

Indian English Poet Rabindranath Tagore: An English Connection

Dr. Madhumita Ghosh

No critique on Indian English Poetry may begin without a study of Rabindranath Tagore, the poet laureate from Bengal, who was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in 1913 for *Song Offerings*, his English translation of *Gitanjali*. Tagore, however, is not the first Indian English poet. The title should go to Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), who was the first Indian to write poetry in English. Greatly influenced by the English Romantic poets, Derozio's poetry speaks of his love for Nature, while incorporating both Indian and Greek mythology in his poems. He wrote sonnets, often in the Petrarchan tradition, and lyrics, his notable work being *The Fakir of Jungheera*. Other writers before Tagore who also wrote in English besides in Bengali were Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94). Toru Dutt (1856-77) wrote in English and French. But none of these writers earned as much fame as Tagore did with his collection of poems, *Gitanjali*.

R.N.Tagore was not only the first Indian, but also the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Tagore's original English writings are mostly essays, poetry being his translations of his original Bengali poems. Two interesting English works of Tagore, *Stray Birds* and *Fireflies* contain poems, both original and translations. Besides *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* which has earned him the Nobel prize, among his other poetical works in English, all translations, are *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Fruit Gathering*, *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, *The Fugitive* and translations of the poems of Kabir. *The Child* is the only major poem of Tagore written originally in English and published as a separate book. Tagore was never ambitious to be famous as an English writer. Though he was born into an elite family and well-exposed to Western culture and literature, had visited England twice and had many Europeans as acquaintances and friends, his preference of language for his literary expression had always been his native language, Bengali. Yet, it is very interesting to note that, he has earned his reputation worldwide for his English translations, mainly *Gitanjali*. The greatest poet of Bengal is known not only in countries outside India but also in other Indian states for his English translations.

The response to *Gitanjali* in the West was phenomenal. Ezra Pound "boldly asserted: 'Briefly, I find in these poems a sort of ultimate common sense, a reminder of one thing and of forty things of which we are over likely to lose sight of in the confusion of our Western life, in the racket of our cities, in the jabber of manufactured literature, in the vortex of advertisement.'¹ Pound wrote to Harriet Monro, the editor of *Poetry*, a Chicago publication, "I'll try to get some of the poems of the very great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. They are going to be *the* sensation of the winter."² And Tagore's poems, six from *Gitanjali*, were published in *Poetry*, for the first time in America. The reason for this enthusiasm for Tagore and a great interest in his poetry in the West may be found in the comments made by T.S.Moore and Bertrand Russell. About Tagore's poetry Moore wrote to a friend: "His unique subject is 'the love of God'. When I told Yeats that I found his poetry preposterously optimistic he said 'Ah, you see' he is absorbed

in God.”³ Bertrand Russell was fascinated with the very Indian mystic element in *Gitanjali* and said: “...the poems have some quality different from that of any English poetry...I feel it has a value of its own, which English Literature does not give.”⁴ Rothenstein’s friend Paul Nash, who later became a famous artist, said, “I would read *Gitanjali* as I would read the Bible for comfort and strength.”⁵ *Times Literary* almost echoed: “As we read his pieces we seem to be reading the Psalms of a David of our own time who addresses a God realized by his own act of faith and conceived according to his own experience of life.”⁶

Of the hundred and three poems in English *Gitanjali*, fifty one are taken from the Bengali original, the rest from his different books, and translated by him.⁷ After the initial euphoria and the accolades conferred upon Tagore were over, the poet’s English translations were criticized by many. It was even rumored that the work was not only edited but was considerably worked on by Yeats. It is true that much of the essence of the original work has been lost in translation. But what has made the English version so appealing is not because of the language but for the theme, and Tagore’s idealism and mysticism that shine through the poems. In a way, the poems of *Gitanjali* are metaphysical. Though Tagore writes in a way suggesting a relationship of two earthly lovers, it is clear that the poems in reality are about the poet’s quest for a union with the Supreme One, his God.

Tagore’s spiritualism so appealed to the West, but Tagore was never a religious poet. He was not a Theist. He believed in the Religion of Man, seeing the divine in man’s inner soul. His God is in man, in nature, in the soul of the seasons, in innocence, in beauty-- in the very cycle of existence. Tagore here is on a quest to meet his God. Whether it is a wait for the Supreme One or a journey that he takes with Him or to meet Him, his poems have an aura of divine simplicity. He waits for his God in poem no.45: “Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.”⁸ In poem no. 22 he says: “In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest, silent as night, eluding all watchers...Oh my beloved, the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream.” In poems 21 and 42 he speaks of taking a journey to meet his God.”I must launch my boat. The languid hours pass by on the shore—alas for me.” In poem 23 again he is waiting with the hope that his God is on a journey to come to him: “Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend?...I have no sleep to-night. Ever and again I open my door and look out on the darkness, my friend!” In unfolding a serene world of poignancy and beauty in *Gitanjali*, Tagore explores the soul of the eternal Man, *Viswamanav*, as he calls him, in terms of love, light, joy, freedom and infinity. Sorrow, pain, death too are a part of the divine human experience.

In *Gitanjali* we find Tagore as more universal than in his previous work, on a quest to become with the Supreme through an inward voyage into the soul. This profound sense of introspection poignant with a sense of awe is seen in many of his poems here. He is eager to surrender, by submitting all his constraints to his God, the Supreme. “Obstinate are my trammels, but my heart aches when I try to break them...,” he says in Poem 28. To break free from these constraints he seeks light, to enlighten his soul, so that he may unite with his God, who rests in

his soul. “Light, oh where is the light! Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!” he urges in Poem 27. Again in Poem 57 he ecstatically sings an ode to light. The poem glittering with the exquisite beauty of imagery is worth quoting in full.

Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light!
Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life; the light strikes, my darling,
the chords of my love; the sky opens, the wind runs wild, laughter passes over the
earth.

The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and jasmynes surge up on
the crest of the waves of light.

The light is shattered into gold on every cloud, my darling, and it scatters gems in
profusion.

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.

Tagore was a nature lover. He loathed staying at his ancestral home at Jorasanko in Calcutta and set up abode later in life at Shantiniketan, Bolpur, where he founded his school, today a leading university, Viswabharati. He immersed himself in the beauty of nature in the rural surroundings and imbibed the spirituality he found in the beauty of nature. Nature appears in his poems not only as themes but also as motifs and images. The poems of *Gitanjali* are adorned with beautiful images and metaphors culled from nature. The different seasons too are portrayed vividly with all their distinct nuances and properties. The sky, clouds, rainy July, sunshine and shadow, oceans, rivers, birds, flowers and forest groves only add to the exotic beauty of Tagore's spiritually romantic poems. In more ways than one, Tagore may be said to be a Romantic, much closer to the English Romantic poets than to his contemporary poets in his homeland. He was an avid reader and an ardent admirer of English poetry and has spoken of his fascination with the Romantic poets variously. A strain of melancholia runs through the poems of *Gitanjali*, agony underlying the ecstasy expressed in his love for nature, in his love for his God and in his eternal wait for a union with the Supreme. In several poems in this collection he has spoken of parting and of death. “Oh thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!”—he says in Poem 91, almost echoing the Romantic poets, Shelley and Keats.

The calm and serene atmosphere of nature adds a unique exotic and mystic grandeur to the poems, one of the factors in *Gitanjali*'s overwhelming appeal to the West. Tagore was seen as a saint and his poetry as saintly. Tagore wrote to his niece Indira in May 1913 from London: “...in *Gitanjali* I never told myself that I was writing poems—they are simply expressions of my inner life, sincere and humble prayers, my ardent *sadhana*, which has melted all my joy and sorrow into its own form.”⁹ Verner Von Heidenstam, a Swedish poet who won the Nobel Prize later in 1916, wrote of *Gitanjali*: “...I read them with strong emotion, and I can say that in the course of decades I have not met their like in poetic literature. The hours they gave me were special, as if I had been allowed to drink from a fresh and clear spring. The loving and intense religious sense that permeates all his thoughts and feelings, the purity of heart, and the noble and unaffected elevation of the style—all amount to a total impression of deep and rare spiritual beauty.”¹⁰ Heidenstam's highly appreciative comments sum up the monumental response of the West to Tagore's poetry and also the cause behind it.

Immediately after the grand success of the English *Gitanjali*, Tagore took to translating one of his earlier works, *Shishu* (child), published in Bengali in 1903. *The Crescent Moon*, as the English work was called, was published by Macmillan in November 1913. A collection of poems on children, *The Crescent Moon*, an aura of innocence pervading in the work, remained, however, partly unappreciated, because of the overwhelming enthusiasm in the West for *Gitanjali*. The collection, dedicated to Thomas Sturge Moore, has forty poems, thirty five of which are translations of poems from the Bengali original *Shishu* and the rest are from *Kadi O Komal*, *Sonar Tari*, *Kshanika* and *Gitimalya*.¹¹ The poems of *Shishu* were written during a period of sorrow. Tagore's wife Mrinalini had died in 1902 and his second daughter Renuka was afflicted with tuberculosis. Tagore went to Almora with his three children where he composed these poems probably to entertain the little ones who had lost their mother. The poems in the series thus grew out of pain and misery. "I do not know why I wrote about children...I used to become the child-poet, going back to my childhood," he later told Dr. Thompson in 1921.¹²

The child's world depicted in *The Crescent Moon*¹³ is one of innocence, peopled with little girls and boys, mothers, dogs and cats, birds, flowers, trees, moon and stars. The world is seen through the eyes of the child and the poems in the series present a revelation of a child's mind. In a child's world, as Tagore says in the poem titled 'Baby's World', stars talk to the baby, "and a sky that stoops down to his face to amuse him with its silly clouds and rainbows." Birds, animals and even nature are the child's playmates. In 'Clouds and Waves', the poet says, "the folks who live up in the clouds call out to the child" to join them to play with the golden dawn and silver moon. With his masterly poetic touch Tagore states, in the same poem, the child's resolve to be the waves of the ocean and his mother the shore so that "I shall roll on and on and on, and break upon your lap with laughter/ And no one in the world will know where we both are." The child's world is one of imagination where the impossible is easily possible. "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..." Tagore says in 'On the Seashore', the second poem in *The Crescent Moon*. In 'The Champa Flower' the child wonders whether his mother would recognize him if he "became a *champa* flower, just for fun, and grew on a branch high up that tree, and shook in the wind with laughter and danced upon the newly budded leaves." But throughout the series, it may be noted that it is distinctly an adult who reads the child's mind and portrays a world that the child inhabits in his thoughts and wishful dreams. The insight into child psychology presented in the series is effected by adult sensitivity with an inherent child-like innocence, a quality few poets possess.

A very interesting and curious comparison may be drawn here between Rabindranath Tagore and William Blake. In his *Introduction to Gitanjali*, Yeats has compared Tagore to Blake¹⁴ and *The Nation* (13 December 1913) observed that in *The Crescent Moon* is revealed "a vision of childhood which is only paralleled in our literature by the work of William Blake."¹⁵ Tagore himself seems nowhere to have mentioned Blake. But that he had read Blake and admired the English visionary poet's creative genius is clear from his essay 'Religion of an Artist' (a lecture delivered at the University of Dacca in 1926).¹⁵ Speaking of poetry as being 'a creation of a uniquely personal and yet universal character', Tagore quotes a poem of Blake as an illustration for his argument. It is interesting to note here that Tagore quotes not from a well-known poem of Blake but from a lesser known fragment from his Notebook, 'Never seek to tell thy love', preferring the deleted word 'seek' to Blake's final choice 'pain'.¹⁶ Long before Derrida wrote *Of Grammatology* (1967), in his lecture Tagore seems to have adopted a post-

structuralist view of reading a poem: "...directly a poem is fashioned, it is eternally freed from its genesis, it minimizes its history and emphasizes its independence." He finds Blake's poem a perfect specimen of poetic unity: "It has its grammar, its vocabulary. When we divide them part by part..., the poem which is *one* departs like the gentle wind...The poem is a creation, which is something more than as an idea, inevitably conquers our attention; and any meaning which we feel in its words is like the feeling in a beautiful face of a smile that is inscrutable, elusive and profoundly satisfactory."

The Crescent Moon bears similarities with Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in more ways than one. Tagore seems to reveal the profound in much the playful way as Blake has done in his *Songs*. The idyllic atmosphere, the blissful innocence and a visionary element underlying the dreamlike beauty prevailing in the child's world are unmistakably noticed in both. Tagore too, like Blake, writes in a simple language, expressing a smooth flow of thought befitting a child's. The joys, the likes and dislikes of the child remain universally the same and are conveyed sensitively by both poets. Of course, we do not find an overt social criticism that features prominently in Blake's *Songs* in Tagore's series. But we do see in *The Crescent Moon* sullen clouds, a dismal sky, black fringe of forest, fierce lightning that starts up like a sudden fit of pain, and adults weighing the child's merits against his faults.

It is worthwhile here to compare two poems of Tagore's to Blake's. In 'The Beginning' where the baby asks his mother where he has come from, in her reply the mother speaks of the child as her dream-come-true, expressing her immense joy in loving him. Blake's 'Infant Joy'¹⁷ is a simple poem in the form of a tiny drama, involving an imaginary dialogue between a two-day old baby and its mother. The baby is an embodiment of joy and happiness and inspires the same feeling in the mother. Through the fanciful conversation, Blake creates an atmosphere of pure unalloyed happiness. 'Khoka' in *Shishu*– 'The Source' in *The Crescent Moon*– may be paralleled with Blake's 'A Cradle Song'. In both the poems we find the mother lovingly watching the child sleep. In 'A Cradle Song', said to be based closely on Dr. Isaac Watts' 'Cradle Hymn',¹⁸ where the mother looks on at her child sleeping a 'happy sleep' and sings :

Sweet dreams form a shade
O'er my lovely infant's head
Sweet dreams of pleasant streams
By happy silent moony beams.

The mother in Tagore's poem says :

The smile that flickers on bay's lips when he sleeps – does anybody know where it was born? Yes, there is a rumor that a young pale beam of a crescent moon touched the edge of a vanishing autumn cloud, and there the smile was first born in the dream of a dew-washed morning – the smile that flickers on bay's lips when he sleeps.

Both the mothers wish to ensure a sound undisturbed sleep for the baby. While the mother in 'A Cradle Song' wishes for her baby

Sweet moans, dove-like sighs,
Chase not slumber from thy eyes .

The mother in Tagore's 'Sleep Stealer' is determined to find the one 'Who stole sleep from baby's eyes' and 'chain her up.'

The introductory poem in *Sishu*, is placed second in *The Crescent Moon*. Titled ‘On the Seashore’, the poem presents the joyous world of Innocence where children are seen playing gleefully on the seashore, oblivious of the fact that ‘tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad.’ Incidentally the lines bring to mind Blake’s description of the world of Experience in ‘The Argument’¹⁹ in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* :

Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the Burden’d air;
Hungry clouds swag on the deep.
Once meek, and in a perilous path,
The just man kept his course along
The vale of death...
Now the sneaking serpent walks
In mild humility,
And the just man rages in the wilds
Where lions roam.

The children playing on the seashore are inhabitants of the world of Innocence, uninitiated to the world of Experience. ‘They know not how to swim,...they seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.’ It is Experience, that will teach them, as Blake says ‘to catch/ And to cage Fairies & Elves.’ They seem to dwell in Blake’s ‘Beulah’—the state of happy marriage among all things. The sea laughs with them, the seashore smiles. One is reminded of Blake’s ‘Laughing Song’, a perfect picture of bliss where nature—green woods, stream, air, hills laugh along merrily with ‘Mary and Susan and Emily.’ The children in Tagore’s poem are like Blake’s little chimney sweepers who, released from their black coffins by an Angel, ‘down a green plain leaping laughing they run/ And wash in a river and shine in the sun.’ Leaving their soot bags behind, ‘They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.’

Champions of freedom of mind and spirit, both Blake and Tagore are seen to be very vocal against restrictive and institutionalized formal education. Neither Blake nor Tagore went to school though both were widely read in classics, philosophy and theology. Both found it difficult to adapt themselves to closed classroom education and were educated at home. Blake wrote in his *Notebook*: ‘Thank God, I never was sent to school/ To be Flog’d into following the Style of a Fool.’²⁰ Tagore’s child in ‘The Little Big Man’ wishes to grow up to be as big as his father so that he does not have to take lessons any more.. Blake’s ‘School-Boy’ in *Songs of Experience* declares:

I love to rise in a summer morn,
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away:

Tagore’s child in ‘Vocation’ is envious of the bangle-seller he encounters on his way to school and the gardener he meets on his way back, and yearns to flee from his ten-to-four classroom schedule to experience the freedom they enjoy. In his poem ‘The Flower-School’—to explain the sudden appearance of a host of flowers after the rains, the child compares the flowers before

their state of blossom to little boys bowed down with the burden of books, entombed in a subterranean school. They are regimented into a confined classroom and punished by a strict schoolmaster when they are inattentive and desire to play.

Before he went to England in 1912, Tagore did not publish anything significant in English. He translated his poems in *Gitanjali* on an impulse at Selidah when he was recuperating from an ailment and continued with it on his voyage to England. His English lacked the polish and fluency of that of the English poets. It was rumored in England as well as in Tagore's homeland that Yeats had rewritten *Gitanjali*. A British correspondent associated with *The Times* openly accused Tagore of taking credit for Yeats' work. Tagore wrote to T.S.Moore: "...in a meeting of the leading Mohameddan gentlemen of Bengal Valentine Chirol told an audience that the English *Gitanjali* was practically a production of Yeats."²¹ Much later, in 1937, Graham Greene wrote: "As for Rabindranath Tagore, I cannot believe anyone but Mr.Yeats can still take his poems very seriously"²² Tagore poured out his feelings in a letter to his niece Indira: "You mention the English translation of *Gitanjali*. Even today I cannot grasp how I wrote it and how people have liked it so much. That I cannot write English is so plain a fact that I have never felt enough pride in my English to be embarrassed by it."²³ In the same letter he has also spoken of a gentleman from Bengal who had sent a translation of his own work and was rejected: "He made the big mistake of assuming that everything depends on language."²⁴ Tagore's poetry did not depend on language, the English language. As he had written much earlier to a very young Indira: "In my life I may have done many things that were unworthy, with or without knowing, but in my poetry I have never uttered anything false; it is the sanctuary for the deepest truths I know."²⁵ Truth is beauty, and Tagore's honesty to his thoughts and beliefs lent beauty to his English poems, where the sanctity of language did not matter.

Notes

1. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The myriad-minded man*, Rupa & Co. New Delhi, 2000, p.166
2. ibid p.171
3. ibid p.170
4. ibid
5. ibid p.167
6. ibid
7. Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, Surjeet Publications, Delhi 1998, Appendix B, p.317
8. All references to and quotations from poems from *Gitanjali* are from *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 1, ed. Sisir K. Das, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 43-78
9. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1997, p.119
10. Dutta and Robinson, op. cit. p. 186

11. *English Writings*, op. cit. pp. 603-04
12. Thompson, op.cit. p.196
13. All references to and quotations from poems from *The Crescent Moon* are from *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 1, ed. Sisir K. Das, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 129-54
14. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 1st. edition, ed. W.B.Yeats (India Society, Lond.1912), p.xiv
15. 'The Religion of an Artist', ed. Sisir K. Das, *English Writings of Tagore*, vol.3, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1999, pp.695-96
16. Geoffery Keynes ed. *William Blake: Complete Writings*, OUP,London, 1969, p.161
17. All quotations from poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are from Keynes, op. cit. pp. 111-26
18. 'Children's Poems: William Blake and Rabindranath Tagore', by Madhumita Mukherjee Ghosh in *To Times In Hope: Essays in Memory of Professor S.C.Sengupta*, ed. Tapati Gupta and Salil Biswas, Subodh Chandra Sengupta Foundation, 2006
19. *ibid* p.148-49
20. 'Notebook', 808-11, Keynes, op. cit. p.550
21. Letter no. 81, *Letters*, ed. Dutta and Robinson, op. cit. p. 138
22. Dutta and Robinson, op.cit. p. 349. This was in response to the publication of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse by Yeats, which included poems by Tagore.
23. *English Writings*, op. cit. vol 1, p.117
24. *Letters*, op. cit. p. 119, 120_n
25. Dutta and Robinson, op.cit. p. 368

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