

## Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*: Translating a Nation's Consciousness

Usha Kishore

In his 'Introduction' to the 1913 Macmillan edition of *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel Prize winning poetry collection, W. B. Yeats imagined an Eastern mystic dreaming in verse: 'A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from the learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion.' Edwardian assumptions of the Orient led Yeats to interpret Tagore as an Eastern mystic, and this interpretation has resonated across the centuries.

However, to a disconcerted postcolonial like me, *Gitanjali* is Tagore's nationalist narrative: a poetry collection which translates Bengal's and, more widely, India's consciousness to the world. *Gitanjali* is written as prose poetry; the English auto-translation incorporates 103 verses. The collection lends itself to many readings: the historical, the traditional, the reformist, the cultural, the religious

and the nationalist. After many tear-jerking readings of Tagore's *magnum opus* that move the inner core, I am resolved to adhere to the nationalist interpretation. By dint of *Gitanjali*, Tagore was, in fact, smuggling his nationalist thoughts across to Britain and to the rest of the world.

Through his recurrent use of allegory and self-reflexivity, Tagore subverts the dominant culture from within its own discourse. This nationalism, if explicit, would never have reached the wider world. An illustration of this is the allegorical Verse XXXVII, which describes a metaphorical voyage and denotes the journey of self-realisation, a metonym of the journey towards national freedom:

*And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.*

In the metaphors of 'old words' and 'new melodies', Tagore calls for an end to the old colonial order and visualises a new order of freedom. A new nation-state is imagined as emerging from its colonial cocoon. Another illustration of allegory is Verse VIII, in which Tagore addresses the Mother Nation:

*Mother, it is no gain, thy bondage of finery, if it keep one shut off from the healthful dust of the earth, if it rob one of the right of entrance to the great fair of common human life.*

I read these lines as imploring Mother India to lay aside her bondage of finery, a symbol of her colonial status that prevents her from exerting her right of independence among the peoples of the world.

Verse XXXV, however, projects Tagore's nationalist sentiment without any camouflaging paraphernalia. Here, the Indian nation is imagined before its political realisation, and resistance against the British Raj is expressed in the poet's longing for freedom:

*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.*

In the prayer-like concluding lines of the poem, addressed to the Father in a Christian vein, the metaphor of heaven depicts Tagore's radical idealism, which does not dissent from nationalist ideology, but defines it. In this verse, the poet also aspires for freedom of knowledge and tireless striving towards independence: 'Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.' Here, the poet criticises Indian socio-cultural residues, such as casteism and religious conflict, as dead habit. The tiered

allusions to nationalism in this poem seem to have evaded certain critics, who only deciphered Tagore's spirituality and visionary zeal in *Gitanjali*.

In colonial India, Tagore writes an imagined nation and portrays a nationalist dream. This Tagorean sentiment is strikingly emotive to a postcolonial like me, totally enmeshed in the web of the joint histories, joint present and joint futures of India and Britain. The verses from *Gitanjali* are also stark reminders of Britain's colonial past, the Indian independence movement, and the dreams of nationalists, who dared to invent a nation where it did not exist. This nationalist dream that manifests itself in concealed and revealed *avatars* makes *Gitanjali* an all-time favourite of mine.

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Usha's poetry has been published internationally and widely anthologised by Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Faber India, amongst others. Her poetry is featured in Indian school and university syllabi and the British school curriculum. Her work has been translated into German, Spanish, Turkish and Manx Gaelic.

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