

Gitanjali: *The 'beautiful Poetic Piety'*

“Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs”.
[Gitanjali; Poem 101]

This year is special to us in India as it marks, (i) the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and (ii) the completion of 100 years of the original *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). Rabindranath Tagore’s long life (1861–1941) was marked by ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity manifested in the richness and variety of all kinds of literary and artistic forms. He was both a man of action and a seer, a man of royal grandeur and an ascetic. In his philosophy of life the best of the East and that of the West are reconciled into a harmonious whole. His inclusive mind aspired after the Universal Man shining in the glory of creation and *joie de vivre*. With the passage of time Tagore, our first Nobel Laureate, has only grown in stature and is now recognized as an increasingly significant and rich personality and a genius for all times.

It was *Gitanjali*, a unique bunch of devotional poems, which first brought Tagore to limelight. In these poems which register richly sustaining experiences of the beautiful and sublime, the poet seems to have poured out his heart, his innermost intimate emotions and realizations, revelations and epiphanies in a series of ‘offerings’. It is the devotional core that informs and connects the songs which, both individually and collectively, present a form of worship, the poet’s ‘offerings’ to his own God, or ‘*jīvandevatā*’.

In his essay ‘The Religion of an Artist’ (1936) Rabindranath wrote: “My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life. Somehow they are wedded to each other, and though their betrothal had a long period of ceremony, it was kept secret from me”.¹ *Gītānjali* represented the consummation

¹ *EWT. Vol 7. p. 934*; was first published as ‘Meaning of Art’ in 1926.

of this 'betrothal' and the 'song offerings' came out in 1910 as the first unmistakable burst of the beautiful blossoming of this 'wedding'.

Beginning of the Beginning

Gītānjali (1910) and the English *Gitanjali* (1912) invite us to look one decade backwards at *Naivedya* (Offering), that seemed to herald a new turn in Tagore's poetry, which would eventually lead to *Gītānjali*. In the words of Krishna Kripalani, the poet's friend and biographer, "The religious consciousness, the need of establishing a satisfactory relationship with the Divine, which was to find its culmination in the *Gitanjali* period, is beginning to stir within him" (Kripalani 140) around 1887. The decade that followed – and particularly the later years, 1907–8 – brought personal tragedies for the poet, alongside alienation on various fronts, and as a consequence Tagore turned more and more to his own resources and God. *Gītānjali*, a bunch of 157 poems, was the exquisite blossom of this sublimation of personal grief and suffering.

Gītānjali and Gitanjali

The English *Gitanjali* is not an exact English replication of Tagore's Bengali *Gītānjali*. The poet, while translating in 1912 the poems/songs from the original Bengali collection of 1910, took only 53 from the bunch, and added 50 more from his other anthologies to make it 103; the rest were gleaned from other anthologies of the poet – including 16 from *Gītimālya*, 16 from *Naivedya*, 11 from *Kheyā*, 1 from *Acalāyatan*, 3 from *Śiśu*, 1 from *Smraṇ*, 1 from *Kalpanā*, 1 from *Caitālī*, 1 from *Utsarga*. Two of the poems from *Naivedya* were made into one in the translation.

Regarding translation, however, Tagore had repeatedly insisted that translation of a poem was "essentially a reincarnation, the soul of the source language poem assuming a new body in the target language poem" (Ray 2007: viii). In an interview with *Evening Post* in New York on 9 December 1916 he reiterated:

The English versions of my poems are not literal translations. When poems are changed from one language into another, they acquire a new quality and a new spirit, the ideas get new birth and are reincarnated. (Cited in Ray 2007: viii-ix)

Anyway, eminent critics, from Ezra Pound to Buddhadev Bose (eminent Bengali poet-critic), have put on record their genuine admiration of the poet's auto-translation in the English *Gitanjali*; and St John Perse, while requesting Andre Gide to translate *Gitanjali*, wrote on 23 October 1912: "The English translation of Tagore's, which he himself made...is the only really poetic English language work to have appeared in a long time". (in Ray 1995: 250) Even without entering into the issue of the quality of the translation one may agree with Robert Frost: "Fortunately Tagore's poetry overflowed national boundaries to reach us in his own English. He belongs little less to us than to his own country" (Frost 298).

The actual translation work was started rather casually, during a period of convalescence, in a relaxed mood, while on board his houseboat on the Padma, the great river (now in Bangladesh), that Tagore was so fond of. He continued the work during his ship-journey that followed before long. On arriving at London, he handed over the manuscript to Rothenstein, the English painter and his friend, as he wrote to his niece later, "with some diffidence... I could hardly believe the opinion he expressed after going through it. He then made over the manuscript to Yeats. The story of what followed is known to you..." (in Kripalani 222).

Reception in the West

Indeed what followed has been almost a legend. Rothenstein reacted with enthusiasm. "Here was poetry of a new order which seemed to me on a level with that of the great mystics. Andrew Bradley, to whom I showed them, agreed: 'It looks as though we have at last a great poet among us again'" (in Kripalani 224), he wrote. Rothenstein was instrumental in getting Yeats read the manuscript. Yeats's response remains registered in his beautiful Introduction to

the limited edition of *Gitanjali*, published in November 1912 by the India Society of London.²

The book, although deeply rooted in the Indian devotional tradition[s], had received an instant overwhelming response in the West with the appearance of the English version in 1912. *Gitanjali* was indeed perceived by the West as the opening of a charmed magic 'Oriental' casement which, in spite of all its fascination, was, nevertheless a strange Other, and attractive for that very reason, its 'Otherness' ushering in the note of a 'strange, distant and subtle voice'. The influence of Yeats in introducing *Gitanjali* to England and shaping readers' opinion to an extent cannot be denied. Yeats enthusiastically responded to the poems in September 1912 as "the work of a supreme culture" and "a tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing" (Yeats 5); Yeats had exclaimed in admiration: "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream." (Yeats 6).

On 30 June 1912, before a choice gathering at Rothenstein's Hampstead house, Yeats read out the poems; the audience included, among the celebrities, Ezra Pound, May Sinclair, Charles Andrews *et al.* Charles Andrews, who first met the poet that day, and became a lifelong friend thereafter, wrote about his response to the poems that evening:

...It was an experience something not unlike that of Keats', when he came for the first time upon Chapman's translation of Homer—
... (in Kripalani 225)

May Sinclair wrote to Rabindranath:

² Yeats's 'Introduction'(1912) has been reprinted in *EWT, Vol.1*, pp.1–8.

... You have put into English which is absolutely transparent in its perfection things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language. (in Kripalani 226)

It was Yeats, from whom Ezra Pound, another illustrious contemporary, first came to know of Rabindranath, at a time when Yeats, as Pound found, was “much excited over the advent of a great poet, someone ‘greater than any of us’” (in Kripalani 226). Ezra Pound too enthusiastically put his appreciation on record. What moved him most was the calm poise that the poems (and their author) presented. “But beneath and above it all is this spirit of curious quiet. ... this sense of a saner stillness come now to us in the midst of our clangour of mechanisms...” (ib.). Finally he comes to the ‘flaw’: “If these poems have a flaw – I do not admit that they have – but if they have a quality that will put them at a disadvantage with the ‘general reader’, it is that they are too pious. Yet I have nothing but pity for the reader who is unable to see that their piety is the poetic piety of Dante, and that it is very beautiful” (ib. 227).

Gitanjali had been translated in many European languages, including German and Icelandic. Halldor Laxness, the renowned Icelandic novelist and Nobel winner of 1955, wrote in his centennial tribute to Rabindranath in 1961 about the impression “this rare species of religious lyrics made ... on the West as a whole” (Laxness 332) and particularly on his country; while recounting his memory of its translation into the ‘old poetical language of the Eddas and Sagas’ he also seeks to underscore the distinctive Indianness of its perception of God amidst fresh fragrant nature, which the Western spirituality, he assumed, can yet fail to grasp.

In my country, as elsewhere among western readers, the form and flavour of the *Gitanjali* had the effect of a wonderful flower we had not seen or heard of before; ... (Laxness 332)

Laxness’s response, though warm and exuberant, helps to underscore the strangeness of these poems to the Western perception: “... We are living in material wealth compared to the eastern world, yet we have very little comparable to the wealth that brings forth an attitude of

mind as expressed in this *Gitanjali* opening of a song: 'When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable'" (Laxness 333). Incidentally it is touching to remember that the personal papers of Wilfred Owen which were forwarded to his mother—after the young poet's death on the front at just twenty-five on 4 November 1918 – contained a quote from Tagore's *Gitanjali*: "When I go from here, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable". Later Owen's mother located the author of those lines, and sent it to Tagore at Shantiniketan, his ashram in Bengal, and it has been preserved there ever since among Tagore's correspondences at Rabindra Bhavan. This is a memorable evidence of the kind of appeal *Gitanjali* had made to the young minds of Europe in those early decades of the last century.

Gitanjali: the Indian Roots

Though the religious vision and temper of the lyrics of *Gitanjali* had reasonably thrilled great Western minds with its 'strangeness' and freshness, to the Indian reader, however, the vision does not seem that unfamiliar; in fact, *Gitanjali* seems to be deeply rooted in the Indian religious tradition[s], including both the sublime imaginative-intuitive elevation of the Vedic-*Upaniṣadic* approach and the enthralling sweetness and earthy simplicity of India's folk culture, especially as it had become manifest during the era of the Sufi cult of 'bhakti' or simple devotion, which held God as an intimate friend and beloved. As Tagore himself said in an essay:

In India the greater part of our literature is religious, because God with us is not a distant God ... We feel his nearness to us in all human relationship of love and affection and in our festivities... In seasons of flowers and fruits, in the coming of rain, in the fullness of autumn, we see the hem of His mantle and hear His footsteps. We worship Him in all the true objects of our worship and love Him wherever our love is true. ...Therefore our religious songs are our love songs...
(‘What is Art?’ *EWT*, Vol.4. pp. 354–355)

These lines, while underscoring a persistent theme in the Tagorean oeuvre, seem to carry the echo of so many lyrics in *Gitanjali*.

'Thou' and 'I'

Indeed, many of these devotional songs can also be read and sung as exquisite love songs in which the devotee not only longs for a union with God but also believes that God equally longs for a union with the mortal devotee. He can be seen as a lover, set on his voyage to come down to the devotee, his beloved.

The woodlands have hushed their songs, and doors are all shut at every house. Thou art the solitary wayfarer in the deserted street. Oh my only friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house – do not pass by like a dream. (Poem 22)

The subtle moods and fine layers of emotions surrounding a superb experience of love can be noted in its fine shades and tunes in these poems: sometimes it is the yearning for the presence of the loved one – “I ask for a moment’s indulgence to sit by thy side” (Poem 5); sometimes it is the longing to submit in total surrender to the beloved – “I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands” (Poem 17); or the anxious wistful wait for the lover whose arrival is being delayed – “Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows?” (Poem 41); or the coy beloved shyly yet eagerly looking for some fragrant token of the lover after his departure at dawn – “like a beggar I searched in the dawn for a stray petal or two” (Poem 52).

The Infinite too, as it were, longs for the Finite, and the 'I' is also needed by 'Thou'; the poet sings with deep conviction: “thou who art the King of kings hast decked thyself in beauty to captivate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover...” (Poem 56). And “Thou givest thyself to me in love and then feelest thine own entire sweetness in me” (Poem 65). It is a reciprocal and mutually complementary connection; and not the perennially

insatiable longing of the devotee for his Lord who remains, “alas, away!”³

Thus it is that thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not? (Poem 56).

The poet envisions his God as the 'King of Kings' who would yet come down across immeasurable vista of times and distances to meet the devotee.

I know not from what distant time thou art ever coming nearer to meet me. Thy sun and stars can never keep thee hidden from me for aye. (Poem 46)

So he sings with the quiet joy of deep conviction:

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. (Poem 45)

God is such a lover who brings the gift of both the 'nest' and the 'sky', the comforting assurance of the finite nest as well as the vast expanse and freedom of the infinite sky: “Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well” (Poem 67); the 'I' feels the touch of the wondrous love of 'thou' in every beautiful thing around him – be it the dancing light, the sailing cloud, or the gentle breeze; he would declare emphatically, “Yes, I know, this is nothing but thy love, O beloved of my heart – this golden light that dances upon the leaves, these idle clouds sailing across the sky, this passing breeze leaving its coolness upon my forehead” (Poem 59).

³ G.M. Hopkins, 'I wake and feel the fell of dark...', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* [ed. H.Gardner], Oxford: OUP, 1956, p.68; Sonnet no 69 line 8.

Separation and Union

In spite of this conviction, however, there are moments in this extraordinary love-relation when the intense longing for union with 'thou', seems to get subsumed in the deep anguish of separation from the same. For instance,

Clouds heap upon the clouds and it darkens. Ah, love why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone? (Poem 18)

The pang of the separation is felt and translated in intense lyricism, as if it were the pang of a poetic heart missing and yearning for his beloved, weighed down and quivering under the very intensity of an ecstatic pain which blossoms into song:

It is this sorrow of separation that gazes in silence all night from star to star and becomes lyric among rustling leaves in rainy darkness of July.

It is this overspreading pain that ... ever melts and flows in songs through my poet's heart. (Poem 84)

If God remained far away, the poet would not seek the comfort of oblivion; he would rather opt for the intense sorrow of 'separation'; hence his prayer not to be allowed to forget:

If it is not my portion to meet thee in this my life then let me ever feel that I have missed thy sight – let me not forget for a moment, let me carry the pangs of this sorrow in my dreams and in my wakeful years. (Poem 79)

Darkness, cloud, rain, and tempestuous black nights are the associations of the suffering caused by separation from 'thou'.

“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.” (Poem 27)

One can compare this to the dark night of spiritual desolation in G. M. Hopkins's last sonnets. But there is a remarkable difference. It is not the crushing darkness accosting St John or Hopkins in which they grope for light in anguish and bewilderment. It is not punitive; rather the darkness is also a sign of God's compassion. When during a night "black as a black stone" the lamp fails to give a flicker, and outside "it thunders and the wind rushes screaming through the void", the poet can barely suppress the shriek of agony – "Light, oh where is the light?". Yet in the same breath he would remind himself: "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" (Poem 27). This seems to be closer to the vision of God in the *Gītā*, as manifest luminosity transcending all darkness – 'Yā niśā sarbabhūtānām tasyām jagarti saṃyāī' – or the triumphant declaration of the *Upaniṣhadic* sage, 'Vedāhmetaṃ puruṣaṃ mohantaṃ ādityavaraṇaṃ tamasah paraśāt.' Tagore himself had translated this into Bengali as 'jini ādhārer pāre jyotirmay, āmi jenechi tāhāre' (I have known the One who is the Great Radiance, beyond darkness.). Therefore, the poet is prepared to wait through the 'night' of separation in patience, drawing sustenance from the conviction that morning will follow:

If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it. I will keep still and wait like the night with starry vigil and its head bent low with patience.

The morning will surely come, the darkness will vanish, and thy voice pour down in golden streams breaking through the sky. (Poem 19)

Indeed, in Rabindranath's perception 'night' itself involves a silent intense prayer for light, and therefore he would be imitating the night itself to end the night:

As the night keeps hidden in its gloom the petition for light, even thus in the depth of my unconsciousness rings the cry – I want thee, only thee. (Poem 38)

The 'I' looks enchanted at the strange beauty of the 'thou' – a beauty which is manifest in the charm of aesthetic grandeur, but also bursts forth resplendent in its 'terrible beauty' at moments of rare revelation (Poem 53). The beloved is prepared to accept 'this honour of the burden of pain': "Thy sword is with me to cut asunder my bonds, and there shall be no fear left for me in the world" (Poem 52). Be it through the fragrant flower or the dazzling sword, the finite is touched again and again by the infinite, and the rapturous joy of a unique love bursts at every blessed contact.

The Friend, Playmate, Master

Again, in the poems of *Gitanjali* we get glimpses of a god who is not only the lover but also at once so many things to the speaker. The songs hail god as a playful child, an honoured guest, a friend, a parent, a master, the companion/'playmate' on life's voyage. The poet can imagine the 'Friend' "on thy journey of love" in the stormy night for coming over to his beloved: "By what dim shore of the ink-black river, by what far edge of the frowning forest, through what mazy depth of gloom art thou threading thy course to come to me, my friend?" (Poem 23). In the immediate aftermath of the publication of *Gitanjali* the songs were compared by Evelyn Underhill (*TLS*, 7 Nov, 1912) to the psalms of David. But whereas "David's God smites the enemies, destroys the wicked, protects the good and preserves the virtuous ... He is not eager to share the company of His devotee. Tagore's God is, on the contrary, an intimate companion, with whom the poet can sit quiet, face to face" (Dev 87), and pour out his heart in 'full-throated ease'.

'His garment covered with dust'

In many a poem of the anthology, alongside the *Upaniṣadic* resonances, the simple rhythm and core seem to call back to the folksongs of India, sung by common people invoking a dear God – while plying a boat, tilling the land, or just walking along the track by the forest. In tune with this folk-tradition, the poet of *Gitanjali* envisions God as coming down amidst the dust and sweat of work

and labour, instead of holding himself aloof upon some high clean pedestal.

He is 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... (Poem 11)

Play

The idea of a playful God – not the Aeschylean God, the 'President of Immortals', who would kill humans for 'sport' – but a real joyous happy childlike God, absorbed in his creation like a playing child among its toys, has been familiar to the Indian folk imagination. Among the many forms of God, it is the playful deity – Lord Krishna playing with shepherd boys as another lovely shepherd boy, for instance – who has been held dear by common consent.

It is this idea of 'play' that comes up again and again in these songs of devotion. For instance, Tagore would envision god's creation as the "Playhouse of infinite forms" (Poem 96), where God comes down to meet the devotee as a benign playmate, thus filling life with wondrous delight:

In the early morning thou wouldst call me from my sleep like my own comrade and lead me running from glade to glade... (Poem 98)

The Infinite is never impatient or scornful about the play of the finite; "Thou didst not turn in contempt from my childish play among dust, and the steps that I heard in my playroom are the same that are echoing from star to star" (Poem 43). What could be a better manifestation of the spirit of play than the child? So, children playing unconcerned by the tumultuous sea become the epitome of the playful spirit of the Infinite rippling through the finite world; the sea too seems to join the play "with laughter" as "on the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances" (Poem 60).

Eventually an hour comes "when the playtime is over", but it comes as a beautiful surprise as the mortal playmate now discovers

his divine partner in his sublime grandeur, while “The world with eyes bent upon thy feet stands in awe with all its silent stars” (Poem 98).

The Master-Singer

God is again imagined as the supreme musician manifest in his cosmic music to which the poet listens enraptured; the music seems to resonate through everything and vibrates in the luminous glory of the light flooding the sky:

The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on. (Poem 3)

It is perhaps only appropriate that the poet should choose music as his mode of worship to this master singer: “I am here to sing thee songs... / When the hour strikes for thy silent worship at the dark temple of midnight, command me, my master, to stand before thee to sing” (Poem 15).

God is also addressed as ‘My poet’, whose delight is to enjoy the beauty, music and flavour of his creation through the senses of his devotee; in rapturous emotion he articulates his wonder at such kindness: “What divine drink wouldst thou have, my God, from this overflowing cup of my life? My poet, is it thy delight to see thy creation through my eyes and to stand at the portals of my ears to listen to thine own eternal harmony?” (Poem 65). At a moment of intuitive insight the poet would even see himself as the manifestation of God’s own “severed self” – “this thy self-separation has taken body in me”; so ‘the great painter’, the cosmic singer, would paint and sing together with the devotee in a kind of joyous play: “The great pageant of thee and me has overspread the sky. With the tune of thee and me all the air is vibrant, and all ages pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me” (Poem 71).

Some Comparable Paradigms

Tagore's occasional use of the contrapuntal paradigms of 'aridity' and 'rain' can be compared to a basic Christian frame of reference in which desert and rain occur as signs of spiritual aridity / 'Despair' and divine grace respectively:

The rain has held back for days and days, my God, in my arid heart /.../Send thy angry storm, dark with death, if it is thy wish, and with lashes of lightning startle the sky from end to end. (Poem 40)

This can remind a reader of Hopkins's prayer to the, "Lord of life" to "send my roots rain"⁴ – a prayer which runs through the whole gamut of famous poems oriented in the Christian faith, from Coleridge's *The Rime* to Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Again, in a deeply moving prayer to his 'Lord' the poet implores him to "strike at the root of penury in my heart" and give "the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love" (Poem 36). This can remind one of Dante's '*In la sua volontade è nostra pace*' (In His will is our peace), or Donne's prayer to the 'three-person'd God' to "batter my heart"⁵, but the difference is made by the 'love' which takes the place of the awe in Rabindranath's European counterparts.

The Joy

Like this ecstatic sorrow, the ecstasy of divine joy too, the poet feels, cannot be borne by a feeble mind. It is the feeling of a divine joy on the poet's part that ripples over the bulk of poems in *Gitanjali* and lends the tenor and vibrant buoyancy which account for the particular charm of the collection. The poet is thrilled by the joy that brims over from the light's dance, to which "the sky opens, the wind

⁴ Last line of Hopkins's sonnet, 'Thou art Indeed Just Lord...'

⁵ Donne's 'Holy Sonnets' (No.xiv). *John Donne: A Selection of His Poetry*. [ed.] John Hayward, (1964) Harmondsworth(UK):Penguin Books. Pp. 171–172.

runs wild, laughter passes over the earth. /.../ Mirth spreads from leaf to leaf, my darling, and gladness without measure. The heaven's river has drowned its banks and the flood of joy is abroad" (Poem 57). He would celebrate this 'joy' pulsating through the world in songs of exquisite ecstasy. Even pain is made part of this joy, which can absorb pain and ennoble it. In one of the best songs of the book the poet ecstatically responds to this joy pervading the world, and informs the cosmic dance of life and death:

Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song – the joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass, the joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world, the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word. (Poem 58)

It is also a "fearful joy", ever rushing onwards "restless, rapid", through seasons- colours-tunes, pouring "in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment", and the poet wonders if it is "beyond thee... to be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?" (Poem 70)

Upasñiṣad and Tagore's God

This supreme 'joy' can be traced back to Tagore's early *Upasñiṣadic* orientation; because the *Upasñiṣad* also envisions creation as springing from joy, dwelling in joy, and returning to joy, like the water coming up from the sea as rain-cloud, only to come down in showers and dance along into the sea. Tagore writes, "It has been said in our Upanishads that our mind and our words come away baffled from the supreme Truth, but he who knows That, through the immediate joy of his own soul, is saved from all doubts and fears." (*EWT*, 7; 936)

The poet, therefore, would not seek deliverance through renunciation, like a typical Hindu ascetic; "Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling

this earthen vessel to the brim,[and]... the delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight” (Poem 73).

Death

The 'delight'. However, does not blind the poet to the painful reality of suffering and death. Many of the lyrics, and especially the later ones in the collection, reflect a preoccupation with death. Sometimes the anguish is sharp and cutting when the speaker can hardly bear the agony of bereavement. But the consciousness of the Infinite helps him to sublimate the sorrow; finally the grief melts into the 'fullness' of a deep peace; as “seeking her I have come to thy door”, “I have come to the brink of eternity from which nothing can vanish – no hope, no happiness, no vision of a face seen through tears” (Poem 87).

Again, death can also be seen as a kind of fulfillment when one has completely surrendered to God. “And when my work shall be done in this world, O king of kings, alone and speechless shall I stand before thee face to face?” (Poem 76). The poet knows the excruciating pain of the inevitable: “my life will burst its bonds in exceeding pain, and my empty heart will sob out in music like a hollow reed, and the stone will melt in tears”; he can imagine the utter 'nothingness' of the end – “Nothing will be left for me, nothing whatever and utter death shall I receive at thy feet”; but at the same time he can also feel, “from the blue sky an eye shall gaze upon me and summon me in silence” (Poem 98). The poet has already known the great anguish of bereavement from his personal experience; he knows the terrible 'nothingness'; yet he refuses to look away; instead he would rather look upon death as 'thy servant', 'thy messenger', and welcome him by “placing at his feet the treasure of my heart” with “folded hands, and with tears”. (Poem 86)

Death is also envisioned as the bridegroom. “The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom.” Now, “one final glance from thine eyes and my life will be ever thine own” (Poem 91). Death and God here merge into the image of the desired one, who will claim the bride/devotee for his own; and he invokes death – “O thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!” (Poem 91) Death will be the calm beautiful end

of his 'voyage', and though he knows "there are dangers on the way" he has no fears in mind (Poem 94); because "in death the same unknown will appear as ever known to me" (Poem 95).

Death, in the poet's perception, is the ultimate merging of all forms into the "formless, of all ventures into the "deathless", of all music to "the silent", and the poet would calmly surrender to the bliss of this peace of negation: "I shall tune it to the notes of for ever, and, when it has sobbed out its last utterance, lay down my silent harp at the feet of the silent" (Poem 100).

Death which sometimes suddenly strikes the unprepared homestead with its thunderous light in the night of 'storm', is also 'the king', i.e. God. "The thunder roars in the sky. The darkness shudders with lightning... With the storm has come of a sudden our king of the fearful night" (Poem 51).

Again, death is envisioned as the home-coming in which all the music of life will melt into the profound peace of silence. This is the note on which *Gitanjali* closes:

Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee.

Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee. (Poem 103)

And the poet/devotee's "parting word" will be no complaint, no remorse, but only articulation of a deep gratitude, of surrender, and fulfillment, "that what I have seen is unsurpassable... and if the end comes here, let it come –" (Poem 96).

The perennial charm of *Gitanjali* lies in the magnificent evocation of a 'poetic piety', beautiful at all levels: structure and texture, music and meaning, conception and creation, image-symbols and metaphors.

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