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## Gitanjali, a Religious Expression of Cosmogony and Devotional Quest

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### Abstract:

*Gitanjali, the 'offering of songs' represents unity in diversity and a synthesis of the material and spiritual life in hundred and three poems. Rabindra Nath Tagore the writer of Gitanjali is a Patriot, Philosopher, Mystic and a Visionary Poet. Suffused with mystical imagination and aided by the free flowing movement, the book creates a religious expression of Cosmogony and Devotional quest that expresses God's finite love and humanity's deep compassion for all things beautiful aspects. The series of poems in Gitanjali, are organized in accordance with artistic aesthetics. Tagore seeks his realization of God through his songs by receiving the glimpses of the infinite in the midst of the finite. The central theme is the realization of the divine through self purification and service to humanity.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Devotional quest, Mysticism and Self Purification.

*"My religion is essentially poet's religion. Its touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channels as does the inspiration of my music. My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life."*<sup>1</sup> (Radhakrishnan:25)

*Gitanjali, the 'offering of songs' represents unity in diversity and a synthesis of the material and spiritual life in hundred and three poems. Rabindra Nath Tagore the writer of Gitanjali is a Patriot, Philosopher, Mystic and a Visionary Poet. Suffused with mystical imagination and aided by the free flowing movement, the book creates a religious expression of Cosmogony and Devotional quest that expresses God's finite love and humanity's deep compassion for all things beautiful aspects. The series of poems in Gitanjali, are organized in accordance with artistic aesthetics. Tagore seeks his realization of God through his songs by receiving the glimpses of the infinite in the midst of the finite. The central theme is the realization of the divine through self purification and service to humanity. Poet in Gitanjali waits passionately for God, his love, to surrender himself. He goes on to say that he would never shut the doors of his senses. This is because the delights of sight, hearing and touch will be God's delight to him. The central theme of *Gitanjali* is devotional: it expresses the yearning of the devotee for the reunion with the divine. We get many instance of such poetry for example the opening song; *Gitanjali* opens with the image of a *frail vessel* which suggests the empty and destitute life of a man. The empty vessel of man longs for the rain of love, grace and sympathy of the Omnipotent God so that the empty vessel may overflow with new the fresh life: "*Thou has made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.*"*

The book is divided into two major parts. The first parts of the songs are dedicated to the quest for the humanity and the second is for the Realization of God. The lyrics of *Gitanjali* are simple and religious; these show a sound relationship of the poet with his divine and a devotional quest with the mystical realization of his own soul. Poet's *Gitanjali* mirrors forth a soul's journey towards the realization of God to Self realization. The religion of *Gitanjali* is free from pedantic dogmas and high metaphysics. Poet in love to God says: "*I am only waiting for love to give myself up at the last into his hand.*" The image of lyre in *Gitanjali* is so beautifully woven into the fabric of the book that it always comes back and forth like that of Shakespeare. Tagore believes that the human body is the temple of God so it needs to be kept pure. Since God dwells in the inmost shrine of the heart, one has to keep away all evils from one's heart. Our effort should be to reveal God in our actions because it is God who gives us the power to act. This is true worship and this sort of worship is not of the Pharisee but of the simple man of the wayside. Poet heart weeps with the rain cloud and he yearns to meet the Devine love: "*Clouds heap upon clouds and it Darkens, Ah, love, why dost thou let Me wait outside at the door all done.*" The songs in *Gitanjali* are considered as a manifestation of the great Bhakti tradition in Indian Poetry, a tradition in which the Vaishanava and Saiva leaves their footprints. Tagore is careful enough in using traditional and familiar imagery, taken from both the Bhakti tradition and everyday life, for these rain forces the bonds of his lyrics with the everyday life of man and make devotional love a part of his every day existence so that the apparently mundane becomes instead the universal. Poet sings and pours forth his boundless love to

God and expresses the joy & ecstasy he actually experienced in his communion with the Divine. Like Shakespeare Tagore has turned the things into something new and unique with the help of his extraordinary imagination and intellect. Dr. S. Radha krishnan has rightly observed, “*The visible world as a means of shadowing forth the invisible*” and thereby he takes interest in “*touching the temporal with the light of the eternal.*”<sup>2</sup> (Radhakrishnan: 137)

Gitanjali possesses a common feeling of love for Man with the love for humanity by enforcing the values of humanity such as peace and harmony in the nation at large. Tagore believes that poetry, like other fine arts, is communication; the experience which lived in the mind of the author must live again in the mind of the reader. Tagore gave all through his life through his paradisiacal imagination that envisioned a world of love, equality, honesty bravery and spiritual unity of all the mankind. Gitanjali deals with the infinite, mystic relationship of man and God and express the feeling of gratitude for the Supreme God for his immortal gifts to mortals. He sees the present humanity is infatuated with the greed, wealth and power that further leave it to those who do evil to turn away from their evil doings and their horrific moral slumber. Tagore prays for India and in turn he prays for the whole Humanity to experience the true peace and harmony in life by giving up evil and taking up good deeds. Tagore conveys the theory of renewal of life; human life may end in emptiness, but if it is god’s pleasure then god will impart life again into person’s life and renew it. He writes: “*My poet’s vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.*”

The whole experience must be given and transplanted from one mind to another. In this sense the poet expresses his personality which is the sum of his integrated emotions and ideas. Tagore trusts that God cannot be comprehended by logic and reason rather His existence can be felt within, inwardly realized. He can feel the touch of the Infinite but cannot comprehend the Infinite. Thus he emphasizes the personal realization of God rather than proving the existence of God by way of proofs. Tagore’s devotion however goes one step further and believes that God’s love is incomplete without reciprocation from man. Man becomes the receiver of God’s love in its entirety. Tagore does not see renunciation as the path to deliverance. For him the world itself is a beautiful creation of God and it is one source of reaching Him. Tagore’s belief in God is deep rooted without God his poetry would not be what it is, for even thought he is a great poet of love and nature, it is his belief in God and his vision of God that given depth.

The Paper analyzes how his poems from Gitanjali are reminiscent of a great Indian tradition called the Bhakti tradition and how all songs amalgamate with religious expression of Cosmogony and develop the Devotional quest in readers. It is true that all songs in Gitanjali are characterized by a great variety of mood and appear from joy to ecstasy and then ecstasy to despair. My paper seeks to find a religious explanation for Tagore’s perpetual praise of the natural world, a praise that he was able to connect dynamically to his love of God. Iyengar says: “*Gitanjali is verily the recordation of the vicissitudes in the drama of the human soul in its progress from the finite to the infinite.*”<sup>3</sup> (Iyengar:18) The explanation given is that Tagore’s repetition of nature motifs and his ability to link these motifs to a harmonious pursuit of the divine is rooted in an appreciation for cosmogony of the *Rig Veda*. The paper will also be focusing on how Tagore’s naturalism rooted in a tradition extending back to sacred text leads the poet to a mystical expression of personality through his poems. This further means that in poetry his *thought and art* is one. Gitanjali is a great document of intuitive faith and reads like the Bhagwat Gita on the one hand and Psalms of the Old Testament on the other. It can be a synthesis of all that is best in the mystical experiences of the east and the west where the Spiritual salvation is considered to be the highest state and quality represented by God attained by man through a life of dedication, consecration and sacrifice. The various activities bring only restlessness and misery if they do not have a goal that is beyond the realm of ordinary desires. So only a man of great devotion who has nothing to do with the evils of the world can feel the silent steps of the soul. Kathopanishad observes: “*This self is hidden in all things; it is not manifested. But subtle seers see him by their keen and subtle intellects.*”<sup>4</sup> (Tattvabhushan: 57) The trouble at present is that more importance is given to the body and material needs than to the spirit and spiritual salvation. But a mystic has the direct intuitive experience of the ultimate Bhakti poets such as Chaitanya, Mirabai and Aandal believe in worshipping God through music and dance highlighting performative nature of art in cultures with an oral tradition such as the ancient Tamil culture. Gitanjali is in itself reminiscent of the Bhakti tradition. Man becomes a mere instrument of carrying God’s Love to the earth. The very music that the Bhakti poet renders is a gift from God, a divine expression that cannot be realized without the Grace of God. He points in the book: “*When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride*” Gitanjali as a transcript of mystical experiences without their being conceived in imagination would be to deny that essential fact that he is a poet first. He confirms: “*I know thou takest pleasure in my singing.*” Rather like a true poet he reaches the mystical consciousness through the transfigured senses of taste, sound, odour, touch and sight and celebrates that knowledge in his poetry. He openly declares: “*I will never shut the door of my senses.*” This is all because “*The delights of sight and hearing and touch will beat thy delight.*” The human soul is eternal whereas his body is perishable and mortal but God wills it so that man in reality becomes immortal. Tagore in his *Song offering* begins with a beautiful conceit of human life His immortality may be an illusion. The reality is that God blows his spirit into him and thus lives on ever after though the body may die again and again. The limited bound human heart expands into limitless joy and thus poetry is created out of divine inspiration.

The God in *Gitanjali* has no name or abode and cannot be identified with any specific Indian God. He has His own form and personality. Tagore referred to God as *You, Thou* or *Thee*. The Almighty is shown as a loving father who cares for His children and at times as a Lover who is waiting for reciprocation from His own creation. He goes like this: “*My song has put off her*

adornments...they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers...My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight." Tagore's expanded self includes life of all kinds outside self, of all emotional states, all conditions and situations and excludes nothing. The cry: "my king thus didst press the signet of eternity upon many a feeling /moments of my life..." as the new vistas of knowledge and understanding unveil themselves, the poet is filled with a sense of intense certitude peaceful joy and enhanced powers. The poet cries out in his ignorance and asks through his songs for where is God. After realizing of the truth, he speaks that God can be understood only through wisdom that comes from varied experience. In the last lines he conveys the feeling that God is within him and God is in every object of nature.

Separation from the loved one, waiting, searching, mourning and lamenting over the absence of the Supreme Lover are all common sentiments in the Bhakti tradition. The search is painful and the destination elusive and he remarks the truth: "When I awaken and hurry in search of my goal...cruelly thou hidest thyself before me." He perceives that the Universal life-spirit reflects in all the creation – near or far and death dies in a burst of splendour which he says in one of the songs of Fruit-Gathering in Gitanjali. On such moment Tagore bows in his "silent salutation to thee" comprehending fully and distinctly that "From the words of the poet men take what meanings /please them; yet their lasting meaning points to thee."

Tagore was highly influenced by the Vedas, sacred literature of India where flew a stream of poetry. He was also impressed with the Upanishads that embody the philosophical aspect of the Vedas. Tagore as the Bhakti poet, had processions inviting one and all to sing the praise of the Lord. Amid clanging cymbals and drums, he sung the glory of God in through his Bhajans with cries of ecstasy which did not follow the strict rules of Raag or Taal. Tagore has also used all through his poetry, the beautiful images of the kind of life, images of good hood, images of divinity which he has got from the Vedas, the Vedantas and the devotional poetry, but making them all look like our own. There is originality and delicacy in the art with which he portrays the ever shifting moods and emotional intricacies of love. He shows again and again how love comes in one's life suddenly with a strange force. He conveys the intensity of love and the pleasure as well as the pain it causes.

Tagore conceives sin as our selfishness and failure to be true to our real selves. Our sin is a claim of independence on God. God employs suffering and misfortune of the world as an occasion to draw human beings' attention to their real destiny. Pain and suffering are occasions for us to rise above our human weakness and realise the infinite in us. Death that is generally seen as the greatest evil is nothing but the fullness of life complete harmony and perfect love. The atmosphere of *Gitanjali* is characterized by the very first verse of the first poem, in which Tagore says that he worships his creator in the dust of the earth. Humility, devotion and love are the key which determines the tone of his work. Death of our beloved ones may cause a bitter experience for us if we are attached to the individual fact of life, but if we see the wholeness of life of which death is a part, our sorrow over death may turn into joy. A devotee runs to the ends of the earth in search of God. At last, he rests to take a breath, weary with futility. At that moment of silence, God's Love springs upon him and takes him unawares. The poet thinks that, God is bound to his body and soul. Longing of the soul for union with the divine is expressed in the poem. He wanders in solitude and on unknown pathways. He tries his best to seek Him in silence, in songs and in every object of nature. Finally, his search is over and he realizes that God resides inside his very own soul. Tagore sings: "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."

With the focal theme of Devotion, *Gitanjali* it expresses the yearning of the devotee for re-union with the divine. The poet is a singer and he seeks the realization of God through his songs. Tagore shows a new avenue of self-preparation and boosts the morale of the baffled self to enkindle 'the lamp of love' that will promise life with the perfume of the mystic fragrance of fulfilment to him."5 (Chakrabarthi: 83) He considers himself to be a living musical instrument in the hands of God, the Master Musician. But he must remove his imperfections before he can be a fit instrument. The entire Sadhna of his life is elevated to removing the imperfections and the impurities of his mind and heart, to overcoming all obstacles in the path of his realization of God. Tagore wishes and yearns: "only there is agony of wishing in my heart...I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet." His search for the Divine life leads him to express the Devotee's intense experience of pain, passion and joy. His realization of the Life Divine is vividly portrayed in *Gitanjali*: "I will meet one day the Life within me, the joy that hides in my life, though the days perplex my path with their idle lust."

Tagore was truly national and therefore international. Tagore represented in his thoughts and writings not only the best elements of the Indian culture and civilization extended over five thousand years or so but also he was always ready to take up the cause of man all over the world. He took upon himself the task of carrying the Indian message of love and amity all over the world. There is an abundance of word picture of the quiet and the gentle side of nature in the poems of Tagore. One of the most striking features of Tagore's *Gitanjali* is the sublime role nature plays in it. The poems of *Gitanjali* are adorned with beautiful images and metaphors culled from nature. The different seasons too are portrayed vividly with all their distinct nuances and properties. The sky, clouds, rainy July, sunshine and shadow, oceans, rivers, birds, flowers and forest groves only add to the exotic beauty of Tagore's spiritually romantic poems. One of the observations on Tagore' says, "All the above and much else reveal Rabindranath as a unique creative spirit in the domain of art and aesthetics. He was also an inspired sage who had glimpses of the unseen reality i.e. beyond life. As a mystic and devotional poet he takes his place with the greatest sages and devotees of India and the world." 6 (Chatterjee: 38)

The poet experiences the living touch of God's love in the beauties of Nature. The smiling flowers, the flowering grove, the thick forest and the green grass, the ever wakeful blue sky, the night with starry vigil, the spring with its flowers, the singing birds and flashes of light and so on--- all these are intimations to the poet from immortality, alerting him to the Infinite immanent in Nature. These descriptions of beautiful nature also form the background in which the poet enjoys mystical experience that closely associates

with his mysticism of joy. Gitanjali is a blend of a number of themes and ideas. Its hundred and odd lyrics explore the relationship between God and Man, individual and humanity. It justifies the ways of man to God and vice versa. It expresses in perfect language permanent human impulses and thus passes the test of great poetry as laid down by T. S. Eliot. Here poetry has become a revelation and incantation like Vedic mantras and the poem as a whole opens the closed petals our lotus heart.

Tagore's poetry did not depend on language specifically on the English language. The lyrics of Gitanjali represent a simple religion, one that is characterized by sound relationship with the divine rather than by external paraphernalia. The religion of Gitanjali is free from pedantic dogmas and high metaphysics. It does not have any complicated rites and rituals. Its worship is not of the Pharisee but of the simple man of the wayside. Tagore affirms: *"In my life I may have done many things that were unworthy, with or without knowing, but in my poetry I have never uttered anything false; it is the sanctuary for the deepest truths I know."*<sup>7</sup> (Dutta & Robinson: 368)

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