
MYSTICISM IN RABINDRA NATH TAGORE'S GITANJALI

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In the Bengali poems of RabindraNath Tagore, we find that common emotional appeal is united in a very fine music and rhythm. This music and rhythm is almost unconceivable to Western ears. It has metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelly. He writes with a simplicity that makes his writings appear the most natural thing in the world. It will not be an exaggeration to say no Western poet has done precisely this way. Not Milton as he is far too grandiose for the human heart. Not Wordsworth as he is at once too subtle and too ponderous. And not the great mystic poets of the West, for they are the poets of mystics. Not Crashaw and not Francis Thompson, nor Henry Vaughn nor Blake at his simplest. However Dante and St. John of the Cross, stand very near to this great mystic poet of Bengal. For the songs of the "Gitanjali," the purest of pure poetry are sung all over his native province. Written in Bengali language, they are sung in the churches of the BramaSomaj. We have not seen any of those great mystic poems of the West sung in church. Even if we do, they will not be understood by the congregation.

To the Western mind, there is a gulf fixed between the common human heart and Transcendent Being. That is why the devotional poetry of the West, with the exception of the works of the great mystics and the seers, is so unsatisfying. Another reason for this is its being written by people who are not poets. Also it is not supremely devotional. It does not directly deal with the Transcendent. We may be soothed by the assurance of atonement but our finer metaphysical hunger is left unappeased. Tagore bridges the great gulf by supreme simplicity in the songs of Divine Love from "Gitanjali":

The simplicity, restraint and austerity in Tagore's writing are far away from efflorescence and sensual imagery. Extreme subtlety of feeling and of rhythm is evident in his writings. It may be because East is subtler than the West, and of all Eastern races the Bengali is the subtlest. The subtlety of the poet makes for transparenance and simplicity. As a mystic, he is bound to be a symbolist. His phrase and his rhythm is infallibly the most perfect medium of his symbol and of his thought. He has incomparable unity of rhythm and language, of language and idea.

That sky there above us, O Zarathustra, seen from afar looks like a palace built of heavenly substance and shining over the earth; it is like a garment inlaid with stars.

Gitanjali is a book of songs whose pages are tinged with a light like the sky shown to Zarathustra. The book has won for its author Nobel Prize in literature over his audience here and we still return to it as to a first love. We found in these "song-offerings," an accent that is natural as our own hopes and

fears. They took up our half-formed wishes and gave them a voice. They rose inevitably from the life, the imagination, and the desires of him who wrote. They were the vehicle of a great emotion that surprised its imagery not only in the light that was like music, the rhythm that was in the waves of sound itself and the light- waves of the sun; but in the rain, the wet road, the lonely house, the great wall that shuts in the creature-self, the shroud of dust, the night black as a black-stone.

To explain the true incidence of song is always lost endeavour. All one can do is to say the lyric fire is there for those who can and care to receive it; and for the others, of what use to try to convince them? You cannot force a reader to like Shelley, or understand the innocence of Blake, any more than you can make an unmusical ear delight in "Aderyn Pur" or the original air of "Lhude sing Cuccu."

The English notion of Indian religious poetry is that it lies too far aloof from the hopes and fears to pass the test of art of English men and women. But what strikes one in reading Gitanjali is that the heavenly desire is qualified by an almost childlike dependence on the affections, and at times by an almost womanly tenderness. Its pages carry on an old tradition, yet strike the new emotion of a race, in a mode that is very real, with all its ideality. In the second page of Gitanjali, the poet gives us the key to his melody and to its control of the two elements when he makes his confession:

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony, and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

If The Gardener is the song-book of youth and the romance of the young lover who is satisfied with a flower for itself, or for its token of love's happiness, to be realised on earth in a day or night, Gitanjali is the book of the old lover who is in love with heavenly desire. He cannot be satisfied, but must always wish to transcend life and sensation through death, and attain not Nirvana in the sense of extinction, but Brahma Vihara, the joy eternal, the realisation of love in its last abode:

Thou art the sky, and thou art the nest as well. Oh, thou beautiful, there in the nest it is 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.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows

deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.

But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form, nor colour, and never never a word.

"I understand quite well, mother nature, that after such a long time you have again discovered me, your lost child. That is why you have taken me in your affectionate embrace, and have begun to sing your imposing music, rich in harmony and melody. That is why the gentle zephyr rushes towards me and embraces me repeatedly; that is why the sky in its exuberance of joy showers the very morning itself on my head; that is why the clouds from the eastern gate of the horizon gaze on my face so intently; that, again, is why the entire universe is beckoning me again and again to hide my head in her bosom, hers alone."

Whenever they experience anything supernatural, the Hindus are wont to turn ascetic. Prince Gautama heard the call, left the world and all that it held for him, became an ascetic, and afterwards the Buddha; ChaitanyaDev heard the call, left his dear mother, wife and child to gain salvation by renouncing the world. But Rabindranath heard the call and clung to the world more closely than ever, and his attachment for the world ripened into selfless love for the oppressed and suffering millions of famine-stricken India. He sings in Gitanjali:

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will hear thy delight.

Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love."

The contrast between the idea of renunciation and the non-dualistic philosophy he most exquisitely brings out in a poem which he thus translates:

"At midnight the would-be ascetic announced :

"This is the time to give up my home and seek for God. Ah, who has held me so long in delusion here?"

God whispered, T, but the ears of the man were stopped.

With a baby asleep at her breast lay his wife, peacefully sleeping on one side of the bed.

The man said, 'Who are ye that have fooled me so long?'

The voice said again, 'They are God,' but he heard it not.

The baby cried out in its dream, nestling close to its mother.

God commanded, 'Stop, fool, leave not thy home but still he heard not.

God sighed and complained, 'Why does my servant wander to seek me, forsaking me?'

Compare with this these lines of Walt Whitman, the American Vedantist :

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,

And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,

And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is."

So instead of being an ascetic Tagore became a pragmatist, for he held, as he holds today, that the "greater cannot be great without the small, the infinite is only the fullest expression of the finite, and that there is no liberation without love. Wherever love is there dwells the Infinite within the finite." What Henry James says of Browning may be said of Tagore with more appropriateness: "The meeting point of God and man is love. Love, in other words, is, for the poet, the supreme principle both of orality and religion. Love, once for all, solves that contradiction between them, which, both in theory and in practice, has embarrassed the world for so many ages. Love is the sublimest conception attainable by man; a life inspired by it is the most perfect form of goodness he can conceive; therefore, love is, at the same moment, man's moral ideal, and the very essence of Godhood. A life actuated by love is divine, whatever other limitations it may have. Such is the perfection and glory of this emotion, when it has been translated into a self-conscious motive and become the energy of an intelligent will, that it lifts him who owns it to the sublimest heights of being.

"For the loving worm within its clod,

Were diviner than a loveless God

Amid his world, I will dare to say.'"

Holding that the soul finds its fullest expression in work well done, for, as Carlyle says: "All true work is religion," he thus writes in Sadhana : "It is only when we wholly submit to the bonds of truth that we fully gain the joy of freedom. And how? As does the string that is bound to the harp. When the harp is truly strung, when there is not the slightest laxity in the strength of the bond, then only does music result; and the string transcending itself in its melody finds at every chord its true freedom. It is because it is bound by such hard and fast rules on the one side that it can find this range of freedom in music on the other."

Rabindranath Tagore has been able in his poems and other writings to preserve with uncommon felicity and naturalness of effect the balance between the Sanskrit and the Bengali idioms. He has the instinctive sense which warns him off the schoolman's word and the intimidating note of pedantry, and in Gitanjali the Bengali tongue has been carried to its most forcible and melodious pitch. It has the quality begotten of the inherent music of a tongue, which we find in the best of Elizabethans, who wrote with a true regard for the spoken word and its clear enunciation, using all those associations of word behind word, and thought within thought, to which Coleridge alludes in a famous passage of the Biographia.

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