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Gitanjali: A Distant Conception Made an Up- Close Perception

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Introduction- This paper studies how *Gitanja li* transcended cultural boundaries carried and passed on to the European reader glimpses of Advaita and such great philosophy.

In an era that continuously tended to manufacture a global culture under the spell cast by an invisible hegemonic force, it was really hard for individual cultures to survive. Many of them began to dissolve into the ever expanding sea of a synthetic merger of cultures. Many others were smudged out helplessly in the growing current of 'pseudomodernisation'. Everything that was old, and own, was left with utter negligence in going with the current, seeking after the new. It had been the persistent scenario in the past couple of decades. Though, of late, signs of hope are visible, this is what prevailed in India too In a desperate endeavour to make an absolutely alien culture and way of living their own, large sections of the populace did let fall into oblivion the traditions and culture. It is terribly unfortunate for a country like India having the oldest and superlatively supreme of cultures in the world to have to tolerate such self-destructing tendencies. Not that there are no serious endeavours going on to study and personalize our culture and most importantly what has been the very essence our existence, our philosophy and elaborate discourse on the truth and true spiritual knowledge treasured in the sacred texts. But those attempts turn increasingly trying even for Indians for such deep is the imprint that the modernized culture has left upon us.

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Gitanjali: A Distant Conception Made an Up-Close Perception

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I. Introduction

This paper studies how *Gitanjali* transcended cultural boundaries carried and passed on to the European reader glimpses of Advaita and such great philosophy.

In an era that continuously tended to manufacture a global culture under the spell cast by an invisible hegemonic force, it was really hard for individual cultures to survive. Many of them began to dissolve into the ever expanding sea of a synthetic merger of cultures. Many others were smudged out helplessly in the growing current of 'pseudo-modernisation'. Everything that was old, and own, was left with utter negligence in going with the current, seeking after the new. It had been the persistent scenario in the past couple of decades. Though, of late, signs of hope are visible, this is what prevailed in India too. In a desperate endeavour to make an absolutely alien culture and way of living their own, large sections of the populace did let fall into oblivion the traditions and culture. It is terribly unfortunate for a country like India having the oldest and superlatively supreme of cultures in the world to have to tolerate such self-destructing tendencies. Not that there are no serious endeavours going on to study and personalize our culture and most importantly what has been the very essence our existence, our philosophy and elaborate discourse on the truth and true spiritual knowledge treasured in the sacred texts. But those attempts turn increasingly trying even for Indians for such deep is the imprint that the modernized culture has left upon us. Of course it is much easier for an Indian to understand them than a foreigner, for the former has them in his blood.It is naturally difficult for someone belonging to a different cultural domain to understand aspects of a cultural text. More important than the spatial distance is the temporal difference. Yet from late nineteenth century there has been an evident interest among the European scholars to know something of the philosophy unique to India and serious work was going on in this direction. They tried to decode, as what it appeared, an encrypted discourse. Their work, their study of Vedas, Upanishads, especially translations by Max Muller and others not only failed to touch any true matter of significance or their essence, but also in turn served to mislead those, including Indians, who honestly wanted to learn of such texts. It was ridiculous on their part to expect a foreigner to understand, in the true sense, texts deeply rooted in India's culture and explain it for them .Hence Indian philosophy is conceived by the typical British reader an alien, less comprehensible body of knowledge explained in English (by books of most Indian scholars too) with excessive use of jargons and clichés, both of which only added to the ambivalence. Even a maestro of expressive precision in fine English could not work wonders. It was in this context that we should consider Tagore's prose translation of his original poetry in Bengali, *Gitanjali* got published in 1912.It contained 103 poems or as it is named 'song offerings' to God, rendered in a poetic prose.

W.B. Yeats in his introduction to *Gitanjali* puts to contrast the huge mass of meaningless literature written in English to Tagore's work,

> These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life.

Yeats's opinion mirrors the typical effect of Tagore on the western reader,

> I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me.

Yeats speaks further of what he understood of the uniqueness of India through Tagore,

> A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.

It is true not only for the English readers but for Indians. Every common man in general, thinks of spirituality and concerning concepts not as their cup of tea. They realize those to be connected to life experience and are moved only when some great poet establishes that connection.

Gitanjali was nothing new in India's literary tradition. For, right from the epics, we find all great works filling the reader with fresh meaning of life. It is

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said - *Na anrushihkavih* (He who is not a Rishi is not a poet). There are different stages in the development of one's individual self. A Rishi dwells on such higher realms of spiritual development, beyond the realm of poetic imagination where one tends to diverge and disperse, there are stages where some convergence is first at sight. True poetry is that comes from such convergence and not what we generally refer to.

One is readily struck of the significance of *Gitanjali* when Yeats confesses how his understanding of Indian civilization changed with his acquaintance with Tagore's poetry.

> We write long books where no page perhaps has any quality to make writing a pleasure, being confident in some general design, just as we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics---all dull things in the doing---while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity.

One can by himself experience in this work as a delightful perception, diverse spiritual states that our great texts talk about. Conceptions of high philosophical truth like that Advaita envisages-*Aham Brahmasmi* is brought so near to us like a real perception,

> 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.
>
> My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said `Here art thou!'
>
> The question and the cry `Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance `I am!'

Note how simple like real experience Tagore has put the otherwise complex concepts about human existence put forward by our philosophies.

> Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.
>
> This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new...
>
> Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill
>
> O Fool, try to carry thyself upon thy own shoulders! O beggar, to come beg at thy own door!
>
> Leave all thy burdens on his hands who can bear all, and never look behind in regret.
> Thy desire at once puts out the light from the lamp it touches with its breath. It is unholy---take not thy gifts through its unclean hands. Accept only what is offered by sacred love.

Just as Greek mythology and philosophy has influenced, stood as a foundation and framework for, Western literature, our philosophical texts have always been, of no doubt, an omnipresent undercurrent of Indian Literature. Great literature in India, as a rule, has had high philosophical disposition melted and merged up in a perfect mould of literature. Unlike many literary endeavours that we have in English literature that merely takes us on a ride, true literature is that which enlightens the reader, makes him live out whatever is told and moreover transforms his life with a newly born awareness. *Gitanjali* belongs to such canon of literature.

For English literature *Gitanjali* showed a grand new path, setting a perfect example of how literature should be. The English reader had been quite accustomed with ornamental, romanticised treatment of the superficial and the trivial. Before him Tagore leaves *Gitanjali*- a text that fulfils a purpose, that gives the reader a meaning, and a sense of convergence not only for the reader but for English literature leading to a point where it should truly converge.

Tagore himself speaks of true poetry in these lines from *Gitanjali,*

> From the words of a poet men take what meanings please them; yet their last meaning points to thee (to God)."

Hence the real greatness of this work of Tagore is not that it won him Nobel prize for literature in 1923, but that it made the European reader feel for the first time: well, India was not a continent so distant after all, and Indian philosophy not something out of reach. For Tagore could bring so near to their perception some conceptions that appeared so dry, strange and complex and further some glimpses of spiritually ecstatic experiences.

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