

Gitanjali: Main Themes

Expression of Permanent Human Impulses

Gitanjali means *song offering* and in the words of Dr. Radha Krishnan "the poems of 'the *Gitanjali*' are offerings of the finite to the Infinite". It is poetry of the highest order, poetry which very nearly approaches the condition of prophecy. In the Words of T.S. Eliot it is great poetry which, "expresses in perfect language permanent human impulses", and thus brings strange consolation to the human heart. In such works poetry becomes a revelation, *an incantation, that flashes open the inner reality*. It is poetry in which men converse with eternity.

The Four Basic Themes

As a matter of fact *Gitanjali* is a great work of art, and as such a number of themes and ideas are woven together to make up its complex texture. Its hundred and odd lyrics explore (1) the relationship of God and the human soul; (2) of God and Nature; (3) of Nature and the human soul, and; (4) of the individual soul and humanity. These four themes are not kept strictly separate, they frequently run into each other, fuse and mingle.

The Theme of Devotion: Originality of Treatment

The central theme of *The Gitanjali* is devotional; it expresses the yearning of the devotee for re-union with the divine. It is in the tradition of the devotional poetry of India, but it finds a new and original treatment. That is why *Gitanjali* created such a sensation in the West. When it was first published in English, Abbe Bremond declared that pure poetry aspires to a condition of prayer. "Such poetry is half a prayer from below and half a whisper from above: the prayer evoking the response, or the whisper provoking the prayer, and always prayer and whisper chiming into song." *Gitanjali* is full of such poetry, as in the opening song:

*Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.
This frail vessel thou emptyest again and again,
and fillest it ever with fresh life.*

The human body is the temple of the soul, the human soul is the temple of God. The human soul has no significance unless it is inhabited or "filled" by the Supreme. Birth and death are but the filling and the emptying of the soul by the Supreme Soul and the individual—insignificant as he may seem to be—in this way partakes of God's endless life, His immortality. Hence sings Tagore,

Humanism—Individual and Society

Along with the relationship of the individual soul and God, the relationship of the individual soul with other men is also explored. Tagore's humanism is voiced forcefully in a number of lyrics. God is not to be found in the temple but with the lowliest of low. Idolatry and blind worship are castigated—

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

The tiller, the stone-breaker, the honest labourer working in the spirit of the *Gita*,—God is with them. The idea of 'escape' from world's duties is condemned by the poet:

Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.

"If some people are blind and seek Him in the wrong places or in the wrong way, others are crushed by their own cowardice and dare not seize the freedom that would end their misery." —(Srinivasa Iyengar)

My debts are large, my failures great, my shame secret and heavy; yet when I come to ask for my good, I quake in fear lest my prayer be granted.

Says Iyengar, "Endless indeed is the waywardness of man, endless the varieties of human wretchedness; slavery and misery form numberless patterns, and faith from below and grace from above are needed to end them once and for all. In what is probably the most often quoted of the songs in *Gitanjali*, Tagore articulates a prayer for his country's redemption, and many are the schools in India today where it is recited by the boys at the beginning of each day's session":

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; etc.

Man, God and Nature

In a number of poems devotional poetry mingles with the poetry of nature, poetry in which the poet explores the relationship of God and Nature. Nature is the vast arena across which the Divine and the human eternally seek each other. "In the aching yearnings of the soul, joy is touched with pain and pain is transmuted into joy as mystical Union takes place." A recurrent thought is that God's love and joy ever stream through Nature's rapturous forms to entice the soul; to realize the mystery of that revelation is to be united with Him. "Indeed there is no end to the amazing diversity of the

central note of absolute unison that takes in the three worlds, God, Nature and Man. Their expression is as richly varied as the sense of dynamic harmony is profound. And let us not overlook a significant fact. This vision of love and joy and harmony has been wrestled for and won by a poet who had passed, not long back, through the worst calamities that flesh is heir to, social calumny, ridicule and insult, death and bereavement. The man has suffered. The poet conquers".

—(Mukerji)

A vision steeped in wonder, mystery and boundless joy fuses the human body and spirit and Nature into a harmony. An exalting rapture breathes into a vision of timeless unison—physical as well as spiritual—with Nature's forms and phenomena; into the primitive bond of creative unity with the universe; into the sense of oneness with lights and waves, with flowers and fragrance, with the starry spheres. They blend and merge into a paean of joy and wonder, into an affirmation welling from inner spiritual apprehension. And the poet who wrote these poems of love, joy and harmony, had lost earlier a wife, a daughter and a son. To quote the words of **Romain Rolland**, "in *the Gitanjali* the poet ranges over the immensities of time and space, the eternal and the temporal, and probes into the mysteries of life, of man, and of nature, and the poet's vision is, "free, vast and serene".

The Theme of Death

Quite naturally, towards the end of his "song-offering", the poet's thoughts turn to death, and the theme of death finds a most varied treatment. To the poet, Death is not an object of fear. Rather, he welcomes it joyfully, for it is the gateway through which alone union with the eternal is possible. This creation of myriad colours and shapes is the curtain that separates the poet from his maker, and it is death alone which rends asunder the veil and ushers in the poet in the presence of the divine. The poet, therefore, welcomes this king of the fearful night. It is a guest who must be welcomed with an open hand. Death may be terrible to look at, but it leads the human soul to its tryst with the Eternal.

Death is not the end or cessation of life; it is the renewal of life. In *Gitanjali-74* life is spoken of as the pitcher, which is filled again and through Death. There is a constant rhythm of birth-death-re-birth, and Death is only a phase of this rhythm. Death is the servant of the Divine, His messenger, whom the poet will welcome when he comes, and whose call he will obey. Death is the last fulfilment of life; life is consummated and fulfilled in death as the Bride is fulfilled through her union, with the bridegroom (*Gitanjali-91*). In *Gitanjali-92* we are told that it is only through death that spiritual truths can be realised and one can see into the heart of things. Death is necessary for a realisation of the value of meanest lives. The poet, therefore, goes to meet death with wedding garlands round his neck, as a bridegroom goes to meet his bride (*Gitanjali-97*). Death is welcome for it alone can take him to the great audience hall where the Divine sits in all His majesty and glory (*Gitanjali-100*).

Infinite in their variety are the tunes which the poet plays on a single harp.