

LITERATURE AND IDENTITY
THE CONCEPT OF HIS 'SELF' AND 'IDENTITY', LYRICALLY EXPRESSED BY
RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN GITANJALI

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Abstract: Since 1910, Modernism and the theories of Individualism are re-constructing the society and the individual identities. As a part of this modern world, we tend to regard ourselves as unique individuals; that, our personal identity is irreplaceable and to which we alone have privileged access. We have stepped in an era where the subject-self has vanished and where the uniqueness of personal identity is on the verge of eclipse. This eventually formulate the most philosophical questions, "Is there any other way we can or we should perceive ourselves?" or "What are the sources of our belief in authenticity and what are its limits?" Literature gave a clear outlook to these different questions on the modern "self" through confessional writings, essays, literary portraiture, short stories, memoirs, philosophical discourse, and most importantly, through the poetry.

Introduction: The concept of identity differs with individuals. However, reading the literature of the text by greatest philosophers and visionaries can really help in molding a strong premise for interpretations. On surface level, it can be said that Tagore in his collection *Gitanjali*, captures the most transcend and mystic self and possibilities for communion of an individual with the Universe. The collection is basically a reflection of his soul, something with which he identifies himself.

Throughout his eighty-one years, he swung between public life and the seclusion of a poet. Overtime he would reinvent his creative identity in his work of art. His 'Self' was, however, not bereft of contradictions. Secular in public life, Tagore's poetry drew on Upanishadic philosophy underlying *Brahmanism*. His patriotism and love for his country flowed alongside his belief in a transnational humanist, universalism, the 'religion of man' for the future of civilization. The experiences which Tagore's lyrics in *Gitanjali* offers, are certainly peripheral to the major currents of human life: A child's play with its mother, moments of sympathetic communion between man and nature, the longing for the Divine union. They identified with the beautiful visions and wonders in a person who is awake to the presence of his Divine *Self*. These poems give us precious clues on how to integrate and assimilate the teaching of the Upanishads about *Self* and how Tagore saw himself. On a higher level, it is thus a poetic knowledge which enable its readers to be aware of their presence as a Being; a knowledge where 'I', the world and all human beings are fundamentally 'connected' to or in which all is 'united'.

This paper is a fair monograph to analyze the philosophy of Tagore's transcendent 'Self' and 'Identity' in his literary oeuvre, *Gitanjali*, which mirrored his deeper personality in the most beautiful and lyrical way possible.

'Philosophy' at large is a theory of 'being', often

preoccupied with speculative thought; it contemplates the physical world as a manifestation of the spirit and ultimately concerns itself with the apprehension of the relation of an individual with the Absolute. In a way, philosophical reflections raised man beyond the self of the senses or his animal nature to bring him close to the absolute form and the intellect of it. Since 1910, Modernism and the theories of Individualism are re-constructing the society and the individual identities. As a part of this modern world, we tend to regard ourselves as unique individuals; that, our personal identity is irreplaceable and to which we alone have privileged access. We have stepped in an era where the subject-self has vanished and where the uniqueness of personal identity is on the verge of eclipse.

Yet, the concepts of identity differ with individuals. However, reading the Literature of the text by greatest philosophers and visionaries can really help in moulding strong premise for interpretations. An obvious observation of the text could be seen as how Tagore in his collection *Gitanjali*, captures transcend and mystic self; that the poet identifies himself with the divine and possibilities for his communion with his true form. But there are many hindrances in the path to that union. Tagore hopes that man will be reborn in free individuality when he overcomes his selfishness and accepts pure humanity... (V. Lency)

Gitanjali became internationally known through Tagore's own translation, edited and introduced by W.B. Yeats. It was published in a limited edition by the India Society in London in November 1912, and soon afterwards – following its sell-out success – by Macmillan in March 1913. It led directly to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Tagore in November 1913. (Radice) The collection is basically a reflection of Tagore's soul, something with which he identifies himself. The phrase, "it does matter all the world to me to be true to myself", becomes poignant and significant when one realizes how deeply

personal the Gitanjali poems and songs were to Tagore. (Radice) He painted his 'Self' in his songs as all sublime and infinite. He has his faith in Nirgun Brahma (Imageless form of God) that is none other than the divine *Self* in him. One of the coherent views of Tagore's life lies in the 'Oneness' of man and his 'Soul'. According to Tagore, man is a part of this inscrutable, immanent 'Soul' and therefore, man shouldn't be lost in the grief of separateness because ultimately he has to be one with his creator, the inevitable source: his own *Self*.

Throughout his eighty-one years, Tagore swung between public life and the seclusion of a poet. Over the time he reinvented his creative identity in his work of art: writing and painting. His 'Self' was, however, not bereft of contradictions. Secular in public life, Tagore's poetry drew on Upanishadic philosophy underlying *Brahmanism*.

The concept of *Self* goes back to the spiritually inspired poets who wrote early Vedas often imply a one-ness with the Divine. The original Vedas are the oldest sacred writings of the Hindus and are composed of spiritually focused poetry written in Sanskrit between 2000-1000 B.C. (Meehan) More recent Vedas are known as the Upanisads- a name implying sitting at the feet of a teacher - and are the Hindu sacred texts next in antiquity dating from circa 600 B.C. (Meehan) The Upanishads uphold views which maintain that human beings are capable of a profound interior spirituality. Prof. V H Date in his *Upanisads Retold* remarkably explains that the Upanishadic seers have solved the problem of Supremacy of the Atman or God by "equating the two and by further equating them with the absolute. This they could do by eliminating one after another the various limitations, namely, the body, the mind, the senses the intellect and egoism, as being no better than illusions or dreams." (Date) Therefore, summarizing the Upanishadic philosophy of Atman "as immanent, or the same entity known as God and as being transcendent, or as the absolute when the two are synthesized. Thus they could easily jump from 'I am the Brahman' to 'This Atman is Brahman', and from this again to 'All this is Brahman' (Date).

It is very difficult to put 'Self' into the words. The Mundaka Upanishad (Two Modes of Knowing) claims, "The Lord of Love is above name and form. He is present in all and transcends all." In part second of this Upanishad it is interpreted that "in the Atman alone, like spokes in a wheel, all things in the universe, this earth, the heaven and the intermediary space, the mind, the trunk and the veins and the arteries are fixed..." (Date).

Therefore, relationships between Atman ~ being the "Self" ~ and Brahman ~ being the "World Soul" ~ are central to the religiously inspired worldview of most Hindus: -

The Self which is free from sin, free from old age, from death and from grief, from hunger and thirst, which desires nothing but what it ought to desire, and imagines nothing but what it ought to imagine, that it is which we must search out, that it is which we must try to understand. He, who has searched out that Self and understands it, obtains all worlds and all desires. (Hindu Scriptures)

Impelled by such sense, desire and joy of wonder and realization of the being Rabindranath Tagore in *Gitanjali* gives us the precious clues on how to integrate and assimilate the teaching of the Upanishads about *Self* and we as an individual could identify with them. In speaking of the poems and songs he selected for translation, Tagore several times stressed their personal nature. To William Rothenstein on 30 December 1912, he wrote: "...these poems of mine are very different from other literary productions of the kind. They are revelations of my true self to me. The literary man was a mere amanuensis - very often knowing nothing of the true meaning of what he was writing..."³ To his niece Indira Devi on 6 May 1913 (a letter that gives a much-quoted account of the genesis of his translations), he wrote: "They were an expression of my inmost feelings, they were my humblest prayers, my sincerest *sadhana*, and a reflection of my joys and sorrows." (Gupta)

Tagore has basically marshalled a new way through his theology of devotion to God. "His way of translating his poems, even if Yeats had a lot to do with establishing its style and tone, disguised both the formal variety (*Gitanjali* is essentially a mixture of songs or song-like poems, 14-line sonnets, and ballad-like poems in strophic form) and the emotional turbulence of the book..." (Radice) The poems hurtle from one emotion to another, bouncing off each other or suddenly changing the mood quite violently. For instance in one song there is pictured an image of Soul as a traveller symbolizes thirst the poet have for the explorations and quest for God within himself. *Gitanjali* can be traced as the recordation of the vicissitudes in the drama of human soul and its progress from finite to the infinite. And this progress can be taken as an account of battle, as a journey and as continuing sacrifice, culminating in a total offering of all and in all. Similarly, in another song from *Gitanjali*, when curious beings ask "Oh, where?" the answer by God's assured that: 'He is present within everything. He is "I Am!" present in one own self.' Rectifying that, man labours hard in search of God only to find that God dwells within him and in everything living that surrounds him. Man himself is Brahman. To find Him or not, depends completely on the seeker's eye.

There is no doubt about the influences by the monism of the Upanishads repeatedly highlighted in

the lyrics of Gitanjali. Through his songs Tagore insist on the humanity's ultimate mission "When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut." (Gitanjali, 63.4.12-13) and that is the 'Self-Realization'. Examples of the correlation between the Upanishads and Tagore's writings are not hard to find. The main theme of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry is the essential unity (or continuity) of all creation, which is also the main theme of the ancient Hindu Upanishads.

From Tagore's perspective, man is constantly evolving, and there is more to his external identity. Therefore, one must not forget that this is not a day journey but a gradual evolution for the soul to discover eternity. After awakening the consciousness to know the "true being" it is important for soul to go through the "Law of Detachment" "That I want thee, only thee- let my heart repeat without end. All desires that distract me, day and night, are false and empty to the core"(Gitanjali, 38.1.1-3). Therefore, Tagore prays for "When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thy thunder"(Gitanjali, 39.5.10-12). The "light" in the lines indicates the knowledge of being.

Yet it seems even after such knowledge of being, there are some hesitations compiled by the individual's body and mind. Poet weaves those hesitations beautifully in the following lines "The day when I did not keep myself in readiness for/ thee; and entering my heart unbidden even as one of the/ common crowd" (Gitanjali, 43.1.1-3), out of this doubt emerges the state of Nirvana or Self-awareness unknown to the poet that it was God's "signet of eternity" which was pressed upon his soul since forever. And even though we lead a thankless life towards the Almighty and forget His grace and yet He doesn't "turn in contempt from my childish play among dust" (Gitanjali, 43.3.10-11). It is now after this knowledge of truth about his 'Self' that the poet realizes during his childhood "the steps that I heard in my playroom are the same that are echoing from star to star" (Gitanjali, 43.3.11-12).

In the next song poet believes that the communion with God is self-sufficient. In the formless God, ones Self finds its form. When He is there in you, everything is fair with you and you flourishes in everywhere "Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not./ Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou/ hast brought the distance near and made a brother of the stranger" (Gitanjali, 63.1.1-4). The poet is very thankful to God for His blessing for him. This is His kindness that the poet is no more a stranger to the world and this is His grace that all the distances are turned into nearness in his visions. The theme of reincarnation and oneness is dwelling in this song. Though the thought of leaving

"my accustomed shelter" makes his heart uneasy because the soul will departure from the old shelter to the new one "I forget that there abides the old in the new, and/ that there also thou abidest" (Gitanjali, 63.2.6-7). Poet here reminds the doctrine of oneness, he remembers that God is omnipresent and everything is an expression of divine. Therefore the fear of death, oblivion and strangeness after life is no more in the poet's heart. Thus old is will still be there in the new and the Almighty is always there within his child, poet. The ignorance to the divine develops the fear of unknown and unfamiliar once the man is aware of oneness and reincarnation, nothing will be unknown and new to him. He feels that God is always there as a companion for endless life cycle "Through birth and death, in this world or in the others,/ wherever thou leadest me it is thou, the same, the one companion of my endless life who ever pinkest my heart,/ with bonds of joy to the unfamiliar." (Gitanjali 63.3.8-11) His soul is the poet's everlasting companion not only in this world but also in the next world. The poet perceives the existence of his self in every renewal. He prays God to give him the divine wisdom "When one knows thee, then alien there is none, / then no door is shut."(Gitanjali, 63.4.12-13). He prays that he may never loose the bliss of his being which makes a man aware that of His omnipresence and achieve the oneness in different shapes and forms "Oh, Grant me my prayer that I may/ never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of/ the many" (Gitanjali, 63.4.12-14)

Tagore's unique and charismatic appearance, with his long beard and long (pan-Asian) robes designed by himself, seemed to disconnect him from the society and culture of Bengal in which he was actually firmly rooted. "It was inevitable that in the quest for that fine wholeness in his life and in his relationship he should have to say, towards the end of his life, in another letter which he wrote to Elmhirst: "I carry an infinite space of loneliness around my soul through which the voice of my personal life very often does not reach my friends; for which I suffer more than they do. I have my yearnings for the personal world as much as any other mortal; perhaps more."

There is no doubt that the name and fame that came to trap Tagore, as a man and individual were partly his creation. Yes, his foreign admirers found in him what they wanted to find, but he also gave them what they wanted. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan found Tagore "a unified man, a whole man, and as such was an example to his country and a missionary to the West, who still points the way to the final harmonizing of our differences, and therefore towards our mutual strength through this coming phase of the struggle of the human race to understand itself, and to make itself a clear reflection of that godhead out of which it has evolved towards a purpose greater than we

know.” And thus he can be identified as a mystic or a philosopher. He, as a poet is as open-ended for interpretation as his lyrics are.

Hence, by this indepth reading of only some of the Tagore’s lyrics in *Gitanjali*, I fathomed that it is thus a

poetic knowledge which enable its readers to be aware of their presence as a Being; a knowledge where ‘I’, the world and all human beings are fundamentally ‘connected’ to or in which all is ‘united’.

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