



Article Type: Research Article

Article Ref. No.: 20113000443RF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-sp1-a016>



## (RE)READING RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S GITANJALI: MEANINGS FOR OUR TROUBLED, PANDEMIC STRICKEN TIMES

Tapashree Ghosh<sup>1</sup>✉

### Abstract:

The COVID 19 pandemic is far from over. The second wave of the virus is already adversely affecting countries such as England, France, Germany, and the USA. In India, people are suffering from the widespread impact of this disease for the last nine months. It has deeply affected our life, livelihood, health, economy, environment, and mental health. This grim scenario is not only specific to our country but can be witnessed globally. At this critical juncture, literature is extremely important as it can lift us from the nadir of depression and the abyss of nothingness. Hence, while critically engaging with the sub-theme 'Pandemic and Literature' we should not limit our studies to texts dealing with crises, pandemics and apocalypse. We must broaden our perspective to include texts that can emotionally heal us and generate feelings of positivity, faith, strength, and peace. Hence, this paper re-reads Tagore's Gitanjali from the present position of being sufferers of a global crisis. The text is timeless and our contemporary. It contains Tagore's deep engagement with philosophy and spirituality. We should re-read it and fetch newer meanings relevant to our present context. It is relevant and a necessary read for both 'the home and the world'.

**Article History:** Submitted on 30 Nov 2020 | Accepted on 9 February 2021 | Published online on 17 April 2021

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Death, Fear, Heal, Spirituality, Peace, Salutation, Strength

*"The mind is very restless, turbulent, strong and obstinate, O Krishna. It appears to me that it is more difficult to control than the wind" (The Bhagavad Gita, 6: 34)*

We, Indians, are living under extremely difficult conditions for the past few months due to the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has adversely affected our life, livelihood, health, economy, environment, the idea of normalcy, and mental wellbeing. This grim scenario is not only specific to India but is felt around the world. Even after nine months of struggle to survive amidst all odds, the pandemic is far from over. The fear of the second wave of the pandemic looms large with the approach of winter (as the life of the virus increases with the decrease in temperature) and with the European nations such as England, France and Germany along with the United States of America, already suffering from the viral attack anew. Though, in India, the number of active cases of the COVID-19 infection is reducing compared to the figures in the month of September; still, the pandemic is not showing any signs of getting over.

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor, Dhruba Chand Halder College, P.O.- Dakshin Barasat, Dist- South 24 Parganas, Pin-743372, West Bengal, INDIA. E-mail: tapashree.ghosh.deb@gmail.com



It is a major cause of concern locally, nationally, and globally. This situation is war-like, and the nature and scope of this war are widespread and radically different from the horrors of World War I and World War II. Due to this global crisis, the entire human race is in the grip of tension, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear of death and disease.

Human beings' mental health across all age brackets is adversely affected by the deep-rooted psychological impact of isolation, fear, and anxiety arising due to lockdown and prolonged confinement at home to escape contamination from the virus. During this crisis, literature should act like a balm for hurt minds and aim to dispel the fear of death, anxiety, and uncertainty enveloping us. It should make us look within, introspect and provide us with strength, fortitude, and above all, peace of mind as such positive thinking is crucial for our sustenance in these troubled, pandemic-stricken times. Nothing in this world is permanent and static. Everything is in a state of flux. These troubled times too, shall pass, and literature should generate this hope and positivity within us.

Hence, while focusing and critically engaging with 'Pandemic and Literature' we should not limit and restrict our studies to narratives dealing with pandemic, crisis and apocalypse such as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Edgar Allan Poe's short story titled "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839), H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Thomas Mullen's *The Last Town on Earth* (2006), Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), holocaust literature or literature of the absurd such as Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *Endgame* (1957) as it will only add to the feeling of nothingness, absurdity and anxiety surrounding us. At this critical juncture, we need literature that can lift us from the nadir of depression and abyss of nothingness and transport us to a peaceful state of mind. To quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "The mind is its own place and in it self, / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (I, p. 38). Hence, this paper critically analyzes Rabindranath Tagore's seminal text *Gitanjali* in order to study its relevance in the present scenario both for 'the home and the world'. The English translation of *Gitanjali* has enormous historical importance as this text brought India's first Nobel Prize for literature and made Indian literature, philosophy and thinking globally famous. In the Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech dated 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1921 at Stockholm, Rabindranath Tagore proudly mentioned India's spiritual superiority over the West and hailed the text as a gift of "nourishment" (2010, p. 39) handed over to the West by an Eastern man:

I know that I must not accept that praise as my individual share. It is the East in me, which gave to the West. For is not the East the mother of spiritual Humanity and does not the West, do not the children of the West amidst their games and plays when they get hurt, when they get famished and hungry, turn their face to that serene mother, the East? Do they not expect their food to come from her and their rest for the night when they are tired? (2010, p. 39)

Tagore's English translation of *Gitanjali* is carefully chosen by the poet to showcase his poetry to the world. It is not a direct translation of the Bengali poems titled *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). The Bengali *Gitanjali* comprised of 157 poems. Tagore trans-created the English version by including poems from other books of poems written by him. Out of the 103 poems present in the English *Gitanjali*, 53 were from *Gitanjali*, 16 from *Gitimalya*, 16 from *Naibedya*, 11 from *Kheya*, 3 from *Shishu*, 1 from *Chaitali*, 1 from *Kalpana*, 1 from *Achalayatan* and 1 from

*Utsarga*. Thus, Tagore was consciously choosing from his oeuvre as he wanted the West to understand the richness of Eastern philosophy and thinking, at a time when the Western civilization was going through a severe crisis of faith. He was a strong believer in confluence of cultures. The English *Gitanjali* “caused a cultural revolution” (Dasgupta et al., 2013, p. xv) in the West also due to the timing of the text. In the critical essay titled “The English Writings: An Overview” Fakrul Alam critically engages with the English writings of Rabindranath Tagore. He writes, “It was the eve of the First World War, when European intellectuals were registering their despair at a mechanical civilization that seemed on the verge of collapse. The *Gitanjali* poems, through their calming, meditative articulation of the individual soul seeking union with the infinite, promised to salve at least a little of the anxiety of a literary public apprehending Armageddon (2020, p.159)”.

The Western world was in turmoil and had become a spiritual, moral wasteland. Fragmentation, faithlessness, vacuity, isolation, hesitation, and communication gap felt by the modern man can be summed up in Prufrock’s dilemma as he tried to sing out the love song but repeatedly failed in his attempts, lacking courage and conviction in his beliefs and self-esteem:

Do I dare

Disturb the Universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. (Eliot, pp. 4-5)

Tagore’s *Gitanjali* offered them peace and strength. In 1912, W. B. Yeats wrote a wonderful introduction to *Gitanjali*. Explaining his personal experience of reading the poems in *Gitanjali*, Yeats wrote, “These lyrics...display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes” (2010, p. 19). Tagore’s biographer, Krishna Kripalini, notes that death of his wife and two of his children made him shift towards mysticism and spiritualism. His personal grief made him search for higher love (1962, p. 209). Thus, the text of *Gitanjali* was born out of the anguish of his personal life, a text which won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

Today, we are facing another crisis of colossal stature. Our mind is anxious and in constant turmoil. Human beings are in dire need of positivity, faith, conviction and peace. Re-reading Tagore’s seminal text at this juncture is beneficial for our mind and soul. *Gitanjali* contains his deep engagement with philosophy and spirituality. The text is at once both timeless and our contemporary. Commenting on Tagore’s genius, Sanjukta Dasgupta et al. notes that Tagore is our contemporary as well as rooted to the “spatio-temporal dynamics of his own times”. (2013, p. x)

Rabindranath Tagore was deeply influenced by the Upanishads. In *Manusher dharma* 3, he cites *Brihadaranyaka upanishad* 1:4:10: ‘He who thinks “The god I worship is one, and I am another” ...is ignorant like a beast’ (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2020, p. 58). Tagore was also deeply influenced by the *Bhagavat Gita*, central tenants of Buddhism and Jainism, Vaishnav poetry, medieval saints and mystics like Kabir, folk songs especially the Baul songs of East Bengal and Kirtans, a musical form inspired by the Vaishnav devotion to Radha and Krishna.

Devotion to God, the celebration of man’s union with the God, the immortality of the soul, the omnipresence of God, idea of liberation of the soul are some of the recurring themes in *Gitanjali*. The text opens with a note of joy as the poet celebrates the immortality of the soul. As

per Hindu philosophical and religious discourse, only the human body perishes while the soul is immortal. Hence, it enters into a fresh life after the death of the mortal body. In *Gitanjali*, 1 Tagore writes, "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life". (2010, p. 55)

In *Gitanjali*, 3 the poet is in awe of God's plentitude and is silently amazed by the creative ecstasy of the master creator whom he called "bishwa-kabi' (world-poet), a title often bestowed to him by his overwhelmed readers. "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.". (2010, p. 58). He longs to join the Creator but "struggles for a voice" (2010, p. 58). Baffled by God's plentitude, he can only cry out as he fails to understand the innumerable facets of God. It is beyond the capacity of mortal man to comprehend Him. In *Gitanjali*, 7 he addresses the Creator as the "master-poet" and celebrates his relationship with God. Following the tradition of Vaishnav poetry, he sees God as his beloved and he yearns for an eternal union with God. He does not want any adornments to "mar" the union as their "jingling would drown thy whispers". (2010, p. 63) In *Gitanjali*, 11, the poet sings of the omnipresence of God:

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 on the dusty soil! (2010, p. 69)

The lines from *Gitanjali*, 19 "The morning will surely come, the darkness will vanish, and thy voice pour down in the golden streams breaking through the sky" (2010, p. 83) dispel fear and awaken hope in the minds of the readers. These lines, full of hope and faith in God, are particularly relevant in today's world as despair is the worst enemy of mankind in this pandemic-stricken world where human beings are struggling to adjust to the so called new normal ways of life with its new set of rules to abide by. Any act of re-reading a canonical text necessarily includes re-viewing, re-looking at it from newer perspectives, newer contexts and newer realities of life. Reading *Gitanjali* from the present standpoint and position of being sufferers of a global crisis where human mortality rates have increased all over the world and immediate future looks bleak and uncertain, this text generates hope and faith in God which is essential for maintaining sanity, strength, and rationality.

The oft-quoted poem "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" (2010, pp 106-107) contains Tagore's vision of India. Being a cosmopolitan and a champion of humanism, Tagore hated narrow barriers between man and man. He wanted knowledge to be free flowing, East and West to meet in a common platform and spread the message of equality and brotherhood. Truth and reason were of utmost importance to him and he wanted freedom in the true sense of the word and to not be limited to mere decolonization of the Nation. In a letter to C.F. Andrews, he had written, "I love India-but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am not a patriot-I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world" (Dasgupta, 2009, p. xxxii). The founding of the Visva-Bharati University can be read as a prime example of his deep belief in the classical philosophic concept of regarding the world as one family, *vasudhaiva kutumbakum* (Dasgupta and Guha, 2013, p. xiii). Again, it is noteworthy that Tagore aimed at transcultural unity but was always mindful of ground realities. He returned the conferred knighthood after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre of 1919.

In *Gitanjali*, 36 “This is my prayer to thee, my lord” (2010, p. 108) the poet prays for strength of mind. He prays for strength to face the joys and sorrows of life, strength to serve the poor and the needy, strength to rise above petty trifles of everyday life and above all prays for strength to “surrender my strength to thy will with love” (2010, p. 108). This prayer to the lord is also extremely relevant in the present context as we need to rise above the crisis surmounting us for acquiring mental peace.

Poems such as *Gitanjali* 45 “Have you not heard his silent, steps? / He comes, comes, ever comes” (2010, p. 123), *Gitanjali* 49 “You come down from your throne and stood at my cottage door” (2010, p. 133) celebrate the arrival of the God to the humble cottage of the devotee. A devotee is also special to the God and the relationship is mutual. God is celebrated as the Creator of the cosmos and light symbolises Godliness. In *Gitanjali* 57, the poet pays his homage to the light of the universe by offering a melodious and poetic song:

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 (2010, pp 153-154).

Tagore also takes up the theme of liberation or moksha from the cycle of birth and death. It is the cherished goal of the human soul and the poet desires to stand before God once his work on earth is over. Hence, in *Gitanjali*, 76 he writes, “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?” (2010, p. 188).

Meditations on death recur in several poems of *Gitanjali*. It is a recurring theme in Tagorean literature. In the essay titled “Universalism and Ethnicity in Tagore’s Songs and Dance” Amita Dutt Mookherjee notes that in the lyric ‘*Marana re tuhu mama Shyama samana*’, the poet equates Krishna with death. (2013, p. 248). Again, in his travelogue *Japan Jatri* he describes his experience of traveling along the South China Sea where he felt that “everything around him was engulfed in the darkness that was both mysterious and unfathomable, like Krishna and again like death. Our known world is full of light but is limited, circumscribed. Beyond this lies the eternal inscrutable darkness that is constantly beckoning us or even perhaps challenging us. Only a few can hear the call of the Dark as just a few can hear Krishna’s flute and it is these few who leave their known world to seek the uncertain, the unknown and the boundless” (Mookherjee, 2013, p. 249).

Death is the ultimate reality of mortal life and the poet welcomes death. In *Gitanjali*, 86 he promises to offer his forlorn self as the last offering to the Lord (2010, p. 205). The idea of death knocking on the door of the poet is revisited in *Gitanjali*, 90. The poet promises to welcome death as his guest and gift him the “full vessel of my life- I will never let him go with empty hands” (2010, 212). Having submitted his self to the service of God, he is not afraid of death. In *Gitanjali*, 91, he welcomes death and views it as “the last fulfillment of life” (2010, p. 213). He embraces it in the lines “O THOU the last fulfilment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me! Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life” (2010, p. 213). He learns to let go of worldly desires and embrace the things he overlooked in life:

Things that I longed for in vain and things that I got-let them pass. Let me  
but truly possess the things that I ever spurned and overlooked (2010, p. 216)

He looks back at the life he has lived and beautifully describes it as “unsurpassable” in *Gitanjali*, 96 (2010, p. 222). The poem reveals his fulfillment and joy. The concluding poems *Gitanjali* 102 and 103 sum up the thematic content and philosophical richness of the text. The song offerings are the poet’s homage and salutation to God. It flows spontaneously from the depths of his being. Every word is an emotion, a deep feeling describing his relationship with the divine. It is as mystic as God:

I put my tales of you into lasting songs. The secret gushes out from my heart.  
They come and ask me, “Tell me all your meanings”. I know not how to  
answer them. I say, “ah, who knows what they mean!” They smile and go  
away in utter scorn. And you sit there smiling (2010, p. 231)

The songs are his salutation to God. They are woven together in a garland and should be viewed, read and appreciated as parts of a complete whole:

Let all my sons gather together their diverse strains into a single current and  
flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee (2010, p. 233)

*Gitanjali* is relevant and meaningful both for ‘the home and the world’. Tagore was a staunch believer in humanism. He wrote in *The Religion of Man*, “I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and co-operation” (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2020, 57). Tagore sought to redefine cultural borders and boundaries with his artefacts. According to Ketaki Kushari Dyson, “As an artist, as a thinker, as a founder of pioneering educational institutions, he is really of global importance, though the world today may not be very aware of it. He is one of those handful of men and women whose ideas show us the way forward” (Dyson, 1996, p. 20). Thus, (re)reading this text can heal us and make us introspect; it can provide us with aesthetic pleasure, delight and ananda, thereby helping us emotionally and psychologically to tide over the present state of crisis and turmoil successfully. Tagore never lost his belief in man and humanity. Modern human beings should certainly follow the footsteps of Tagore, a great visionary, to retain faith in human capacity to rise above all obstacles and carry on with the progress of civilization while remaining rooted to ethics.

#### References:

- Alam, F. (2020). The English Writings: An Overview. In S. Chaudhuri (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore* (pp 158- 186). Cambridge University Press.
- Atwood, M. (2010) [2009]. *The Year of the Flood*. Anchor.
- Beckett, S. (2011) [1952]. *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Grove Press.
- (2011) [1938]. *Murphy*. Grove Press.
- (2009) [1957]. *Endgame*. Faber.
- Camus, A. (1991) [1947]. *The Plague*. Vintage
- Chaudhuri, S. (Ed.) (2020). *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dasgupta, Sanjukta et al. (2013). *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore’s Fiction and Films*. Orient Blackswan.
- Dasgupta, S. & Guha, C. (Eds.). (2013) *Tagore: At Home in the World*. Sage.
- Defoe, D. (2003) [1722]. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Penguin.
- Dyson, K.K. (1996). In *Your Blossoming Flower-Garden: Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo*. Sahitya Academi.
- Jain, M (Ed.) (1992). *T. S. Eliot: Selected Poems*. Oxford University Press.
- King, S. (2011) [1978]. *The Stand*. Anchor.
- Kripalani, K. (1962). *Rabindranath Tagore, A Biography*. Oxford University Press.

- Mookherjee, A.D. (2013). Universalism and Ethnicity in Tagore's Songs and Dance. In S. Dasgupta and C. Guha (Eds.), *Tagore: At Home in the World* (pp 245-250). Sage.
- Mullen, T. (2007) [2006]. *The Last Town on Earth*. Random House.
- Poe, E (1903). *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*. *The Works of Edgar Allen Poe (Lit 2GO Edition)*. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from [http:// etc.usf.edu/lit2go/147/the-works-of-edgar-allen-poe/5258/ the-conversation-of-eiros-and-charmion/](http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/147/the-works-of-edgar-allen-poe/5258/the-conversation-of-eiros-and-charmion/).
- Prince, F.T. (Ed). (1962). *Milton: Paradise Lost Books I and II*. Oxford University Press.
- Shelley, M. (2015). *The Last Man*. Createspace Independent Publisher.
- Tagore, R. (2010) [1913]. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. Parul.
- Wells, H. G. (2001) [1898]. *The War of the Worlds*. Prakash Books.
- Yeats, W.B. (2010) [1912]. In S. Bhattacharyya and M. Chakraborty (Eds), *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (pp 13-27). Parul.

