

THE NOBEL *GITANJALI* FOR A NOBLE CAUSE: ROLE OF POETRY IN PROMOTING PEACE

Pronema Bagchi

Phd Scholar

Department Of English,

Savitribai Phule Pune University, India.

Abstract

A devout mystic like Rabindranath Tagore subtly represented love for peace, harmony and humanity in his Nobel Prize winning book 'Gitanjali: Song Offerings.' The book which is a confluence of cultures and abode of peace has a universal appeal through poetry. His ideas place the creative individual at the centre of the quest for knowledge. His mature poetry not only transcends from nationalism to universalism but also prepares the masses to attain eternal peace and containment in life. The poet left no stone unturned to encourage the crowds to experience harmony amidst the wild wars and alienating cries of instability. Delight and direction being the purpose of Tagore's poetry, he prepared a platform for the human souls to perform their duties with dignity. The collection of poems in Gitanjali has a deeper conviction of the sense of brotherhood as the underlying cause of uniting the diverse races in the world. The present study is therefore sought to analyze the role of literature in promoting peace in general and locate the dialogic mode of these poems in particular.

Keywords: *humanity, universalism, mysticism, brotherhood, dialogism...*

THE NOBEL *GITANJALI* FOR A NOBLE CAUSE: ROLE OF POETRY IN PROMOTING PEACE

Pronema Bagchi

‘Greatness of mind becomes an object of love only when the power at work in it itself has a noble character’ (Karl Jaspers). Rabindranath Tagore was one such noble heart who always capitulated to reason. Not only India but the whole world reveres Tagore’s generous, universal soul, open to the problems of his own land and stressing on the ideal of a casteless world devoid of irrational discrimination between one human being and his fellow men. As one of the finest nature poets, Tagore was one of the first to argue for a humane educational system, which was in touch with the environment and aimed at overall development of the personality. It continues to offer a flexible and creative model of education within multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural situation. He is, in modern Indian literature, an explicit poet and an exceptional writer. His style is simple and easy to understand. His pen followed the words coming straight out of his heart and entranced thousands. It was Tagore who once affirmed, ‘He who wishes freedom for himself, yet fears freedom of his neighbor, is not worthy of freedom’ (The UNESCO Courier: Rabindranath Tagore A Universal Voice, 1961).

Freedom of thought is indeed a virtue that very few men possess. And Rabindranath Tagore’s writings epitomize this virtue in its true spirit. His literary works in general and poems in particular are lucid, fluent and full of ease. They are grounded in the mundane and yet have an inbuilt quality to transcend reality. As Philip Sidney rightly remarks poetry to be a ‘speaking picture’ that aims to teach and delight its readers, similarly, most of Tagore’s poems are pleasurable and utilitarian too. Undoubtedly, Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his book ‘Gitanjali’ or ‘Song Offerings’, a collection of 103 verses, in 1913. The offering done through the medium of songs in *Gitanjali*, reinstating the inevitable bond that man shares with nature, gives a new glimpse of finding harmony in diversity and celebrating the plurality amidst chaos. May Sinclair opines that the poems in this volume were reflected of a united emotional appeal made

‘in a music and a rhythm many degrees finer than Swineburne’s – a music and rhythm almost inconceivable to western ears – with the metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelley; and that with a simplicity that makes this miracle appear the most natural thing in the world.’

The Song Offerings are indeed, exquisite combination of poesy, philosophy and adoration.

It is the essence of the form of poetry to reform and reshape meaning that can further the process of communication between diverse languages, cultures or communities. The conditions in the past, when *Gitanjali* was composed and the conditions in the present, demand the book to be revisited in a new light. As the context has changed but the feelings have not, the poems are relevant even today; and also because Tagore’s modernity and philosophy (in the Song Offerings) lies very much in current thinking agenda of the youth. The way youngsters feel lucky to contribute their talent in varied celebrations of life, in the same way Tagore considered himself ‘blessed’ by contributing his music to this ‘world’s festival’ (Song 16). He asked people to stop worshipping in lonely dark corners ‘with temple doors all shut’ and commanded them to stand beside those who toil in sun and shower (Song 11). There seems to be no existence of ‘deliverance’ when the supreme power himself is bound by his creation and we, by our endeavors. So it befits the culture of mankind to persevere and share the burden of our fellow human beings to restore balance. Tagore’s poem ‘Dungeon’ (Song 29) depicts the false image man creates around himself for the society. Man seems to build ‘a wall all around’ and plasters it with great pride. This indeed is a symbol of his self-centered attitude that nurtures hatred and disbelief. He becomes so obsessed with this self-image that in the process, he loses sight of his brethren and goes far away from compassion and kindness. This description is in tune with what we witness today; people are severely indulged in their own affairs with hearts parched up and minds blind with desire. In such circumstances, Tagore humbly requests the Almighty, ‘lord of silence, peace and rest’ to prevent loss of grace, ignorance and ‘shower mercy’ (Song 39) for the awakening of souls.

Another very important agenda for Rabindranath Tagore was to awaken the country from the bonds of caste, creed and prejudices; and thereafter, from the shackles of slavery. With regard to this belief, he composed a well-renowned poem, ‘Where the Mind is Without Fear’ (Song 35). The poet makes an appeal for free knowledge, ‘clear stream of reason’, ‘(a) world that

has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls' and a fearless mind that is 'led forward into ever-widening thought and action.' These stimulating words throw light on another significant facet of Tagore. For him, too much fixation on nationalism was an indication to annihilation of world peace as pride is never ever-lasting. He wanted his countrymen to be content, embrace humility and give up aggression. Instead of constructing narrow demarcations leading to broader physical and mental separations, Tagore flagged for the congregation of the East and the West. He worked very hard to channelize streams of nationalism to the direction of universalism. According to the poet, peace could be achieved only when diverse nations were free to evolve in their distinct characteristics, yet attached to the stem of humanity. He ardently believed in a multidirectional flow of knowledge from which, oneness of truth could be perceived, sustaining the universe.

Such were the noble thoughts of Tagore which got popularized by some groups and rejected by some as a utopian concept. But criticism never put him down; in fact, it impelled him to come up with an innovative concept of 'Shantiniketan,' an alternative path for peace. The ideology was to start a cultural and educational hub amidst the natural surrounding; where knowledge can be acquired in the most rewarding manner. Due to man's detachment from nature, Tagore once commented,

'Man must realize the wholeness of his existence, his place in the infinite; he must know that hard as he may strive he can never create his honey within the cells of his hive; for the perennial supply of his life food is outside their walls.'

It was in his 1918 essay 'The Centre of Indian Culture' in which he articulated his vision of *Visva-Bharati*, with a goal to find areas of commonality among various enterprises. Learning was never considered to be a commodity in ancient India. Tagore believed that if a child's sense of awe was awakened at an early age through nature, art, music, dance and the presence of the guru, a spiritual appreciation would develop spontaneously. Hence, in this centre, a co-ordinated study of all cultures was provided. This understanding helped in shaping a new identity of the Earth being perceived as one canopy, sheltering diverse races and providing abode to the citizens of the whole world linked together on humanitarian grounds. This kind of an ennobling

experience further helped in constructing the concept of ‘vasudeva kutumbakam’ (by other scholars of India), the portal through which tranquility could be accessed.

Rabindranath Tagore’s songs in *Gitanjali* follow a structure that is related to birth, life and passing away. Although towards the end, the poems circle more around the concept of death and salvation, they are full of paradoxes. A dominant quality being contradiction to show the inconsistencies in life and thereby reinstate the dictum of change being the only constant thing, Tagore writes, ‘I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight’ (Song 73). He further mentions in song 96, ‘I caught sight of him that is formless’ and ‘now I am eager to die into the deathless’ (Song 100). He also calls life and death as ‘twin brothers dancing over the wide world’ (Song 58). But throughout his poems, life is seen as a holy offering and a never-ending search for the divine being that is omnipresent yet, unnoticeable. The songs are heavily loaded with imagery that appeals to all five senses and compels you to visualize the universe through the magic of his words and the charm of his rhythm. Along these lines what the readers also witness is concrete optimism – they are drawn to the fact that wherever there is darkness, light will automatically follow; all we have to do is to wait patiently and learn to admire the silence. Again through the paradoxical strain, the poet talks of the cosmos wherein ‘swells up the music of toneless strings’ (Song 100). This underlying belief brings him very close to Keats who also talked of unheard melodies being sweeter than the heard ones. At the crux of all romantic poets, there were similar archetypes that repeatedly projected appreciation of the golden silence in nature and the hunt for an eternal home through the image of thirsty travelers having an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Tagore’s versatility encompasses myriad emotions. Culture is entwined in the context of his works. The valley outlines nature’s journey through the time; enter into a valley and you will enter nature’s vivid memory where every new season chants a different melody about what happens with the passing time...joy, sorrow or chaos. This is the kind of mind we humans should have but sadly, we are too enthralled by the covetous world to even notice it.

‘The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.’ (Song 69)

This zest in Tagore's writings has a different charisma- it shows how human beings and nature are inter-connected harmonically. Human nature fluctuates but can the nature fluctuate every now and then? As mere readers or interpreters, we can decode the poems the way we want but as teachers of literature, it is bestowed upon us to show how Tagore's works are a beacon of light and hope for the chaotic world that is today. By having discussions on photos of natural beauty and poster presentations on the theme of the Song Offerings, we should engrain in our students, the ideal of learning from nature. While reading the poems, we can tell them to note down the clusters of images or their figurative meanings and also pay close attention to aural and rhythmic features of the stanzas. Having reinforced the idea of how Tagore urged man to reharmonize with nature, it will then be our duty to elicit responses, reviews and comments from students on the poet's ideals and principles. The students can further be asked to role-play or simulate situations on togetherness, taking inspiration from his portrayal of nature with all its 'flowers' and 'thorns.' In addition to this, we must encourage the students to participate in debates or group discussions on broader topics like unity, society and humanity.

Only when the students feel persuaded to read other works of Tagore and voluntarily appreciate the unchained melody of his poems or the depiction of sublime and peaceful rhythm of life, the teaching of literature would have served its purpose. This is the dialogic essence of the Song Offerings that are still in conversation with the present generation and will guarantee to generate meaningful dialogues in the future. And it is none other than Tagore who wrote poems based on classes and masses respecting unity in diversity, for the local and universal involving both pleasure and pain and not only for recreation but also for education. Therefore poetry, whether didactic or dialogic, does share a means-end relationship with all its receptors. W. B. Yeats, in the introductory note to *Gitanjali*, mentions,

'The work of a supreme culture, they [Tagore's lyrics] appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from the learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and the noble.' (1916, xiv)

Yeats, along with his other western scholars, found the Song Offerings intensely human and spiritual – incorporating the divine within the physical. Although Tagore’s childlike innocence in literature was acknowledged where he made nature seem as near to him as they are to children, it appears that his mysticism is over-hyped by the world. The glorification could possibly be for the purpose of the Nobel but, his other ideas that are practical and timeless, are required to come in the forefront. And *Gitanjali*, the pride of our national literature, equally valued in world literature, must be an inevitable part of the curriculum design at different levels of education. To enhance the love for literature and culture among youth, they should be motivated to empower themselves with Tagore’s contributions towards Peace Building and Holistic Development.

Peace is a dynamic concept because it is related to human beings who have recurrent needs which are contextual, full of variety and urgency. A positive conception of peace would involve fundamental changes on the level of individual psyche and the nation-state as well. At both levels genuine peace requires the advent of a new selflessness, a willingness to see our fellow humans as our brothers and sisters and this can be best learnt from Mother Nature who poignantly synchronizes every creature’s livelihood and moves ahead by respecting the existence of each and every animate as well as inanimate object. This is the kind of peaceful living that is reiterated in *Gitanjali* and should also be inculcated in the students of literature and culture studies. Why talk of peace only during the wars? Why think about peace education post-devastation? If prevention is better than cure, we ought to imbibe and nurture the value of mutual understanding and co-operative learning right from primary school education. And literature being one of the effective tools to bring peace in the society, comprehensive information on works of Tagore should be imparted with a humanitarian outlook at all levels of academics. Finally, when it comes to appreciating nature and admiring its beautiful value of peaceful co-existence, poetry alone can do it in the best possible way. Therefore Tagore’s poetry, as a mouthpiece of our ethnicity, can play the role of a catalyst in bridging cultures and building bonds.

Works Cited :

- Advani, Anurag. 'The Patriotic Gurudev: Tagore's Nationalism'. Web. 31 July 2016.
<<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/colloquium/2014/11/05/the-patriotic-gurudev-rabindranath-tagores-dalliance-with-nationalism/>>
- Chandrasekharan, K. 'World Peace arid Rabindranath Tagore'. *The Institute of Culture*, Transaction No. 8 (September 1951): 1-9. Web. 24 July 2016.
<<http://www.iiwcindia.org/transactions/transaction8.pdf>>
- Dingjun, Li and Hongsheng Yang. 'Peace through literature and culture: An oriental perspective'. *Peace, Literature and Art*, Vol. 1: 1-7. Web. 2 September 2016.
<<http://www.eolss.net/sample-chapters/c04/E1-39A-10-00.pdf>>
- Ghosh, G.K. *Language, Literature and National Integration*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1995. Print.
- Johnson, David and Johnson Roger. 'Essential Components of Peace Education'. *Theory into Practice*, 44.4 (2005): 280-292. Print.
- Kundu, Kalyan. 'Tagore and World Peace'. *Asiatic Volume*, 4.1 (2010). Web. 16 August 2016.
<<http://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/article/view/416/391>>
- Mishra, Loknath. *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 2009. Print.
- Mudegaonkar, Ganesh. 'Role of Teacher for Peace Education'. *Teacher Education Browser*, 2.2 (2013): 44-49. Print.
- Mustaja, Gheorghe. 'Rabindranath Tagore Invites Man to Reharmonize Himself with Nature'. *International Journal of Communication and Research*, 4.4 (2014): 353-358. Web. 25 August 2016. <http://www.ijcr.eu/articole/210_08%20Gheorghe%20MUSTA-%20RABINDRANATH%20TAGORE%20INVITES%20MAN%20TO%20REHARMONIZE%20HIMSELF%20WITH%20NATURE.pdf>
- Pound, Ezra. 'Tagore's Poems'. *Poetry*, 1.3 (1912): 92-94. Web. 1 July 2016.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20569670>>
- Salomon, Gavriel and Nevo Baruch. *Peace Education, The Concept, Principles and Practices Around the World*. New York: Psychology Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 2012. Print.
- Sen, Amartya. 'Tagore and his India'. Web. 30 August 2016.
<http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-article.html>

Sinclair, May. 'The Gitanjali: Or Song-Offerings of Rabindranath Tagore'. *The North American Review*, 197.69 (May 1913): 659-676. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd., 2003. Print.

_____. 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Universal Voice'. *UNESCO Courier: A Window Open to the World*, 14.12 (December 1961): 5-27. Web. 9 July 2016.

<<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000643/064331eo.pdf>>

_____. 'The Role of Education in Peace Building: Literature Review'. *United Nations Children Fund*, New York (May 2011): 6-45. Web. 15 August 2016.

<http://www.unicef.org/education/files/EEPCT_Peacebuilding_LiteratureReview.pdf>

<<http://topfamousquotes.com/quotes-about-noble-character/>>

