

Tagore's *Gitanjali*: A Note on Publics of Performance

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow

Department of Comparative Languages and Culture

Barkatullah University

Bhopal, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

Tagore's *Gitanjali* has been written seeking inspiration from the *bhakti* tradition. The nuances of performance and reception of the tradition essentially involve two aspects- public and private. *Bhakti* as an act of personal devotion of an individual forms its 'private' character. The sonic performance of *bhakti* in forms such as *bhajans* addressed to Gods, accompanied by musical instruments and joyful cries of ecstasy, encompass the 'public' character. Both the 'private' and the 'public' are the modes of transcendental God realisation. While the 'private' is individual-centric, the 'public' can be understood in the sense of the integration of the individual with the Universal or the finite with the Infinite. The modes of publics of performance rely on transcendental collective shared experience as a catalyst of selftransformation and as an agent fostering national and universal brotherhood. This paper presents the case for incorporating publics of performance in the pedagogy for the study of *Gitanjali*, as a text of *bhakti* tradition. This would involve techniques like the inclusion of a CD demonstrating the rhythmic flow of reading, providing guidance on pronunciation, intonation,

emphasis, punctuation and groupings of words and phrases. The trainers, on a more dedicated note can evolve innovative teaching techniques such as a 'literary *jagran*' and perform a collective public reading accompanied by traditional musical instruments of the *bhakti* tradition such as cymbals and *dholaks*.

Keywords: Gitanjali, Rabindranath Tagore, *Bhakti* Movement, Performance Aesthetics, Publics of Performance

The British rule in India initiated a transformational course of socio-cultural assimilation and adaptation bringing forth amalgamated products of new thought such as the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj in the society; and the Bengal Renaissance in literature. The acquaintance of the Indian literary tradition with the West restructured our literary sensibilities bringing about an East-West amalgamation. However, the works of Rabindranath Tagore retain the unchanging ethos of the Indian civilization amidst such change. Even the most rejuvenated of his songs, resonate the eternal beat of the Indian philosophic tradition, combining the most sublime of thoughts with the most mellifluous grace. It is no wonder that, upon his arrival in London W.B Yeats had confided to Ezra Pound stating Tagore was, "someone greater than any of us". Tagore's belief in the primal oneness of mankind undoubtedly stems from the Indic philosophy and restores to us the universal ideal of becoming one with our fellow beings. It was his profound love for humanity; his vision of a world unaffected by bounds of 'narrow domestic walls'; which came back to him manifold accompanied by an impressive cavalcade of international supporters, promoters and advocates eventually fetching him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. He bore in his heart, an unbroken tradition of an apparently crumbling culture, converging the national tradition with the universal in cohesion. His intensely spiritual songs are an aesthetic fusion of the Indian with the Universal and are an embodiment of archetypal oneness of thought. His songs arise from a blending of the awakened Bengal

renaissance, inspired by Western thought, mixed with the indigenous Indian flavor of the intense *bhakti* tradition.

Tagore translated his poems from Bengali into English and shaped *Gitanjali*, which wraps up his influence of Upanishadic thoughts, Bengali Vaishnav poets and most prominently of the *bhakti* tradition of India. The *bhakti* movement of medieval India was characterized by a large number of saint-poets writing for social reforms, as *sadhakas* (meditators) in the name of God to serve the people. They were often anti-establishment, and against the authoritarian monastic order. The historiography of the *bhakti* movement emanates from the Indian philosophical and religious thoughts traced back to the *Vedas*. The *Upasana* of *Vedas* are regarded as the source of the *bhakti-marga* and the *Aranyakas* commend 'upasana' for *Vanaprastha* brahmins which is deemed to have later developed into the *bhakti* cult. During the medieval period, the Hindu decadence on account of the Mughal influence and internal conflicts led to a religious renaissance called *bhakti* movement. The *bhakti* tradition is full of admiration, gratitude and reverence for God and his beautiful Creation.

The idea of *bhakti* can be understood in the sense of two dimensions: public and private. *Bhakti* as an act of personal devotion of an individual forms its 'private' character. However, the aesthetics of performance in terms of songs and prayers sung to God, which may even be accompanied by dance are an integral part of the *bhakti* tradition. Even the personal performances of *bhakti* can be regarded as a manifestation of a public performance addressed to God as the audience. Shankara, in *Shivananda-lahari* expresses *bhakti*, through a metaphor of - the river or self, joining the ocean or Brahman. Abhinava Gupta in his treatise on *rasa*, examines the relationship between *rasa* or the 'flavours' of performance such as love, fear, pity and anger with *bhakti*, the 'key experience of life'.

The literary tradition of *bhakti* is thus linked to the aesthetics of performance and reception. The most sublime text of this tradition, the *Ramayanare* lates to this curious fact. The narrative of *Ramayana* which has a lush history of orature testifies the publics of reception. It is so recounted that Valmiki before embarking upon narrating the great epic, sat meditating on death, asatonement for his sins. Sitting alone he despondently, repeated the word “*mara*” (meaning dead in Sanskrit), while chanting continuously he gradually transposed the syllables and unintentionally thus meditated upon Lord “*rama*”. It was thus his mere uttering the name of the savior Rama, rather unknowingly, with his heart brimming with *bhakti*, which redeems him of his sins. The performance of sonic, aural and auditory role along with *bhakti*, thus together form the two key ingredients of the aesthetics of reception. Thus, the tradition *bhakti* or the universal devotional sentiment goes hand in hand with aural performance and orature. The Sanskritic advocates have recommended the aural performance of *mantras* in its genealogy and historicity throughout.

In the context of this tradition the pedagogy of studying *Gitanjali* should incorporate a rhythmic reading of the poems as an integral part of the study. This can be done by a teacher reading out the poem to the students; or the students reciting the poem to the teacher; or by alternating reading by a collective group of students. The obligation of publishers on this front should inclusion of a CD demonstrating the rhythmic flow of reading, providing guidance on pronunciation, intonation, emphasis, punctuation and groupings of words and phrases. They can also include the original Bengali version of the poems, apart from the translated English account. It is therefore clear that comprehension and paraphrase is only one dimension to the study of *Gitanjali*, or literature of the classical tradition, for that matter. A comprehensive study of *Gitanjali* must necessarily include an auditory performance.

Tagore had written various letters to his kin in which he expresses doubt on the quality of his translation in doing justice to his original work. In letters written to the poetess Amiya Chakravarty his secretary at that time he frankly admits:

You must have received those signed books of mine by now. I was struck when I glanced through them by how careless my translations were. I did not give enough time to thinking about the extent to which their essence can be lost through a change of language – I feel ashamed now. (Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* : Song Offerings)

Like everyone else, Tagore could not have escaped the transmutation associated with translation, yet without his translating his stupendous book of songs would not have been available for public reception, adulation and collective benefit. The so perceived individuality of *Gitanjali* thus compromised for its ‘universality’ – greater cause vindicates Tagore profusely. However, an auditory experience of the original poems written in Bengali can thus be most elevating for a motivated learner, in continuity of the *bhakti* tradition.

Further, reading the poem as a public event, with respect to the Indic tradition, in a so to say literary *-jagran*, with the readers reading keeping their shoulders upright and back straight, reading moderately and unassumingly can likewise draw in the message more easily and harmoniously; moving forth in their journey from the individual to the collective. The publics of collective recitation thus brings forth a transcendental collective shared experience facilitating the integration of the finite and the infinite. The nuanced *bhakti* paradigm being that when one speaks from the mouth, while his heart full of devotional sentiment or *bhakti* and when he does so collectively, he shares a collective transcendence and the publics of aesthetic performance, as a sublime act of transcendence. Samuel Rogers raises a similar appeal:

The soul of music slumbers in the shell

Till waked and kindled by the master's spell
And feeling hearts – touch them
but rightly- pour
A thousand melodies unfelt before.

The prophetic vision on the reception of *Gitanjali*, is corresponding to the public appeal of performance:

These verses.... as the generations pass, traveler will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers while they wait one another, shall find in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more better passion may bathe and renew its youth....

Tagore himself sings of unleashing his soulful wordless adulation for God in ecstatic, joyful sonorous prayer:

In the pulsing life of dance,
To thee I raise
In wordless praise
My eager body's rhythm'd cry –
This new birth's eloquence
In music and in gesture shines
My worship, Lord

Tagore seems to resonate the tradition of the *bhakti* poets who encouraged collective adulation in praise of God, inviting all *bhakts* or devotees to sing *bhajan* together, accompanied by sonorous musical instruments such as cymbals and *dholaks* (small drums), unleashing cries of joyful ecstasy instead of the stringent rules of *raag* and *taal*. He candidly declares in song VII:

My song has put off her adornments.

She has no pride of dress and decoration. Ornaments would mar our union;
they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy
whispers.

My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master poet, I have sat
down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of
reed for thee to fill with music.

Besides the publics of performance within institutional settings or beyond cuts across social hierarchies, physical boundaries building in a sort of carnivalesque-like atmosphere where the devotees are bound by a sublime shared experience, overlook the disparity of caste, race, social position, economic status etc. Tagore too shares this idea in *Gitanjali*: Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.

Therefore, the publics of performance and reading of *Gitanjali* can act an agent fostering self-transformation, national unity and universal fraternity. The pedagogy of publics of performance has a far more profound role to play than mere comprehension focused model.

Works Cited

Rogers, Samuel. "The Soul of Music Slumbers in the Shell". *Human Life*. Blackwood's Magazine. Vol. 4. Edinburg. Oct.1819. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. trans. William Radice. Penguin: U.K. Print.

Miller, Joseph Hillis. *Speech Acts in Literature*. California: Stanford University Press. 2001. Print.