



Rabindranath Tagore's Protest, Renunciation, and Global Legacy through Gitanjali

Dr. Tilok Mondal

Assistant professor, Department of Bangla,

Mahila College Dalmianagar

Abstract:

This paper explores Rabindranath Tagore's complex engagement with colonial rule and his powerful act of protest against the British government following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It also examines the profound impact of Gitanjali—both the original Bengali version and its English translation—on world literature and global audiences. By renouncing the knighthood and dedicating his poetic work to international readers, Tagore positioned himself as a global humanist. The paper highlights how Gitanjali functioned as a literary bridge between East and West, embodying Tagore's vision of spiritual unity and human connection beyond national boundaries.

Keywords:

Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, knighthood renunciation, colonial protest, English translation, global literature, Indian aesthetics, Rosenstein, Nobel Prize.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate, remains one of the most celebrated literary figures of the modern era. His work transcended regional and national boundaries and resonated with a global audience. This paper focuses on two key episodes in Tagore's life that epitomize his moral courage and global literary vision: his protest against British colonial oppression, particularly the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the international success of his English translation of Gitanjali.

Tagore's Response to Colonial Violence

In 1919, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Punjab shook the conscience of the Indian nation. Though Tagore did not initially receive full details of the incident, he sensed the gravity of the events from early reports. Deeply disturbed, he expressed his protest by writing a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, which was later published in the Indian Daily News on April 16. The poet, known for his introspective and philosophical leanings, was moved to take a strong political stand.

In the wake of growing unrest and the imposition of martial law in Punjab, Tagore felt compelled to offer a proposal for unified resistance. However, his call for collective action was met with reluctance and rejection by the political leadership and the general public. Disillusioned by the apathy and the blindness of the British government toward the moral decay of its rule in India, Tagore renounced his knighthood—a title bestowed upon him by the British Crown in 1915. Through a formal letter, he requested to be relieved of the title “Sir,” marking an unprecedented act of cultural and moral dissent.

His decision sparked widespread debate and criticism, especially in foreign journals and newspapers. Despite the backlash, Tagore stood firm in his convictions, setting a unique example of protest that combined poetic grace with ethical firmness.

The Global Journey of Gitanjali

Parallel to his political expression was Tagore’s literary ambition to reach a global audience. His Bengali collection *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) had already won hearts in his homeland. However, it was the English translation of this work that catapulted Tagore onto the world stage. The translated *Gitanjali*—which was not a direct mirror of the Bengali original—was a carefully curated anthology comprising poems from several different collections, including *Gitanjali* (53 poems), *Gitimalya* (16), *Naibedya* (15), *Kheya* (11), *Shishu* (3), and individual poems from *Kalpana*, *Chaitali*, *Smaran*, *Achalayatan*, and *Utsarga*.

Unlike the Bengali version, which consisted of 157 poems and was not dedicated to anyone, the English version was dedicated to William Rothenstein, a friend and admirer who played a pivotal role in introducing Tagore to Western intellectuals. While the Bengali *Gitanjali* begins with a humble invocation, the English translation ends with a note of gratitude directed at foreign readers. This strategic adaptation was part of Tagore’s broader vision to establish a dialogue between Eastern spirituality and Western rationality.

The English *Gitanjali* received immense acclaim, especially from prominent literary figures like W. B. Yeats, who wrote an introductory note praising Tagore’s lyrical depth. The book’s success eventually led to Tagore being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, making him the first non-European recipient of this prestigious honor. The global recognition of his work was a moment of pride for the Indian subcontinent and especially for Bengal.

Literary Strategy and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Tagore’s translation strategy was not merely linguistic but also cultural. He crafted the English *Gitanjali* to reflect a universal spiritualism that could resonate with readers unfamiliar with Indian traditions. His prose-poetry style, devoid of strict meter, created a fluid rhythm that appealed to Western sensibilities. More than a literal translation, the English version was a reimagined spiritual experience designed to transcend cultural limitations.

Tagore believed that literature had the power to foster “intimate connections between the distant and the near.” In his vision, the world was not divided by national or linguistic borders, but united by shared human emotions and aspirations. *Gitanjali* was his offering to this ideal—a literary bridge between East and West.

Criticism and Legacy

Though Gitanjali was celebrated, some critics questioned its literary merit and the legitimacy of its Nobel win. There were even claims that the work had been overpraised due to orientalist fascination. Nevertheless, Tagore's contributions remained indisputable. He opened up a space for Indian voices in the global literary conversation, challenging the Eurocentric canon.

His knighthood renunciation was more than a symbolic gesture—it was a poetic act of resistance that further cemented his moral standing in the anti-colonial movement. Despite the controversies, Tagore continued to be a revered figure in both Indian and international contexts.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's life and work exemplify the fusion of artistic genius with moral courage. His response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, culminating in the rejection of the knighthood, was an act of ethical defiance rarely seen among literary figures of his time. At the same time, his English translation of Gitanjali allowed him to engage with the world on his own terms, offering a uniquely Indian yet universally appealing spiritual vision.

Through Gitanjali, Tagore succeeded in creating a "trap" for global languages, as it were—drawing them into a dialogue with Indian aesthetics and sensibility. His legacy lies not only in the Nobel Prize he received but also in the lasting spiritual and philosophical connection he forged with readers around the globe. He remains, to this day, a beacon of literary excellence and moral clarity in a fractured world.

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