at the prospect of death. In song number 90 the poet says that he will offer his whole self to lord of death when he knocks at his door:

*"I will set before my guest.
The full vessel of my life,
I will not let him go
With empty hands".*

(Song-90, Page-75)

The event of death is something like a romantic experience for the poet. It is a kind of marriage of the soul with the lord and is an occasion for rejoicing. Just as a bride finds fulfillment in her union with her bridegroom the poet's life will have consummation after his union with God. The poet says that he will offer his bridegroom all his hopes, joys and love. The sensuous imagery has been very skillfully employed by the poet in song no. 91 to express his romance with death.

*The flowers have been woven and
the garland is ready for the
bridegroom. After the wedding, the
bride shall leave for home and meet
her lord alone in the solitude of life.*
(Song-91, Page-76)

Vasant A. Shahne maintains that Tagore "is one of those great romantic poets whose imaginative energies are not expended simply in visualizing a kingdom of heaven above common humanity but in transforming this kingdom of earth into a genuine, blissful kingdom of heaven".

Tagore treats a number of themes in Gitanjali but the most pervasive theme is the immortality of the soul. His humanistic and patriotic sentiments also find expression here. The essential unity of God, man and nature has been emphasized throughout in these lyrics. More than anything else the poet preaches the philosophy of indulgent participation in the affairs of life as well as death which is but only a phase in the continuous journey of the soul.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to compare Temporal and Spiritual issues in Tagore's Gitanjali.

Conclusion

Concluding, it can be summarized that Tagore is the most gifted writer of the Indian literary Renaissance. His poetry transcends the narrow boundaries of cultural diversities which establish him in world literature as a poet of cosmic vision. He presents the worldly things in a sublime manner. Therefore, he reminds us of Blake and Wordsworth, yet he is a typically Indian poet. His Gitanjali, has rightly been called a mighty prayer and throughout this work he expresses the relationship between the temporal and the eternal issues of life.

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