

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*

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Gitanjali: Song Offerings

- ▶ Rabiranth Tagore's most famous collection of poems is *Gitanjali*, a volume which enabled him to capture the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1913.
- ▶ Till 2020, it is the first and last time when an Indian was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature.
- ▶ This book is an anthology of 103 poems, but the book here will be discussed in a cursory manner, rather than descriptive.
- ▶ Instead of defining all poems, much emphasis will be only on two poems "O Where is Light" and "When My Play was with Thee."
- ▶ Poetry in these small poems reflects the "life affirmation" along with a life full of colours where there is mystery and melancholy.
- ▶ This religious orientated book creates a soul-spirit that WB Yeats "have dreamed" life long, as he mentioned in the Introduction to *Gitanjali*.



Verse 27

LIGHT, OH WHERE is the light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!

There is the lamp but never a flicker of a flame,-is such thy fate, my heart! Ah, death were better by far for thee!

Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night.

The sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless. I know not what this is that stirs in me,-I know not its meaning.

A moment's flash of lightning drags down a deeper gloom on my sight, and my heart gropes for the path to where the music of the night calls me.

Light, oh where is the light! Kindle it with the burning fire of desire! It thunders and the wind rushes screaming through the void. The night is black as a black stone. Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy life.



Verse 97

WHEN MY play was with thee I never questioned who thou wert. I knew nor shyness nor fear, my life was boisterous.

In the early morning thou wouldst call me from my sleep like my own comrade and lead me running from glade to glade.

On those days I never cared to know the meaning of songs thou sangest to me. Only my voice took up the tunes, and my heart danced in their cadence.

Now, when the playtime is over, what is this sudden sight that is come upon me? The world with eyes bent upon thy feet stands in awe with all its silent stars.



Critique

- ▶ These poems echoed Tagore's spiritualism in general and India's in particular.
- ▶ Poems are dedicated to the ultimate and only source of creation, the God, the Almighty.
- ▶ Thus, they can easily be called mystic poems and hailed Tagore as a mystic poet. Such trait put in in league with Kahlil Gibran, a contemporary of Tagore as a religious poet.



Appreciation

- ▶ To Yeats, *Gitanjali* was a "work of a supreme culture" wherein "poetry and religion are the same thing."
- ▶ Herein Yeats found, "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination."
- ▶ However, all western writers, scholars or critics are not agree with Yeats. They, especially in twenty-first century, have different and opposite against *Gitanjali*.



Critique by Ian Jacks

- ▶ A writer of often past is often rejected by the modern critics, and such is fully applicable on Tagore when he is reviewed by Ian Jacks
- ▶ Jack writes, “I consulted two dictionaries of quotations, the Oxford and Penguin, to check the most memorable lines of this poet, novelist, essayist, song and short story writer. Not a single entry.”
- ▶ But, again he adds, “True, writers can't be ranked merely by their quotability, but Tagore's neglect is extraordinary.”
- ▶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/07/rabindranath-tagore-why-was-he-neglected>



Jacks Continue...

- ▶ Jacks make a critique of Tagore from an Oriental point of view which runs thus:
 - ▶ The success turned everyone's heads, including Tagore's. He became the most prominent embodiment of how the west wanted to see the east – sagelike, mystical, descending from some less developed but perhaps more innocent civilisation; above all, exotic. He looked the part, with his white robes and flowing beard and hair, and sometimes overplayed it. Of course, the truth was more complicated. The Tagores were among Kolkata's most influential families. They'd prospered in their role as middle men to the East India Company, whose servants named them Tagore because it was more easily pronounced than the Bengali title, Thakur. The west wasn't strange to them. Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath, owned steam tug companies and coal mines, became a favourite of Queen Victoria's and died in England (his tombstone is in Kensal Green cemetery). As for the poet himself, this was his third visit to London. On his first, he'd heard the music hall songs and folk tunes that he later incorporated into his distinctive musical genre, rabindra sangeet.
 - ▶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/07/rabindranath-tagore-why-was-he-neglected>
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Critique by JC

- ▶ JC went one step ahead and asks:
 - ▶ "Who reads Rabindranath Tagore now?" Any man dressed in a loose robe-like garment, and whose poetry, at least in English translation, comprises lines such as the one Jack quotes ("Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark"), is up, in Britain, for a laugh.
- ▶ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/08/rabindranath-tagore-rereading>



Francis Xavier Clooney

- ▶ I heard the rumors that Yeats may have "fixed" the poems of *Gitanjali* to suit the tastes of the West, so that it was really a Tagore-Yeats *Gitanjali* that won the Nobel Prize in 1913, a work rather distant from Tagore's Bengali original.
- ▶ <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/gitanjali-i-found-wisdom-lost-it-and-found-it-again>



Why to Read

- ▶ Although western scholar found fault with *Gitanjali*, yet it is unmatched achievement of an Indian, who is equally religious and mystic as other European or the writers from the west.
- ▶ The simplicity of language and readability make it easy for the new learner to inherit something of India's past.
- ▶ Poems are sacred and attuned with religiousness, that is nature of India.

