

Revisiting God: Tagore's Poems versus the Poems of the Western world.

A Comparison and Contrast

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore who drank deep in the bengal renaissance amalgamated into him the rich cultural and mystical heritage of India and the progressive rationalistic idea of the West. He has garnered a unique position for himself in the whole world by his unflinching devotion to God and his deep love for reliving the life, which gave expression to his poem-cum-songs in *Gitanjali(Song Offerings)* (1913). God has been an invisible presence in the Indian as well as Western literature. But the two different cultures have different concept and tradition of God, though it goes without saying that in some points they overlap. Here this paper seeks to situate Tagore`s perception of God in between the classical and romantic notion of Him and in that process it tries to set Tagore`s God in comparison and contrast with the God of the Western poets.

Keywords: Renaissance, Rationalistic, Mystical, God, *Gitanjali*, Classical, Romantic.

Though M.K. Naik in his *A History of Indian English Literature* says about Tagore that "Tagore`s career as an Indian English poet began by sheer accident.", we cannot disprove the fact that this beginning of his poetic career by accident turned into a great incident not only in his life but also in the history of Indian thought and writing. Tagore started writing poetry at a very early age. Then his eyes feasted upon the nature and its elements with eagerness and culled from them sheer pleasure and childish delight.

But Tagore turned to deep mysticism from simple romanticism as he grew mature. His receiving of Nobel Prize in 1913 proves that he has made a great impression not only in the minds of his generation of his own country but also in the minds of the western people. The book that introduced him to the whole world is *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* which is the culmination of his mystical thought. Almost all the poems there Tagore has

dedicated to God. He has become a worshipper of God all along his life. But his approach towards God is somewhat different. Here this paper seeks to situate Tagore's perception of God vis-a-vis the God seen through the eyes of the western poets. He has not looked upon God as something transcendental whose existence is beyond our mortal world but someone immanent in the whole creation. We cannot deny the influence of the western poets, especially the English romantics, on Tagore's poetry. But in his perception of God he seems a little bit different from them. He has remained aloof from way the western poets have visualized God. Western poetic tradition broadly bifurcates itself into two halves - Classicism and Romanticism. And the way these two different traditions look at God is also different. The classicist writers have viewed God as something transcendental. They believe in the finite potentiality of human beings and celebrate the omnipotence of the Almighty. But renaissance humanism has brought about a sea change in human perspective. The God-centric world has been supplanted by the anthropocentric world. Human beings have come to know of their limitless possibilities. And this has paved the way for the romantic concept to thrive upon the idea that human beings are endowed with infinite potentiality. Romantics have elevated human beings to the level of God retaining a sense of faith in His supremacy. As for example, Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound* endowed Prometheus with god-like strength to steal fire from the hearth of Zeus but ultimately he made god win over such audacity by inflicting fatal punishment to him. But Tagore has been brought up in such a culture which has fed into him the mixed knowledge of eastern mysticism and western rationalism. He has been reared up with the knowledge of *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *the Gita*, *Sanskrit kavyas*, the great Indian epics as well as the western philosophy and literature. The blend of these things has greatly impinged on his sensibility and modified his sense of understanding the Ultimate, the Absolute. And mixed with this approach is his naive empiricism. Tagore has neither glorified or lamented the state of infinitesimality of human existence like the classicist nor has he given any credence to the belief of the extreme potentiality of human beings even to challenge that of the god like the romantics. Rather he has taken a middle way in his approach to God. Whereas the western poets have either turned God into a supernatural being or metamorphosed human beings into God, Tagore has humanized him. He has turned God into a human being like him and still has maintained a sense of humility before His altar. One great classical writer Dante in his *Divine Comedy* allegorically charts the journey of the human soul to reach God. In this metaphorical journey only reason enables him to reach the gate of Heaven. And finally to reach it he needs something more, namely, faith and love to accompany him. But in Tagore's case it is intuition which enables him to reach the Ultimate. In the western culture people living in brick and mortar could not discover a proper way to the knowledge of the Ultimate. They have known Him through the external world of forms and the faculty of reason. But Tagore's perception of the existence of the mundane world has given rise to his experience of the existence of god in the living and non-living things around and beyond him. The religious poets like Milton and G.M Hopkins have a notion of god who is transcendental, and has a

metaphysical existence. And this has distanced them from the absolute rather than bringing them closer to Him. They have only witnessed and praised the apparent, superficial and eye-soothing beauty of the world created by god but they have missed to see an underlying uniformity in things different in forms and colors. In the poem *Pied Beauty*, G.M Hopkins says,

All things counter, original spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

But in Tagore's poetry and songs addressed to god, he has endeared himself to the absolute. He has visualized and perceived him from a very close distance. God has sometimes taken the form of his friend, sometimes as his father, sometimes as his lord, sometimes as his beloved and so on and so forth. God appears in his poetry as an interlocutor who is having conversation with the poet himself. In *Gitanjali* poem no.2, he utters

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and
Call thee friend who art my lord.

A great span of time has elapsed in the life of Tagore worshipping god in the form of poetry and song. He believes in the abstract notion of joy and love which are the staple elements of the creation and god manifests himself to us through his beautiful creation which gives one the ineffable utterance of love and joy that bind all of us to the whole creation. He has surrendered himself completely to god and has sung his praise in his songs. His poetry has taken the form of music which he believes to be the purest form of art and through which he can utter his words of devotion in a very modest tone.

In the western literature Christianity has a huge influence. Almost all the religious poets of the western world have in one way or the other been influenced by the great Christian scripture, the Bible. From Dante through Milton to Donne and Vaughan the trajectory to the development of and engagement with the Christian mythology is very clear. Though some other later poets like Emily Bronte and Christiana Rossetti have shown their religious tendency in a different way in the sense that they have explored a first-hand experience of god in their poems. Their perception of god has neither been colored by the Christian influence nor has it been tarnished by the counter-biblical notion in the epoch-making book *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin. Emily Bronte writes in her poem, *No Coward soul is Mine*

Thou-Thou art Being and Breadth,
And what Thou art may
Never be destroyed.

Still their imagery and symbols are drawn from the Christian mythology. In Christianity

especially in the New Testament book Jesus Christ has been conceived of as the incarnation of the god himself. But turning a human being into god is a far cry different from turning god into human being. In the western world as people being separated from the actual world of the senses by the walls, a mark of their progressive civilization, did not find a way of direct communion with the absolute. And as a result they have deified human beings into god discerning a great deal of potentiality in them. But in our ancient Indian culture people lived in close communion with the nature in a harmonious way which made them experience god from a very narrow gap. Their experience of such transcendental figure in the mundane, ordinary world has informed the ancient Indian texts like Vedas, Upanishads etc. and which has had a profound influence in molding Tagore's sensibility and refining his experience of god. In the western world religion and the invocation of god have been necessitated to impart the sense of morality. But Tagore has experienced god for the sake of experience, he has known 'the man in Himself' and not someone whose construction has been required for the maintenance of the civilization by an uncalled-for, insincere devotion towards Him, which does not well out of one's heart spontaneously and therefore he has brought him down to this mundane world. He has found god in the quintessence of dust, in the natural world, in the world of forms and above all in the heart of man. Rather than having belief in the incarnation of God he has de-incarnated him and anthropomorphized him with whom he can hold forth, before whom he can bow, to whom he can sing his songs of praise with utter humility stripping himself of any show of pretention, arrogance, pride and embellishments. As he again writes

My song has put off her adornments. She has no
pride of dress and decoration. (Gitanjali, poem 7)

Tagore's sense of god smacks of his love and affection for the ultimate. His understanding of the absolute is shaped by his sense of duty, responsibility and love towards human beings, which is again derived from his lived experience of the world of mundane reality. He vigorously asserts that the truth and beauty, though they may exist for their own sake, are not independent entities. While poet Keats in his poetry invoked death frequently amidst sufferings, which becomes manifestly expressed in the following lines from his *Ode to The Nightingale*

I have been half in love with
easeful Death.
Call'd him soft names in many
a mused rhyme.

but Tagore who has seen the death of his near and dear ones from a very close quarter has not refused to live ever. He has looked upon life and death in the same way. 'And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well' (qtd in Yeats' introduction to *Gitanjali*) He looked upon god as his companion, he has always sought his company,

has formed camaraderie with him, which gives him sustenance and means to live his life to the fullest. His idea of living life as God's plenty and his notion of death as the continuation of another life has impressed upon one great war poet so much so that a line from his poetry gets imprinted in the mind of the latter.

'When I go from here let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable' lines which were reportedly quoted by Wilfred Owen to his mother upon going to the War. (Kripalani 279).

Wordsworth, one of the great romantics, whose pantheistic view has pervaded most of his poems has celebrated god in the forms of nature. Pantheism which is the belief that God is all things has a connotation of atheism in it. Coleridge explains this in a letter to Dr. Priestley: "How is it that Dr. Priestley is not an atheist? - He asserts in three different places, that God not only does, but is, everything.- But if God be every Thing, every Thing is God:- which is all the Atheists assert." (Ulmer 11). This pantheistic idea may have been what led Coleridge to call Wordsworth "Semi-atheist." (Ulmer 9). Wordsworth even presents nature as a means towards god in his *Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815*. Even his attraction to the "natural world" is a "fascination that inspires not merely use of natural imagery but delight in the natural world as a way towards God" (Countryman 49). Whereas Wordsworth turns to nature for inspiration and solace when 'fever of the world' hangs upon 'the beatings of [his] heart' and when plagued by living amidst the hustle and bustle of city life, Tagore finds pleasure in his performance of duties and responsibilities in his Visva-Sangsar(world of Universe). He is not an escapist.

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the
 embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight. (Gitanjali, poem 7)

Again in some places Tagore's idea of god also coincides with that of Wordsworth. For example, Wordsworth's perception of the spiritual presence in nature is akin to Tagore's perception of mystical presence in the Universe.

Tagore's idea of god as integral, inherent in the cosmos, whose presence can be felt everywhere gives rise to his notion of non-duality. He believes in the continuum of the human self and the ultimate self. Though they may apparently exist separately still they are not separate. Indian philosophy teaches him that the human self should always strive for reaching the ultimate self and then to get unified into one. He believes that if one can understand this thing one can only see joy and love in the creation and nothing else. This sense of unification has been impeded by several hurdles and obstruction in the western world. Thereby they cannot relish to the fullest the feelings of joy and love in the creation and for this lack of unity they always see things on their surface reality. They praise the beauty of God, they express wonder at the splendid creation of God but

they fail to realize that underlying the apparent differences and discords there lies absolute unity, absolute uniformity. And their incomplete understanding of the absolute stems from the lacuna in their understanding of reality. That is the reason why the western people have failed to see god as themselves, their friend, their companion, and their soul-mate.

Tagore does not believe in religion centered upon god rather his faith in god becomes his religion. His religion consists in his poetry. W.B. Yeats in his introduction to *Gitanjali* says about Tagore's religion

A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble.

His religion is again not an orthodox one, rather his notion of man and god transcends every boundary and he emerges as a cosmopolitan figure who then embraces the whole world to his bosom.

... religion is too concrete a thing, though I have no right to speak about it. But if ever I have somehow come to realize God, or if the vision of God has ever been granted to me, I must have received the vision through this world, through men, through trees and birds and beasts, the dust and the soil.
(Radhakrishnan xix)

His consciousness of god harks back to the teachings of Upanishads, the teachings of Buddha and Jesus Christ. At the basic level he finds harmony in all things, and he believes it is our differentiating mentality that creates separation in things. Some modern European philosophers maintain that the Brahma of India is a mere abstraction of all that is in the world. But this is certainly not in accordance with the pervading spirit of the Indian mind. Instead, it is the practice of realizing and affirming the presence of the infinite in all things which has been its constant inspiration. Herein lies his difference in philosophy of God from the philosophy of the Ultimate propounded by the western philosophers. His god-consciousness which is all-consciousness in space or the world of extension and all-consciousness in soul or the world of intension is what he has stressed upon in his poems and songs. His sense of god which is all-pervading, which pervades the human consciousness as well as the consciousness of the world is all that has made him portray god in the human form.

His god-consciousness and devotion to Him not only inhabit his poems and songs but also his prose works especially in the form of lectures delivered at Harvard University, Oxford University and Andhra University are redolent of his notion of God, Man and

the Universe forming a whole. In his lecture at Harvard University in 1912, a year before receiving his Nobel Prize, which is compiled as *Sadhana*, he has time and again emphasized man-Nature relationship, the unity of creation, Union with God/Brahma and the reality of life and death.

In the conclusion it may be said that though Tagore and the western poets have different worldview and different realization of god, still they agree on some points. This is not because of their different mentality but because of the times and atmosphere they lived in, which shaped their attitude and notion about the world and god. And finally it can be said that Tagore has duly paid off his debts to the English poets and this is in evidence from the fact that not only Indian philosophy of mysticism in general and but also Tagore's philosophy of god in particular made such huge impact upon the western world that it led the two great poets of the modern Europe, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot to embrace eastern spirituality for their metanoia as well as for their call to the people to get out of the modern Wasteland by taking recourse to eastern spirituality.

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