

Book Review

Song Offerings and Gitanjali: A Meta-critical Aesthete in Rabindranath Tagore” by Avik Gangopadhyay



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Abstract

"Song Offerings and Gitanjali - A Meta-critical Aesthete in Rabindranath Tagore" by Avik Gangopadhyay presents a pioneering analysis of Tagore's Nobel Prize-winning anthology, "Song Offerings," exploring dimensions previously overlooked by both Indian and Western critics. Gangopadhyay, an acclaimed author on literary criticism and philosophy, provides a thorough examination suitable for a thesis on the English translation of "Gitanjali." The book meticulously traces Western critical responses to "Song Offerings," highlighting reviews by notable critics such as Edmund Gross, Ezra Pound, and Evelyn Underhill. Gangopadhyay delves into Tagore's psychological and philosophical influences, connecting them to personal and political events in his life. The book argues that "Song Offerings" is not merely a translation but a "transcreation," adapting the original Bengali poems to resonate with European audiences while retaining Tagore's romantic and spiritual essence. Gangopadhyay's analysis distinguishes itself by exploring the interplay of romantic and mystic elements in Tagore's work, establishing him as a prominent literary critic with a unique perspective.

Keywords: *Rabindranath Tagore, Song Offerings, Gitanjali, Nobel Prize-winning anthology, Literary criticism, Philosophy, Western critical responses, Edmund Gross, Ezra Pound, Evelyn Underhill, Translation vs. transcreation, Psychological influences, Philosophical influences, Romantic elements, Mystic elements, Spiritual essence, European audiences, Literary analysis, Tagore's personal and political events*

A Seminal Essay of Rabindranath Tagore's Anthology

"*Song Offerings and Gitanjali - A Meta-critical Aesthete in Rabindranath Tagore*" by Avik Gangopadhyay is an anatomizing work on Tagore's Nobel Prize winning anthology *Song Offerings* that breaks new grounds with perspectives hitherto unexplored by critics either in India or in the Occident. Avik Gangopadhyay has penned several books on literary criticisms, linguistics, literary theories, philosophy and a smorgasbord of subjects, all of which are uniquely informative trailblazers, not mere how – tos serving as bazaar notes to help examinees. However, this book fits well for a Thesis on the English translation of *Gitanjali*. Not for nothing has Avik Gangopadhyay won accolades and honors from foreign universities as well as literary circles, and even features in various collections and editions as a scholar, writer, critic and researcher extraordinaire.

The book under review is a meticulously researched work that traces the critical response of the western world to the publication of *Song Offerings* by India Society in London ranging from the weekly literary supplement of The Times, London to Poetry, the news magazine of young American poets. Various critics of considerable repute like Edmund Gross (The Times), Ezra Pound (Poetry), Evelyn Underhill (Nation), Lascelles Abercrombie (Manchester Guardian) penned rave reviews extolling the literary qualities as well as the philosophical depth of the poems translated into English from Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore himself with a few suggestions from his friend William Butler Yeats.

The book dwells in detail the background and sources of inspiration that prompted Tagore to compose these poems in Bengali. Avik Gangopadhyay, as a writer and researcher has always been uncompromising. He has discussed Tagore's psychology and philosophical outlook in minute detail by referring to several poems, not all belonging to the anthology under review. He has even discussed the controversial views of some critics and biographers of Tagore, but has not left the reader in a welter of confusion as to which view to accept. Avik systematically argues and proves his view of Tagore's perception shaped by the Upanishads and the Vedas as well as by the series of events in his life, many of which were extremely tragic as the demise of his wife or his ten-year old son. Even the political events like the partition of Bengal or the boycott of foreign clothes and their resultant turmoil found their echoes in some of his lyrics. The hymnal *Naivedya* (an anthology of spiritual lyrics) resonate deeply through the verses in *Song Offerings*.

Avik, unlike most Bengali self - proclaimed erudite critics who have an irrepressible urge to locate the primary source of Tagore's inspiration for poesy in his controversial relation and torrid romance with his sister - in - law (Notun Bouthan), maps out the individualistic philosophy underlying most of his lyrics. Again, it needs to be pointed out that this individualism is in sharp contrast to the European utilitarian thought. It is the idea of the individual self in which the ego of the self gets effaced with the union of the self with the macrocosmic infinite consciousness that continuously creates, preserves and destroys in its universal role while working through the individual egoistic self in its macrocosmic creation of temporal beauty as well as the subliminal creation of art, poetry and music.

By far the most important aspect of this book is enlightening the reader that much of *Song Offerings* is not a translation, nor even transliteration, of Gitanjali. It is transcreation - a whole new idiom replacing the original Bengali expression to ensure that strict allegiance to the Bengali vocables in composing the English version did not result in ideational alteration degeneration.

Yet the writer is impartial in judging the quality of the translation. He does not forget to mention the case of poems 7, 14, 28, 29, 30, 32 and 79 where "excessive centralizing tendency has ostracized the ornate flow of writing".

Originally Rabindranath Tagore did not consent to the idea of translation and "did not want to sever his own compositional style in his mother tongue". He had rejected the request of his friend Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose to translate his poems. "The extravagance of support, inspirations and constant requests from friends like Pramath Lal Sen, Brajendranath Seal and Jagadish Chandra along with the eagerness and desires of Rothenstein - Froese - Strongwaite disturbed the poet's stubbornness in not translating his poems. Ultimately the poet gave in to be engaged in the translation himself."

Song Offerings, being the transcreation of original Bengali poems, is not any original English work. Still it does not retain the Bengali syntax or idiom throughout. It has its own word formation and syntax which reveal western influence. The archaic English of King James version of the *Bible*, as well as the styles adopted by English Romantic poets resonate throughout the book. This is primarily due to the fact that the English version of Gitanjali is a transcreation keeping the European readers in mind. Yet Tagore's romanticism, despite having influences of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, does not exclude the Romanticism of the traditional Sanskrit literature as found in Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa. Besides being romantic in style, Tagore has inwardly been metaphysical. Ergo, his Romanticism is mingled with a spiritual fervour. Avik Gangopadhyay has not for once missed out this aspect of assessing the poems of *Song Offerings* as a blend of romantic, mystic, spiritual and religious, skeptical and divinely inspired. This esoteric blend that distinguishes Tagore from other romantic poets who penned amatory lyrics, ultimately sublimates his poems into a new order of unique aestheticism.

Avik does not forget to investigate the crisis in consciousness engendered by the dichotomy of mystic harmony and romantic craving. Since the classic examination of romantic literature under one of its most characteristic aspects, namely, erotic sensibility, by Mario Praz, seldom has this crisis been explored by any literary critic, much less comprehensively explained. This aspect of the book establishes Avik Gangopadhyay in a niche of literary critics with an insightful knowledge and the acuity to explain romantic and mystic literature from an uncanny viewpoint.

Song Offerings and Gitanjali is a tour de force for all genuine Tagore aficionados. It is a valuable study for anyone with an academic interest in Tagore's works and in literature in general. Sri Soumyadeep Mondal deserves accolades for the artistic get up. Published by Booksway, Kolkata, the book is priced at Rs 300/-. ISBN 978-93-81672-73-0.

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