



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## A Humble Attempt to Similarise 'Gitanjali' by Rabindranath Tagore and 'Song of Myself' by Walt Whitman

**Sudeshna Das**

Assistant Professor, R.C.E.T. Bhilai, Chhattisgarh, India

**Abstract:**

*The basis of Tagore's view of life, that Death is merely a transformation or the only gateway to the eternal is well portrayed in Gitanjali. The soul after death lives in the Eternal and may assume some different form. Walt Whitman's belief in the Supreme and the cycle of life and death, the immortality of the soul all combine without an escape from the sensory world. To him the sensory world is real and necessary and a pathway to the Union with the Divine, this is well portrayed in Song of Myself.*

**Keywords:** Life, death, divine, soul, body, union

Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) was a multi-faceted genius and a source of inspiration to millions in modern India. He was a prolific writer and a pioneer in many fields. He was a poet, dramatist, actor and producer; a musician and a painter; As an educationist he was an experimental theorist, as well as a practical idealist who turned his dreams into reality at Shantiniketan; he was a social reformer, philosopher, prophet of a new age, a nationalist and a planner of rural reconstruction; He was a renowned novelist and short story writer and a critic of literature; he even made occasional incursions into national politics but remained essentially an internationalist; he was an integral whole, the *Rishi*, the *Gurudev* as Gandhiji called him. His fecundity and vitality were amazing. In Nov. 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, for writing *Gitanjali*.

Walter Whitman (1819-1892) was an American poet, essayist, journalist, and humanist. He was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, and the father of free verse (or verse libre). His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality. Most Americans consider *Leaves of Grass* as a text to be revered only next to the Bible. Whitman was claimed as America's first 'poet of democracy'. The most significant poem in *Leaves of Grass* is unmistakably *Song of Myself*, as it stands out in embodying Whitman's worldview and his mysticism. It does not portray any hero but the common man/self as the hero. The common man and objects of nature become the identity of the poet who projects and connects himself to the entire external world, and the whole poem is a narration in the first person, which justifies its title. It depicts the picture of the materialistic, urbanized America.

*Gitanjali* is the song offering to the divine. The poet offers his thoughts to the divine and yearns and prays to be one with the divine. The poet very distinctively portrays the self and the divine. There is a sense of total surrender, worship, meditation and a display of the humble self, always bending low waiting to be transformed by the touch of the divine. Death is the ultimate step, when the soul can be liberated to unite with the divine. There is no questioning of the existence of the divine in the nature. There is also an understanding and realization, that the feeling of the divine is from within. In this vast universe one has to slowly shun all materialistic needs to ultimately feel the divine within self.

*Song of Myself* on the other hand is about one's own self. One has to understand the physical self, identify with every object of nature, experience the life with every required action to actually understand the creator of this self. The thoughts of the poet are dynamic and there is action in this poem. The outside or physical or material world has to be experimented and experienced to realise the god / soul. Equality among all men, women and objects is projected to such an extent that the poet identifies everything even his country as one. He urges all the Americans to have the feeling of oneness and regards towards their nation. The poet realizes that life goes on as a cycle and death is as important as life.

The similarities in both the poems are that both the poets yearn for union with the divine, though the path is different. Both the poets realize that death leads to the ultimate union with the divine. The life goes on and on in a cyclic progression. The divine resides in the humblest of being. One should be humble, satisfied with self and seek salvation to rest in peace. There is a lot of sexual imagery in both the poems, and god is referred as the divine lover to whom the poets offer themselves. Both the poems are mystic in nature and awaken their countrymen.

Both create a special sensation when read and realized in the deeper self.

#### Common Factors: Walt Whitman & Rabindranath Tagore

- Both grew up among many siblings (though Walt Whitman was from a humble family and Rabindranath Tagore was from an affluent family)
- Circumstances brought them close to nature in their formative years and as they grew up.
- Loneliness drew them close to nature. They learnt to appreciate nature and draw solace from it.
- Mishaps in the family softened their hearts and they very naturally understood the connection of life and death.
- Both were school teachers in the initial years, true patriots and worshipper of their motherland.
- Both were great writers and wrote on a variety of subjects, all relating to life. No aspect of life was left untouched in their writings.
- Both were spiritual and patriotic in their own way.
- Their writings are awakening songs for their own countrymen.
- Mysticism and Symbolism is filled in their writings.
- *Gitanjali* and *Song of Myself* are both self awakening poems, which not only enlighten their readers but is also a tribute to their own motherland and impregnated with a flow of mysticism.
- Both these poems are considered as a spiritual asset of their country, which is beyond the shackles of any particular religion and was written for mankind beyond present times.
- Both the poems consider Death as the ultimate pinnacle of life, and the soul is liberated only after death. The cycle of life and death is continuous and never ending.

A quick reading of *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore and *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman has initiated diverse thoughts in my mind. It directs the readers towards the immense blessings of the Divine on oneself. It makes one realize about the very existence of oneself, his life from birth till death and rebirth, thus how by the divine grace the cycle of birth and death goes on endlessly. In nutshell it's God, God and God all around and the very purpose of the existence. Reading *Gitanjali* made me feel the depth of life beyond physical and mundane activities of life. Unlike *Gitanjali*, in *Song of Myself* the Almighty is felt in daily life, in mundane activities of life. Walt Whitman, sees Almighty in daily toil, pain, fun, love, sex, romance of life. While reading Whitman, I found that there is hardly anything which the poet has missed to connect to life. My brief understanding on both the above work is expressed below.

*Gitanjali* exposes us to the admiration of the creator. How one learns to offer himself to the divine, be humble and surrender to the ultimate, experience the changing seasons, indulge in daily chores yet realize that everything lies in the ultimate creator who is steering the wheel of our life and afterlife. It is all for the sake of that One, in that One and with that One. Amidst the hustle and bustle of life where everything seems apprehensive and at times there is a long wait for something petty, overcast with clouds of ill thoughts and worries, reclining on the divine is the only means of solace. Offering oneself to the divine brings peace of mind and leads towards the final destination. One should always give the best he has, as he will always get back more from the divine, than offered. This will help to unleash mysteries of life and offer one's life easily to death. Death is the ultimate truth of life and rest everything what we assume to be the truth are actually roads leading to that ultimate. God's grace will lead into a smooth sailing to the final rest.

*Song of Myself* is a poem on life bubbling with life, about every little aspect of life. It gives a sense of connection with everyone and everything on this world. It gives a close identification of self with everyone and everything without leaving any direction unobserved or untouched. Everything in this world has a particular place and a significant role. Apart from people and things, the Poet has also mentioned the animals in his poem. Comparing animals to man, they are happier and content above the lowly behavior of people, like comparison, dissatisfaction, manias, discussion of so called duties to be fulfilled. Walt Whitman has left not a single stone of life unturned, in describing the way of life on physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels.

In this poem 'I' seems to be the river of 'Life' flowing through every being animate or inanimate, finding it's existence in every atom in this universe. Everything it touches has an important significance in life. Very subtly the fine emotions of human life have been dealt with and the innumerable examples of life taken and discussed are far beyond imagination. One suddenly starts visualizing the world beyond his limited horizon.

Life goes on like a cycle. All the lord's creation is the same, only the forms and names are different. 'I' am the Lord's creation and the Lord resides in 'Me'. Hence I reside in everyone. Everyone is an extension of me or we all are the manifestation of the Lord's creation. Walt Whitman speaks and discusses not only of life but also of death, as death is a vital part of the cycle of life. The Poet views death as a part of life. The past and the present whither away and life culminates into death, but that does not stop one from living. This 'I' is also the inner voice apart from the outward physical being. 'I' is the soul directing us and in this soul resides God. It is present in every atom of matter and non-matter. Hence 'I' can see God in everything and feel his presence every moment. The 'I' is the part of the universe in unison with God. This aspect of relationship of matter with the divine is common in both the poems and is the main essence of thought of both the poets.

Thus *Gitanjali* elevates me to another level of thoughts, giving me scope to imagine much more beyond the regular activities of life. While *Song of Myself* brings me down to the ground reality exposing every aspect of the living world. I feel both are poles apart in means of text, yet well connected, as unless one lives and experiences life to fullest, cannot be transported to that another world. Unless one has lived well in flesh and blood, gone through a good deal of pleasures and pains of life, experienced upsurges of physical and emotional ordeals, cannot realize the world beyond and the need of the soul to be transported to rest in peace and experience the divine bliss.

Matter and life are not different but inter-related. It is very characteristic of life that it is not complete within itself, it must come out. Union of the soul with something external is essential for self fulfillment. The principle feature of human personality is that it is Transcendental, that it fulfils itself by to reaching itself to what lies beyond itself to what should be and what might be.

**References**

1. Tagore, Rabindranath. Gitanjali. New Delhi: Sterling India Private Limited. ISBN 978 81 7963 113 3, 2007.
2. Whitman, Walt. Song of Myself. Stilwell, KS, 66085. Digireads.Com Publishing. 2006