

Tagore's Song Offerings: Materialism Meets Mysticism

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore is a great poet who enriched the genre of mysticism in world literature and his Nobel winning work *Song Offerings* presents it extensively. There is no debate about the mystic journey we experience through the contents of this outstanding piece of literature, but what we overlooked massively all these years is the point of view of Tagore that is quite opposite to his mystic poems or songs. Whenever a reader peruses the poems of *Song Offerings*, he or she starts to evaluate Tagore just as a mystic, but overlooks his materialist being. There is a 'Master' or 'Lord' or a 'Thou' to whom Tagore surrenders himself, and all the offerings through the songs are made to 'Him'. This 'Lord' is not the unseen God. Tagore believes that 'life' is the power that gives him the spirit to experience the beautiful world. The presence of materialism does, in no way, hamper to nourish mysticism of the poems. *Song Offerings* indeed is a mystical journey but the mysticism does not roam around the perceived God, but the material 'life'. Tagore shows that if material 'life' is the circle, the centre of that circle is mysticism. Such an innovative and unique concept builds *Song Offerings*. This unrevealed part of Tagore, where material body gets a mystic heart, is going to be unleashed in this paper.

I. TAGORE'S SONG OFFERINGS: MATERIALISM MEETS MYSTICISM

Rabindranath Tagore is the name of a scorching sun in the sky of Bengali literature. His rays of wisdom enriched every visible corner of Bengali literature. This year whole Bengal will be celebrating the 100 years of Tagore's Nobel winning. It is an honour for me working on his *Song Offerings*, the translated version of *Gitanjali*, which brought him Nobel Prize in Literature, 100 years ago, in 1913. Rabindranath Tagore is considered as the icon of Indian mysticism. In fact, it is the mystic journey of his *Song Offerings* that introduced sub continental mysticism to the western world and brought him the honour to be a Nobel laureate. But in the last 100 years, we overlooked a very unique concept of Tagore. We misunderstood his poems just as mystic poems or praiseful songs towards God. These songs are not mere mystic song offerings to God; rather they have material values too. There is a 'Master' or 'Lord' or a 'Thou' to whom Tagore surrenders himself, and numerous offerings through the songs are made to 'Him'. It is natural to think that 'Master' is actually God who praised all through *Song Offerings*. But Tagore's 'Lord' is not the unseen God whom we usually believe in. Tagore considers the 'life' as God which he calls 'Jibon-Debota'. Tagore had a strong belief in the 'life' and being alive, more than an unseen God, and that is why he called the 'life' as God. And the praises, offerings

and surrender he made are not at all small in numbers; they are actually dedicated to 'life' which is known as his 'Jibon-Debota'. Tagore believes that life is the power that gives him the spirit to experience the beauty of world. He believes in inevitable death too as he believes in mortal life. It is quite unusual to mix up materialism with mysticism because they are the opposite concepts to each other which seem very nontraditional. This contradictory juxtaposition of opposite ideas is only introduced in Tagore's *Song Offerings*, but we could not discover it in last 100 years. *Song Offerings* is indeed a mystical journey but the mysticism roams around not only the so called God, but also the material 'life'. In my opinion, such a concept needs to be discovered and researched for the sake of finding fresh ideas in literature. Not only juxtaposition of materialism and mysticism but also different ideas with contradictions often dwells together in Tagore's poems. Usually a poet, who is the believer of materialism, does not believe in mysticism and vice versa. Tagore is not like common poets. The enmity between materialism and mysticism comes to an end with Tagore's innovative way of thinking in *Song Offerings*. The paper will prove the friendship among them that is done by Tagore in his immortal work of *Song Offerings*.

It is argued upon by all that Rabindranath Tagore is the World-Poet. Whether it is mysticism or materialism, every single idea reflects through his poems. He is a poet above all and then a philosopher. Before going to the detail discussion about his philosophy of mysticism and materialism, we should focus on the poet Tagore for a while. In the book *Tagore: Portrait of A Poet* by Buddhadeva Bose we find the poet Tagore and his ultimate identity of being a poet. Buddhadeva Bose writes about Tagore's identity as a poet:

...to think that much of the talk we have heard is on Tagore as nationalist, internationalist, messenger of peace and embodiment of India's heritage, a meeting point of East and West, and so on. Not that he was not any of these, but it may be useful to be reminded that he was a poet, and if he was not one, his other aspects would have had little meaning. And we are still scanning the horizon for someone from another part of the world to come and tell us that he responds to Tagore's poems, as poems, and not as expressions of appealing ideas. (Bose 22)

It is justified what Bose believes about Tagore. Tagore should be treated as a poet first. When we will be able to understand

him as a poet, we would definitely understand his ideas later. Poet Tagore is prominent to person Tagore. So poet is the real identity that should be applied to the outstanding talent of Tagore. Buddhadeva showed differences of mystic and poet when Western people often do not understand the particular terms clearly and call Tagore a mystic. Bose says:

...they refused to extricate Tagore from the magic word 'Hindu', they missed a very simple point: that Kabir was a real mystic and Tagore a real poet, and though mystics are sometimes poets they are not so by intention, and when poets have mystic moods they express them, like any others, in a conscious arrangement of words appropriate in the artist but not the true visionary. (23)

Here we can understand that mysticism is just an idea that Tagore used in his poems as a poet. That does not mean he is a mystic. The ideas of mysticism and materialism are the parts of his poetic philosophy.

If we want to go beyond of Tagore's poetry, we need to go through the ideas shared in his poems. It also needs a thorough study of his personal belief. Humayun Azad gave idea about Tagore's personal belief in his thesis paper *Rabindraprabandha: Rashtra O Shamajchinta*. He said about Tagore, "Being unanimous to other's norms is the Tagorian pattern. He is a believer, but it is not that his belief will not be agitated. His belief was agitated several times in life, and every time new threads of faith were born, this is the nature of his belief" (Azad 102, Author's translation). Tagore's belief is clear in Tagore's own words that we find in Ahmed Sharif's beginning essay in *Rabindra-Bhabna*:

This knowledge of theism makes man humorist, then the apparent antithesis of venom and nectar vanishes away-both feel benign to life. That is why we listen in Rabindranath's utterance-'I am naturally polytheistic-that means everyone calls me together, I entirely accept everything, as the tree becomes successful by taking everything from the light of sky to the deep down earth that takes the essence and verve inspired by the diversified states of seasons- I think my nature is like that-my soul can be successful with the touch of truth by being an insider through all' (Rabindra-Jibani-3: page: 294)...Just like this the Universality or the Universalism rises in Rabindranath. (Sharif 11-12, Author's translation)

Tagore declared himself as a polytheist and he has no objection to other's beliefs. This makes him a universal man who is unanimous to all ideas. That is why we get contradictory ideas coming together in his poetry. Sometimes the analysis of ideas can give direction to new ideas that are still unknown and untouched to the world. That is why; for the sake of proper understanding of Tagore's poems in *Song Offerings* we must analyze his ideas of mysticism and materialism.

That Rabindranath Tagore is a materialist may raise many questions. But it is a matter of concern how we ignored that part of Tagore's philosophy until now. It is not a small or ignorable matter at all. The mystic part is very commonly known to the readers of Tagore that is why, I am emphasizing in his materialistic view that is hardly known to us. Materialism is present in his thought as well as in his poems. He wrote the poems in such a way that no one gets disappointed with the inner meanings. But we can get various meanings in his poems if we look carefully through them. These can be taken as offerings to God and also as love poems. They can be described as mystic poems and also as materialistic poems. Tagore had no intention to hurt the religious belief of people. So he chose a pattern where he could express his own feelings and also the religious feeling of general people. He is not from actual Hindu religion. His religion is called 'Brahma' that he got from his ancestors. In this religion people believe that there is only one supreme power who is directing the whole world and the universe. Tagore developed the same belief from his childhood. But with the growing ages he starts to think more freely and rationally about the worldly affairs. He blends science with his religious knowledge. He understands that God is powerful because of the mankind he created. So Tagore starts to observe the life of general people and study their minds. He finds God as the power lying within human soul. God is no one who is different from human beings. God is the life of every living being, God is the energy that flows everywhere. The very beginning poem of *Song Offerings* says,

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. (1-4)

In these lines it is clear that Tagore finds his God in human lives. He says about the endlessness of human soul that fills up with life every time when it becomes empty. Tagore praises the immense power of human soul. Life is the positive thought or hope, and emptiness is frustration. So when we become frustrated, hope keeps us alive to look forward and move ahead; this is what Tagore means to say in this poem. Readers often presume 'Thou' as God, but actually this 'Thou' means life which is God to Tagore.

If we study Tagore's life, we come to know that he believes life as God. He calls his God 'Jibon-debota'. In Bengali if we break the phrase, it means 'life like God'. The concept of 'Jibon-Debota' brings us to Tagore's materialistic thought. Though his mystic thought in *Song Offerings* is undeniable, it is the humanism more than mysticism that brought him the Nobel Prize. His humanism does not mean only mysticism but materialism too.

Tagore's point of view is to share his philosophy with the western world that he endured like his ancestors and that is necessary for the sake of humanity. In "The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech" that we find in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: a miscellany*, he mentioned there, "We know what we have to be proud of, what we have

inherited from our ancestors, and such opportunity of giving should not be lost-not only for sake of our people, but for the sake of Humanity” (Tagore 964). This could be the reason for what Tagore considered his *Song Offerings* as his philosophical, more precisely mystical work and kept the material effect behind the curtain. Another reason for camouflaging the material effect with mystic cover may be his wish of introducing Indian heritage and philosophy, which stands on a base of religion, to western world. His speech clarifies his mission of uniting Indian culture with western culture:

I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity. This ideal of unity never rejects anything, any race, or any culture. It comprehends all, and it has been the highest aim of our spiritual exertion to be able to penetrate all things with one soul, to comprehend all things as they are, and not to keep out anything in the whole universe-to comprehend all things with sympathy and love. (965)

The one soul Tagore mentions in his speech is not just the meaning of uniting soul of East and West, but also the union of ‘Jibatta’(soul or spirit of living beings) and ‘Paramatta’(supreme soul or spirit). His belief upon the concept of soul, spirit, and life provokes us to look into his material thoughts.

His materialism is a mystery that can be solved through the analysis and study of his personal views. His personal belief attests that he is a believer of life, not the perceived God. His poems indirectly indicate the celebration of life, celebration of human soul, celebration of natural power that flows in natural beings. If we try to find out praise of God, we find it in the form of holy soul of human. It proves what Tagore actually believes in. In poem number 3 Tagore says about the holiness of soul that is only possible because of the presence of life. In this poem he calls life as Master:

I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.....
Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master! (1-2, 7-11)

In different times our life acts in different ways to us. The different ways of life are shown as music here and the song is the unending soul that would never be destroyed. The poet is so amazed with such music and song that this amazement makes him speechless. In another sense we can interpret this poem as a bridge between mysticism and materialism. Tagore blends the supreme God (mysticism) with human heart (materialism).

Again we see his material belief when he says in poem number 4, “Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my/ body pure, knowing that thy living touch is/ upon all my

limbs” (1-3). ‘Life of my life’ is a clear indication of Tagore’s materialistic point of view. He is directly saying about the life he considers as God, and its holy presence in the limbs of his body. This holy presence makes him to keep his body pure. Tagore gives high honour to life in these lines.

Tagore’s collection of songs named *Gitabitan* is divided into several sections such as ‘prem’, ‘puja’, ‘bichitra’ etc. The selection of poems or songs in this book is done by Tagore himself. This information is necessary because poem 5 of *Song Offerings* is placed in the section of ‘prem’ in *Gitabitan* in Tagore’s presence. Love songs are not offerings to God. If anyone wants to call *Song Offerings* as a collection of offering poems, it would be wrong. As Tagore himself placed an offering poem as love song instead of placing it in ‘puja’ section, so it is clear that Tagore’s point of view had sensuousness along with mysticism. Poem 5 is a song that is a dedication to the lover of the singer:

I ask for a moment's indulgence to sit by thy side. The works that I have in hand I will finish afterwards.
.....Now it is time to sit quite, face to face with thee, and to sing dedication of live in this silent and overflowing leisure. (1-3, 12-14)

Gitanjali is named *Song Offerings* in English but that does not mean that all the poems are offerings and dedicated to god. Tagore’s poems are not bound in limitations. That is why, even believers of different isms can take the poems in their hearts however they want to take. His poems are so flexible that anyone can interpret them in their own way. Even Tagore’s interpretation has been different in different places. The poem 5 of *Song Offerings* is an offering to God, but in *Gitabitan* it is a love song. Both interpretations are taken from Tagore. It is true that Tagore contradicts his own idea. Not only about poem 5 but also in poem 57 we find a contradiction. Poem 57 is placed in ‘bichitra’ section of *Gitabitan*. Poem 57 is an exceptional poem that can be placed in several genres:

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. (1-7)

But usually we know that God is often symbolized as light. Knowledge is also symbolic to light. Tagore can use several meanings of one word. It is his specialty and also the point of his self-contradiction. Contradictory ideas are mingled by Tagore in his *Song Offerings*. Such is materialism and mysticism. He praised the power of life and showed his materialism in poem 11:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a

temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy
God is not before thee! (1-5)

But again in the next paragraph of the same poem he became a devotee towards God and put his full trust on God's obvious presence:

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 of thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! (6-11)

It is Tagore who can bring material and mystic taste together. Such examples are not seen in any other poet's poetry. It is not only rare but also a new idea. If we look into his mystic thoughts in *Song Offerings*, there we find the material thoughts.

The famous Irish poet W. B. Yeats wrote the introduction of *Song Offerings* for Tagore. He found similarity of Tagore's poems to paintings. He called Tagore a painter. Probably it is Tagore's mysticism that made the whole world spellbound. Yeats was not different from them. So the mysticism was taken as painting to Yeats and he praised the painter:

This is no longer the sanctity of the cell and of the scourge; being but a lifting up, as it were, into a greater intensity of the mood of the painter, painting the dust and the sunlight, and we go for a like voice to St. Francis and to William Blake who have seemed so alien in our violent history. (Tagore xv)

In Europe Tagore became very famous after getting the Nobel Prize. Yeats was a little jealous of him because the Tagorian version, where Yeats had objection about quality of language, of translated *Gitanjali* got the Nobel Prize. Yeats earned his Nobel Prize after ten years of Tagore's achievement. He called Tagore's English as rubbish. Yeats had a racial conflict in his mind and for this reason he suddenly started to oppose Tagore's talent. It is true that Yeats helped Tagore a lot in translating *Gitanjali*, but it is Tagore himself who did the major work of translating the poems. We get to know about this jealousy in Hasan Ferdous's book *Rabindranath, Gitanjali o dui Harriet*. In this book we get Tagore's universalism, when Hasan Ferdous says about Tagore's criticism on European Nationalism, "Highly criticizing the European nationalism he said, the birth of imperialism is from this nationalism." (Ferdous 63, Author's translation). This 'he' is Tagore who do not like the racial differences among people, rather he believes in unity and globalization. This thought of universalism influences his mystic mind. Ferdous says about the nature of his mysticism, "...Which Indian philosophy and mysticism echoes in Tagorian poem, that is not only ancient, but also remained effectively unchanged from the very beginning." (65, Author's translation). Indian mysticism is opposite to dynamic western civilization. It is ancient but serene like a river. The serenity is unknown to the

inconsistent western world. Same serenity dwells in Tagore's poetry that surprises the western world.

Tagore is known as a mystic because of his both Bengali and English version of *Gitanjali*. The poems of this text are best interpreted from mystic view. Some poems are not meant to any other idea but mysticism like poem 67:

Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well. O thou beautiful, there in the nest is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours. But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word. (1-4, 13-16)

In this poem, Tagore is really a religious man who is praising the God's creatures and their aesthetic values. There is neither material view nor any other ideas than the mystic thought about the world's beauty and God's creation.

Another type of mysticism is seen in Tagore's poems where he is waiting for the inevitable death and his union with God. In some of his poems we can see that Tagore often takes death as a means for union with God. For this reason we find him waiting eagerly for his upcoming death as he wishes to meet God or the supreme power. Poem 91 reads:

O thou the last fulfilment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me! Day after day I have kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life. (1-5)

Tagore is not at all scared to face death. Again in Poem 90, he rewards death with all his beautiful achievements of life:

All the sweet vintage of all my autumn days and summer nights, all the earnings and gleanings of my busy life will I place before him at the close of my days when death will knock at my door. (6-10)

The direct presence of death or it can be said that the dedication to death is continuously noticeable from poem 90 to poem 103. In poem 92 his imagination of death is clearly seen in these lines:

I know that the day will come when my sight of this earth shall be lost, and life will take its leave in silence, drawing the last curtain over my eyes. (1-4)

Tagore loved his life and equally he loved his death. It is common to love life but loving one's death is very uncommon as death means the end of a life span. But Tagore is not like common people. In poem 95 he declares,

Even so, in death the same unknown will appear as ever known to me. And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well. (11-14)

His unique mystic thought is found in his famous poem 18 where his waiting mind sings of such loneliness that no one has ever seen before.

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens. Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?
 I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of then sky, and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind. (1-3, 10-12)

His song of loneliness touches our heart. Even reading this poem we become mystic for a while. It gives a perfect picture of a lonely person as well as lonely natural scenario. Again in the very last poem that means poem 103 we find the full sacrificial Tagore who submits his soul to the supreme God. This is no material God but the only creator whom we keep faith in. The poem 103 says, "In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my/ senses spread out and touch this world at thy/ feet."(1-3). The salutation ends with a humble surrender:

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. (11-14)

It indicates the final surrender of soul to God. Well, Tagore featured only his mystic or material ideas in *Song Offerings* that is not true. Some poems show patriotism, some show devotion to nature and so on. But this paper refers to show the juxtaposing presence of materialism and mysticism, so it is focused only into these two ideas.

The analysis is to bring a hidden part of Tagore in light. Tagore often made things possible that usually seems impossible. Poets cannot even think of crossing one's own genre but Tagore crossed his own talent several times. The contradictory ideas come together in his poetry- it proves how he surpassed himself. He, who can go beyond his belief and create such poems that are adorable to every kind of people, is of course an extraordinary talented person. Such talent is rare. This talent is rewarded with its deserving honour of Nobel

Prize. Tagore got what he deserved, so got his unparalleled creation *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings*.

1913 to 2013, 100 years of an immortal master piece of literature is going to be celebrated. 100 years of *Song Offerings* is definitely a pride to me as a Bengali. Tagore's Nobel Prize is not just Tagore's pride but also the pride of the whole Bengali nation. I am a part of it. Tagore's open mind in *Song Offerings* shows us different shades of life and death, and shades of nature and love. Somehow these shades bring us to the horizon where everything unites in a single point. Only Rabindranath could make it possible. He did so. He has given a mystic heart and material shell to *Song Offerings*. No one could do that except him. He really deserves the title World-Poet. Tagore is the first poet who brings contradictory ideas together that is similar to bring two opposite poles together. He is the magnet that joints the opposite poles of eastern and western literature. He walked in his own way and now we are following his way to seek friendship and decline enmity. If materialism can dwell with mysticism, it is possible for mankind to stay in peace without enmity. It is possible to vanquish racism by uniting all the nations. Tagore's message is not ignorable at all. His message has the power to fix the unstable conditions of the war-prone world and bring peace everywhere.

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