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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 04: Rabindranath Tagore

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Political Conditions

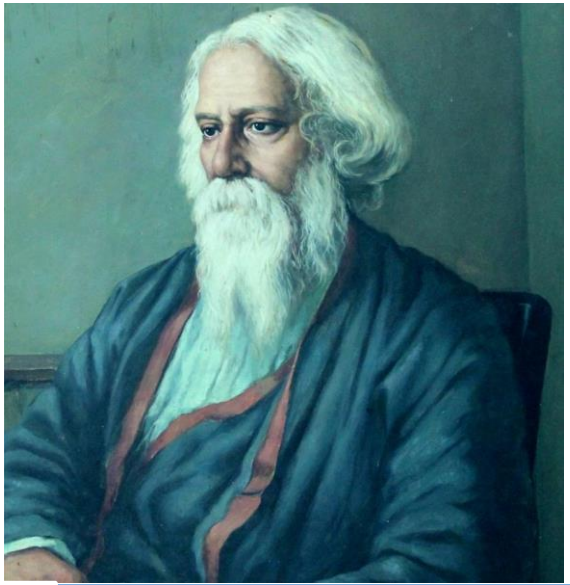
- Tumultuous political and social times for India.
- Tenacious hold of Western imperialism.
- Rise of Nationalism.

'Let our civilization take its firm stand upon its basis of social co-operation and not upon that of economic exploitation and conflict.'

The West 'has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine.'- Tagore

Introduction

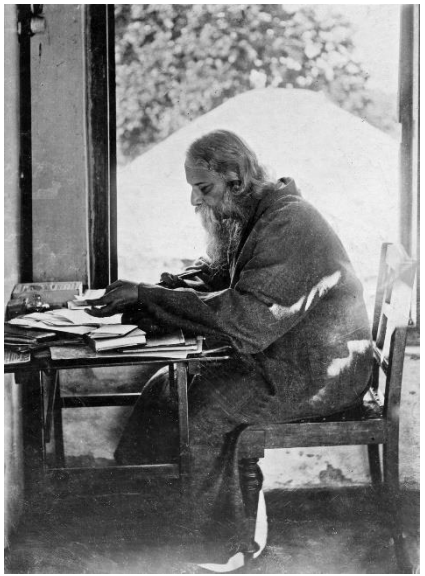
- Born on 6 May, 1861 in Calcutta.
- Began writing at 17, Visited England at 17.
- Influenced by English Romantics and great Victorians.
- Nobel Prize in 1913- First non-European
- 'The Great Sentinel'- Gandhi
- Bengal Renaissance.
- 1901 Ashram at *Shantiniketan*
- 1921 Established *Visva-Bharati* University
- Died on 7th August, 1941.



Poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, composer, painter, thinker, educationist, nationalist and internationalist

Introduction to the Poet

- Nationalism was on the rise.
- Tagore composed National Anthem
- He translated many works.
- He was interested in astronomy, biology and medicine: *Vishva-Parichay.*
- Tagore also wrote Haiku poems.
- Vedic and Rig-Vedic affiliations provided with Imageries.
- ‘Cosmic element poetically domestical.’
- Away from theocentric vision to scientific vision.



Tagore on His Knowledge of English

"I did not undertake this task in a spirit of reckless bravado; I simply felt an urge to recapture, through the medium of another language, the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in past days." (Letter to Indira)

Tagore's Major Works in English

- *The Gardener* presents both male and female point of view in love.
- *The Crescent Moon* delineates with both the outsider and insider's view of childhood.
- *The Child* was inspired by a passion play in Germany.
- A conventional allegory in which ' the Man of Faith' is killed during the night by his despairing and impatient followers.

Gitanjali (1912)
The Gardener (1913)
The Crescent Moon (1913)
Fruit Gatherings (1916)
Stray Birds(1916)
The Fugitive (1921)
Lovers Gift and Crossing (1918)
Fireflies (1928)
The Child (1931)
Poems(1942)

Some Memorable Lines

“Like a bird losing its way, I am caught.”

“ Free me from the bonds of sweetness, my love.”

“For a few fragrant hours, we two have been made immortal.”

“ I plucked your flower, O world!
I pressed it to my heart and the thorn pricked.
When the day waned and it darkened, I found that the flower had faded, but the pain remained.”

Characteristics of Tagore's Poetry

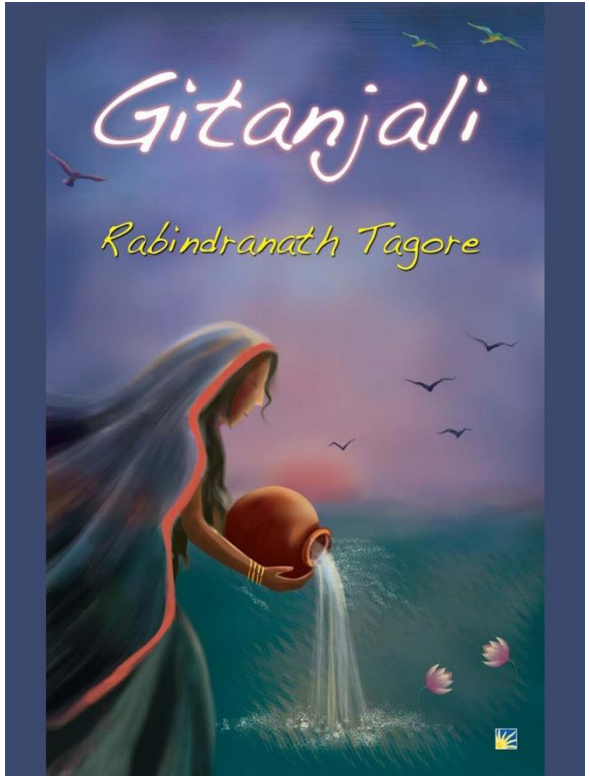


- Style bearing influences of:
  - Whitmanesque
  - Browningesque
- Poetry of childhood

  The Child (Victory to man, the new-born, the ever living)
- Themes
  - ✔ God, Nature, Love, Child, River, and Death
  - ✔ Steeped in Indian ethos

Synthesizing the East and the West

“ We must recognize that it is providential that the West has come to India. And yet someone must show the East to the West, and convince the West that the East has her contribution to make to the history of civilization. India is no beggar to the West. And yet even though the West may think she is, I am not for thrusting off western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have a deep association.” (Tagore, *Nationalism*)



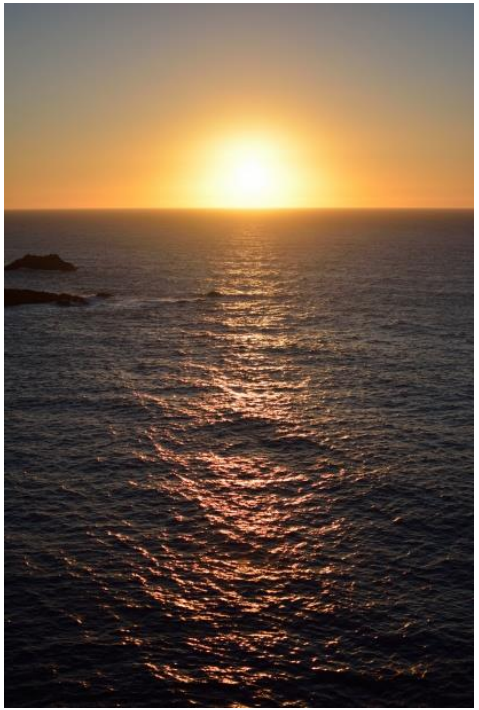
Gitanjali (1912)

- A gain in loss
- Theme of ‘devotion’
- Lyrical & Expressive
- Tone is philosophical, devotional and mystical
- Transcreation than translation
- Unconscious act

"There are moments when the translations surpass the original.” -Buddhadeva Bose

Characteristic Features of *Gitanjali*

- Semi-sonnets
- Philosophical
- Relationship between God and Devotee (Man)
- Is there a ray of hope?
- Shift from pessimism to determined optimism.



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

Poem No. 11

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!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Contd…

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.

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

Gitanjali, Poem 18

"Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens. Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?

In the busy moments of the noontide work I am with the crowd, but on this dark lonely day it is only for thee that I hope.

If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside, I know not how I am to pass these long, rainy hours.

I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of the sky, and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind."

Gitanjali, Poem 35

Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken
up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the
depths of truth;

Contd…

Where tireless striving
stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the
dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward
by thee into ever widening
thought and action-
into that heaven of freedom,
my father,
let my country awake.

Characteristic Features of the Poem 35

- Utopia of freedom
- Freedom from Mental slavery
- Seven subordinate clause with one main clause
- Restoring what Britishers had robbed from our country
- Patriotic yet universal



- Use of anaphora – ‘where’
- Integral Philosophy

“On the Seashore” (From *The Crescent Moon*)

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.
The infinite sky is motionless overhead
And the restless water is boisterous.
On the seashore of endless worlds
The children meet with shouts and dances.

Contd…

They build their houses with sand,
And they play with empty shells.
With withered leaves they weave
Their boats and smilingly float them
On the vast deep.
Children have their play on the
Seashore of worlds.

Contd...

They know not how to swim,
They know not how to cast nets.
Pearl-fishers dive for pearls,
Merchants sail in their ships,
While children gather pebbles
And scatter them again.
They seek not for hidden treasures,
They know not how to cast nets.

Contd…

The sea surges up with laughter,
And pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.
Death-dealing waves sing
Meaningless ballads to the children,
Even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle.
The sea plays with children,
And pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.

Contd…

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.
Tempest roams in the pathless sky,
Ships are wrecked in the trackless water,
Death is abroad and children play.
On the seashore of endless worlds is the
Great meeting of children.

Characteristic Features of the Poem, “On the Seashore”

- Evokes the innocence of the child in harmony with nature
- Contrast between the world of the adults and the children
- Imageries of Companionship
- Cosmological Existence
- Societal and human context
- Innocence vs. Danger
- Tagore witnessed the death of many. Perhaps he wants to preserve innocence



“The Wicked Postman”

WHY DO YOU sit there on the floor so quiet and silent, tell me, mother dear?
The rain is coming in through the open window, making you all wet, and you don't mind it.
Do you hear the gong striking four? It is time for my brother to come home from school.
What has happened to you that you look so strange?
Haven't you got a letter from father today?
I saw the postman bringing letters in his bag for almost everybody in the town.
Only, father's letters he keeps to read himself. I am sure the postman is a wicked man.
But don't be unhappy about that, mother dear.

Contd…

To-morrow is market day in the next village. You ask your maid to buy some pens and papers.
I myself will write all father's letters; you will not find a single mistake.
I shall write from A right up to K.
But, mother, why do you smile?
You don't believe that I can write as nicely as father does!
But I shall rule my paper carefully, and write all the letters beautifully big.
When I finish my writing, do you think I shall be so foolish as father and drop it into the horrid postman's bag?
I shall bring it to you myself without waiting, and letter by letter help you to read my writing.
I know the postman does not like to give you the really nice letters.

Summing up

- God is an entity embodying Sat, Chit and Ananda.
- Man must remain close to Nature.
- The finite world and the body are both real and good.
- Evil is but the part of the infinite perfection.
- Tagore is a poet ‘with a delicate sensibility deeply Indian’.
- Tagore’s style combines ‘ the feminine grace of poetry with the virile power of prose’.

Have you not heard his silent steps?
He comes, comes, ever comes.
Every moment and every age, every day
and every night he comes, comes, ever comes.

-(Tagore, Gitanjali, Poem no. 45)

Thank You

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