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Spiritual Evolution of Tagore's Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper primarily analyses the development of intellectual and spiritual content in select poems of Rabindranath Tagore, including *Gitanjali*, in a chronological manner. The paper intends to contribute some valuable insights into the origin and development of spiritual and intellectual content in Tagore's poetry, through textual analysis of selected poems and a comprehensive biographical research on the poet employing the model of 'Narrative Flow' as proposed by Vilma Hänninen (1996). Through it is beyond the scope of the paper to analyse the entire poetry by Tagore, the paper, however attempts to analyse few select poems by the poet seer and present an evolution of spiritual content observed in Tagore's poetry beginning at *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*, through *Gitanjali*, and ending with *Sesher Kobita*.

Keywords: Tagore, Spirituality, Universalism

Upon analyzing the existing literature on Tagore's poetry, one can find numerous references to the mysticism and spirituality found in his poems. There are research papers and articles critiquing the translations of his Bengali poems into English and even discussing Tagore's Universalist philosophy and his unique brand of spirituality, but none that directly discuss the spiritual evolution of his poetry over time.

According to Tagore, in his autobiography *Reminiscences*, his earliest attempt at serious poetry was *Kavi-Kahini*, published in 1878, which according to him was a "product of an age when the writer had seen practically nothing of the world, except an exaggerated image of his own nebulous self." (Tagore, 1912, p. 150) According to Tagore, it was his drama poem *Prakritir Pratishodh* that can be looked at as an introduction to the whole of his future poetry. The poem deals with the conflict between truth and beauty, reason and love, and rejection and acceptance in the life of a sanyasi who had adopted a little girl, who is an outcaste. Internal conflicts in the pursuit of the "Truth" form the central theme of this poem.

According to Donald R. Tuck (1974), Religion for Tagore was a personal manifestation. According to the author, religion for Tagore has more to do with the union of — "I" with "Thou" (Tuck, 1974, p. 104). The following are a few lines from Tagore's *Fireflies*, published in 1928 –

Write to me what thy waves struggle to say.
The sea writes in foam again and again
and wipes off the lines in a boisterous despair.

Tagore, through the above lines conveyed how he felt that words and utterances are useless when trying to convey the meaning of man's ultimate religious experience (Tuck, 1974, p. 104). From the internal conflicts as illustrated in *Prakritir Pratishodh*, Tagore's poetry has evolved to convey the poet's personal religious experience and the futility of words in trying to explain the experience. The following lines are from his first noted poetry *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*, published as part of *Prabhat Sangit* in 1883 -

Why, my God! Why was I
chained inside the stone?
I'll break loose from all shackles, and
hurl my cascading waves to strike with a terrific force,
to my heart's delight.

These lines were written at a time when the poet was barely twenty-one years old, just back from England with his father. It was also a time when he developed a close friendship with his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. This poem was the beginning of Rabindranath as a poet. It can be observed that in *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*, the lines involve a lot of passion, and reflect a verbal interaction with God and an eagerness to explore his new-found spirituality, whereas in the *Fireflies*, it appears that the poems talk about a higher understanding about God, reconciled with the fact that words and utterances are futile when it comes to Man and God.

Tagore's belief that God lies among human beings has had a great impact on his literary works, especially on the poems in *Gitanjali*. The following lines are from *Gitanjali* published in 1912 -

The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,
The conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish,
Crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.
All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine,

O Thou of boundless life,
 Save them, rouse thine eternal voice of hope,
 Let Love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
 Open its petals in thy light.

Here, the poet tries to spread the message of universal love to broaden the people's minds and hearts for everlasting peace on earth. If in *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*, one may find an unquenched thirst to be awakened to new horizons of knowledge and spirituality, by the time *Gitanjali* was written, the poet had travelled not only to England, but to many other places in the world, and was inspired by the notion of Universalism.

K. V. Gilevych's (2009) account of Tagore's poetic style in "'Gitanjali' and 'The Gardener' By Rabindranath Tagore: Peculiarities of Style" offers a great insight into the reflections made by the poet through his poems. The following are a few lines from *Gitanjali*, that according to the author, a description of harmony, which includes beauty, knowledge and joy as its elements (Gilevych, 2009, p. 148)

Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.
 O thou beautiful, there is in the nest of thy love that encloses the soul with colours and
 sounds and odours.
 There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of
 beauty, silently to crown the earth

The author opines that, upon reading the lines above, one can observe that Tagore, in his works expressed a point of view that is unusual for his contemporaries, who belonged to different modernistic trends, voiced the ideas of chaos, total loneliness, crisis and gloomy future. Unlike them, Tagore had this inveterate optimism that brought out the eternal principles of goodness, justice, beauty and love (Gilevych, 2009, p. 148). Tagore's spirituality set him apart from his contemporaries, and made him a herald of Eastern knowledge for the westerners.

Shilpa Jain (2009), in the "The Poet's Challenge to Schooling: Creative Freedom for the Human Soul" quotes the following lines from *Gitanjali* to express Tagore's perception of human life (Jain, 2001, p. 18) –

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of
 freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.
 No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight
 and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.
 Yes, all my illusions will burn into the illumination of joy, and all
 my desires ripen into fruits of love.

According to the author, in the above stanzas, links to simplicity, liberation freedom, sentiment, nature, joy, creation, and love can be seen clearly. Tagore did not see human life as singular, mechanical, selfish or soul-less, but as manifestations of the divine in the natural, as free willed creators with endless potential, and whose purpose is the realization of the infinite in love (Jain, 2001, p. 18).

Both Jain and Gilevych observe that in his poetry, Tagore expressed his view that human life exists in constant harmony with the divine, with beauty, knowledge, and joy being the elements of the same. This perspective was a unique phenomenon in Tagore's spiritual poetry.

In the *Unending Love* published in 1890, the poet writes:

Today it is heaped at your feet,
 it has found its end in you,
 The love of all man's days, both past and forever:
 Universal joy, universal sorrow, universal life,
 The memories of all loves merging with this one love of ours—
 And the songs of every poet past and forever.

These lines reflect the poet's bent towards Universalism long before the conception of *Gitanjali*. Upon looking into the philosophy of the poet, as analyzed by Ramin Jahanbegloo (2007), in "Tagore and the Idea of Civilization", for Tagore, Man begins his life with his brute nature, but deep within him lies a current of universal humanity, the universal mind. According to his philosophy, civilization is not just a national consciousness, but a world consciousness (Jahanbegloo, 2007, p. 65).

Mohammad A. Quayum (2006), offers a similar analysis of the poet's idea of universalism and 'One World', and how he challenged the ideological system of nationalism and jingoism (Quayum, 2006, p. 33). The author quotes the following famous lines from *Gitanjali* to express Tagore's idea of the common destiny for all mankind (Quayum, 2006, p. 45)-

Where the mind is without fear and the 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
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
 Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
 Where the mind is led forward by thee
 Into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

The author opines that Tagore has been impractical about his visions for India, but the transcend thoughts revealed in the poem provides a testament to his noble and beautiful mind (Quayum, 2006, p. 46). However, both Quayum and Jahanbegloo converge on the composition of Tagore's brand of Universalism that transcended political and racial boundaries.

Adam K. Webb (2008), observed that Tagore, although being a traditionalist, believed in the co-existence of all faiths under the one umbrella of Universalism. (Webb, 2008, p. 189-212)

Upon researching Tagore, one should also investigate how his once acclaimed works lost its sheen in the West after his Nobel Prize win. Nabaneeta Sen (1966) makes a critical account of Tagore's rise and fall in the West, in terms of the aspects of his poetry and loss of meaning in their translations in English. The English translations did not make a lasting impression upon the critics in the West, but people largely saw Tagore as a mystic from the East. Sen observes that Tagore did not mind being seen as a mystic by the West, and he was in fact delighted to be useful to his country, even if it was at the cost of his reputation as a poet (Sen, 1966, p. 281).

According to A. H. Somjee (1961), Tagore based his political philosophy on the foundation of social and moral traditions of the India, while at the same time highlighting and appreciating the differences between the East and the West (Somjee, 1961, p. 143).

From the articles by Webb, Sen and Somjee, one can observe that Tagore's philosophy extended beyond the boundaries of race, culture and politics, and he believed in a universal common goal for all mankind irrespective of the differences between the cultures of the East and the West.

The poems written during the final years of his life, especially the *Sesher Kobita*, holds several instances of poet's own longing and anticipation of the end, and bidding goodbyes, portraying how Tagore's poetry evolved in its spiritual and philosophical content as if it were a human being in pursuit of the "Truth" of existence.

Conclusion

Tagore's poetry that began with the passionate lines of *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*, over time, moved on to the ultimate realization of the relationship between Man and God. His poems reflect his view that humans are the manifestations of the divine, and also his understanding and bent for the idea of universalism. At the twilight of his poetry, in the collection, *Sesher Kobita*, one could observe everything drawing to a close, as the content of his poetry seemed to be bidding farewell to his readers.

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