



## REVISITING TAGORE: AN ICONOCLAST WITH A VOICE AGAINST SOCIAL BIGOTRIES THROUGH METAPHYSICAL CONCEPTS

**Shaila Binte Sattar<sup>i</sup>**

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature,  
University of Science & Technology Chittagong (USTC),  
Bangladesh

### **Abstract:**

Tagore is a name that does not welcome any introduction. His pieces have been explored and interpreted with versatility, diversity, and, to some extent, brutality. This paper analyses select Tagorean strokes in *Gitanjali* (1910) to find the voices against social dogmatism as felt by the poet. Relating to contemporary society, it can be viewed that Tagore was ahead of time in foreseeing the significance of a bigotry-free system where life and humans are rejoiced upon subduing class struggle, presumption, and discrimination. This study addresses these problematic facets of human society with close attention towards Tagorean philosophy and evaluation of institutionalised beliefs. It also assesses his use of metaphysics in establishing the power of communal harmony and coherence where every individual is equal.

**Keywords:** Tagore, *Gitanjali*, dogmatism, metaphysics

### **1. Introduction**

It is no surprise that Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) has long been revered for his delicate and picturesque strokes in *Gitanjali* (Naik, 1984) which offer an intensified view of metaphysical realities, sometimes allegorically and metaphorically (Prasad, 2007), though Nagarajan (1996) believes that the world, particularly the audience outside the Indian subcontinent, has long been oblivious to such a prodigal architect. Critics have labelled him a humanist, a universalist, an internationalist, and a staunch anti-nationalist since he pushed for India's independence from the British Raj and criticised colonialism (Alam & Chakrabarthy, 2011; Dasgupta, 2004). As a Bengali renaissance figure, he established a wide canon of literary nomenclature that distinguishes him apart from the rest. By discarding inflexible classical forms and grammatical structure, he modernised Bengali art and literature. Metaphysics in Tagore's poetry and his use of the metaphysical concept as a weapon of his protest against a tainted society will be the focus of this study. This is because of his spiritual humanism, which combined ancient Indian and Western

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: [shaila.sattar@ustc.ac.bd](mailto:shaila.sattar@ustc.ac.bd)

intellectual conceptions in order to link the limiting ego with the all-inclusive Being. The optimism and faith in human kindness he inspires in us is contagious. It is hypothesised in this study that the One's essence is within each and every human person. Harnessing this essence can favourably alter the course of human history and lead to a sustainable communal existence.

## 2. Defining Tagorean Metaphysics

Metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, is comprised of “meta” or “beyond” and “physics” or “material” which can be defined as the study which explores the entity/material beyond the physical world. Aristotle's work on physics was referred as "metaphysics" by an ancient editor of Aristotle's writings. For the study of what and how things are, metaphysics is more commonly utilised. In other words, Aristotle's Metaphysics does not rule out the metaphysical idea that everything changes. There are some aspects of existence that transcend the boundaries of time and space. It is the study of what it is to exist and the different kinds of existence that survive. Existence, objects and their attributes, space and time, cause and effect, and possibility are some of the metaphysical questions that might be asked. For Tagore, metaphysics is non-dualist, utterly absolute, faultless, isolated from the world, and is of little interest to Humans (Paul, 2006). While referring to the Absolute, we talk about an active, creative being that we may love and be loved by. Knowledge is not as vital as love. The divisions between things are either preserved or, in the exceptional case of knowledge, completely destroyed. When it comes to love, the lover and the loved one are distinct, but nevertheless connected. Love is able to preserve both unity and diversity, as Deshpande (2015) upholds. Advaitam, the connection with the Absolute, is the pillar of our inner goodness. In a sense, Tagorean vision relates to that of Plotinus, who viewed human souls as fragments of the One. Tagore tries to pursue the audience that Karma (action) should always be prioritised over any inconsistency and we need to spread the essence (goodness of heart) like candles. Darkness resides in materialistic minds whereas the light emerges from a soul free from prejudice or bigotry. Both *The Religion of Man*, compiled lectures of Tagore, and *Gitanjali*, collection of songs, intone the celebration of life and humane eminences over social and communal obstacles, be it religion, politics, economics, or policy.

Tagore teaches his audience that the three pillars of human flourishing are love, knowledge, and freedom. It is possible for people to break away from discrimination, intolerance, difference, and a disparity with love and care (Ghose, 2016; Lago, 1989). As a protest against these very prejudices, he uses metaphysics to teach his audience about existing malpractices and ill-treatment (Gupta, 2016). His love for the faith in the One is understandably expressed through “*Nature, the soul, love, and God, one recognizes through the heart, and not through the reason ... Reason is a tool, a machine which is driven by the spiritual fire*” (Joarder, 2019).

*Gitanjali* promotes the harmony of divinity, the natural world, and the human spirit. He maintains that these universes are inseparable from one another. As an

expression of his compassion for humanity, he extols the infinite patience of God. I believe that nature, as defined by Tagore, is fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be truly transcendent. Man is influenced by it. In nature, there are forces that are both positive and negative (but ultimately symbolise the One). These two forces also have an effect on human behaviour. Tagore's trust in rhythm and harmony as the universal law that governs all matter and all existence allowed him to continuously reconcile and harmonise life's extremes. Tagore uses his metaphysical notion to speak out against social bigotry. It is his belief that the Absolute is found in every human soul. The One is within each and every one of us. They are able to get closer to God through doing good deeds for others. As a result, he mounts a revolt against dogmatic social and religious beliefs. According to this study, the poet, a metaphysical believer, encourages his audience to believe that the Creator lives within their own souls, rather than in the physical world. The closer one gets to the common people, nature, and the components of the natural world, the more polished one becomes and the freer one becomes of societal prejudices, racial bias, and religious dogma.

### **3. Tagore and Bigotry**

By definition, bigotry is an infringement on human rights. A bigot is someone who harbours hatred, fear, and contempt towards others who are different from themselves (Brudholm, 2018, Cope, 2007). This might be as a result of aversion resulting from ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or age. Bigots use language, display mannerisms, and behave themselves in ways that not only insult or damage the entities they target but also foster a division in the minds of onlookers (Frederick et al., 2016; Frosh, 2002; Gay, 2013; Levin & MacDevitt, 2013). Thus, working-class and racially disadvantaged people feel dehumanised and isolated from the rest of society. Discrimination based on race is a broad term that encompasses many different forms of intolerance. For example, this form of prejudice can occur in every area of society (Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Levin & McDevitt, 2002; Levin & Nolan, 2016; Morgan, 2021; Okrent, 2020). In any definition of discrimination, there must be an emphasis on conduct. Race-based discrimination is separate from other forms of racial animus, such as prejudice, stereotypes, and outright racism (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Blank and Reed (2021) mandate human psychology and familial upbringing at the backend of such tendencies. Begby (2021) views bigotry as an unfounded and frequently unpleasant attitude or assumption about members of a group that has a significant impact on how individuals behave and interact with one another. Such insolences are often experienced by people based on ethnicity, sex, religion, or culture, among other factors. Discrimination can occur directly or indirectly, as viewed by Anderson (2010), in which cases the language and tone are used to sugar-coat the intention. It deprives people of the opportunity to reach their greatest potential. Over history, bigotry, be it social, political, or psychological, had a disastrous effect on mankind transforming itself into colonialism, genocide, and racism (Brown, 2010). Anderson (2010) claims that society is ruined as a result of bigotry. People have lost touch

with their moral and ethical principles. They travel to the sacred spot to demonstrate their devotion to God, but their hearts and minds are empty. Tagore's writings, which reveal the genuine road to displaying an individual's love for one's creator, stand against such social ills. With great diffidence and the anointment of the immortality of the human soul, Tagore begins his Song Offerings with his pronouncement of the immortal one. This is where he uses Hindu mythology, which emphasises the resurrection of the human soul. The soul continues to complete the circle until it satisfies the final answer to the question of the Absolute that metaphysics proposes. Buddhism and Sufism both emphasise the concept of salvation and Fanah, respectively, as a foundation for these beliefs. A person's existence is perpetually replenished by the Creator, who repeatedly fills this body, which is like an empty vessel.

*"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy  
pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again  
and again, and finest it ever with fresh life."*

In this poem (the first one in *Gitanjali*) Tagore makes use of the reincarnation theory to illustrate the duality of human existence: the mortal and the immortal. Because of this, the human body is fragile and unable to support itself. The Absolute has the option of making it immortal or mortal at its discretion. It is said that the human "*atma*" (soul) reincarnates till it attains "*moksha*" (ultimate freedom) through the unification with the "*paramatma*" (the Absolute). A person seeking moksha must earn good karma by assisting other people and the natural world. In this poetry, the poet encourages people to help others in order to earn freedom and eventually return to the Absolute. "... *still there is room to fill*" conveys the idea that the One, from whose essence we are all created, has yet to achieve its ultimate goal. He continues to put people to the test until they achieve his goal of spreading the love by coming to know Him fully. Poets are always on the front lines of the fight for human equality. This can be seen in this poem when he compares the human body to a small flute. As the body is filled with new cells and atoms, the flute is able to carry new melodies, and so is the body. The poet conveys the idea that no living thing is insignificant to him by depicting this particular likeness. Compassion and charity should be shown to all living things.

Again, *Gitanjali*'s metaphysical voice is heard in the 6<sup>th</sup> verse (*Pluck this Little Flower*), but he also expresses his sorrow for the abandoned. The poet prays to his lord because metaphysicians think that the soul returns in many forms and colours until it reaches salvation. To put it another way, the poet asks the Divine to hurry up and bring his soul closer to Him before it is too late. In order to achieve enlightenment, he is unwilling to adhere to any organised religion. He fervently desires to be loved by the One and receive His blessing and kindness. Another way of looking at it is that the poet is speaking of the street children who grow like a flower but are trampled underfoot by an evil-practicing society. Their lives have been dried up by society's monster-like indifference and corruption. Most people are preoccupied with the goal of appeasing

their own personal deity alone through the practise of rigidly adhered-to religion. They do not implore the One about the poorest generation still to come. Tagore believed that the only way to find redemption was to spend time in nature, searching for the One. Finding out who God is through His creations is a way to get a clearer picture of who he really is. *"Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust"* are among the lines of the poem expressing concern for future generations about extending their wings like free birds to enlighten the future world. He pleads with the One to protect these helpless youngsters from the ravages of a corrupted society, natural disasters, and everything else. In fact, he makes such supplication to be the submission of all educated minds overthrowing individual differences and derelictions (Chakrabarti, 1990). Singh (2002) believes that by exhibiting a linear connection, the poet demarcates the true sense of humanism and above all, a benign sense of nationalism. Thus, he places humanism over religion, creed, or caste for a sustainable holistic development built upon the core notions of humanism (Abdi, 2012; Basu, 2010). In song 27, he aspires,

*"Light, oh where is the light?  
Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!  
There is the lamp but never a flicker of a flame, — is such thy fate, my  
heart! Ah, death were better by far for thee!"*

Another notable urge lies in his formulation of the man himself. *"I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine I have a corner seat"* (song 15) demonstrates that he elevates human life to the ultimate level, as one who shares the same level with the One, though as an observer. Tagore's goal for spiritual practise is to penetrate the hearts of all mankind. He thinks that while God created the world, man must give it purpose by imbuing it with values, not prejudices. He urges, *"When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy"* (song 39). Except for Tagore, no other poet has ever written with such vehemence on his own people's dogma. He mocks the caste system, the social ill of sati, untouchability, and the disparity between wealthy and poor. As with the Romantics, he is continually extolling the virtues of the kid, innocence to be precise. A child, free of difficulties, conflict, callousness, desire, deception, and loss, reveals a glimpse of heavenly majesty. He states in song 08, *"The child who is decked with prince's robes and who has jewelled chains round his neck loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step"* clearly asking justice for everyone.

There is an escalated level of innovation and expressiveness in the seventeenth poem. There are two ways to look at this poem. In order to gain favour with the king, the poet assumes the persona of a beloved courtesan. This poem represents the longing of a human soul to be one with God, who is represented by the lover and poet, respectively. For the sake of expressing his devotion to God, the poet employs John Donne-style sexual imagery and phrasing. As a result, the secular and spiritual worlds have become one. To put it another way, *"I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands"* becomes a metaphor for our longing to be one with God. The poet continues to speak out against

the institution of marriage throughout the entire poem. He is dissatisfied with the way marriage has always been done. As a poet, he believes that the person longs for the freedom to choose his/her own life partner, and this sentence reveals that idea. Social bigotry is shown in these laws and codes, which are constantly in conflict with human freedom. The rules imposed on women by their guardians are a burden. In every aspect of their lives, they are unable to make their own decisions. The elders, all of whom come from the male side of the community, have placed obligations on them, and they must fulfil them. They have no choice but to marry the men who have been handpicked for them. They have never given much thought to the idea of 'love.' In Tagore's view, marriage should be a union of mutual love and respect. Love, understanding, and devotion should be the foundations of this relationship. If they don't, they will pay the price in the long run. Even if there is no love in the relationship, domestic violence can still be a problem. The poet again emphasises the idea of child marriage in this poem. When it comes to having their daughters married, people who act like guardians are always apprehensive. As a result, women everywhere, but particularly in the Indian subcontinent, are left behind. When women are not given the chance to be self-sufficient, it has a negative impact on a country's economic growth since they cannot make the most of financial independence, which is critical for women in society. A woman's reliance on a man's financial support renders her weak and a puppet in his hands, allowing him to treat her as if she were an object. Both at their homes and at the homes of their wives, this is the case.

The poet reveals a metaphysical truth in his 20<sup>th</sup> poem, "On the Day when the Lotus Bloomed," that the Absolute resides within every one of us. He is only to be found in that place, and nowhere else. The Divinity is the source of all life on Earth, and we are all made of it. In order to make his point, he uses images from the natural world that is both vivid and graphic. With the phrase, "*My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded*" the poet expresses his perplexed state of mind about how he should go about collecting flowers because his mind appears to be lost in thinking. He scours the globe in search of the blossomed lotus, hopping from thing to object as he goes. This flawless sweetness had sprouted in the depths of his own heart, and he finally admitted it. The smell of the Supreme is represented by this. People are continually looking for the One in many religious houses. However, they are not interested in cleaning up their own act, which is often tainted with hypocrisy and corruption. "*If the heart is rotten, the odour cannot be smelt and seen by the eyes,*" sings Bangladeshi folk singer Mumtaz (translated by the author to English from Bangla), the poet also emphasises human soul purification, which is the astringent for God. There is a lotus in Hindu mythology, and this poet uses this myth to raise a social concern for people to leave the dogmatic religion in which religious events and show-offs take precedence over actual religious actions and service to the community. Lotus is used by the poet as a symbol of spirituality, purity, self-growth and rebirth. There is filth and mud surrounding the lotus as soon as it emerges from the water. It does not let the tough conditions get in the way of its development and aesthetic appeal. The blooming of this flower, like Buddha's declaration that "*as a lotus flower is born in*

*water, grows in water, and rises out of water to stand above it unsoiled, so I, born in the world, raised in the world, having overcome the world, live unsoiled by the world,"* is a metaphor for the poet's call for the reader to overcome all obstacles to emerge unscathed. Tagore urges individuals to cleanse their souls of the mud and grime of contemporary society by filling their minds with good thoughts and disregarding the world's negative features. Tagore urges his listeners to follow their hearts, which he believes contain the One, in order to overcome all forms of prejudice, racial segregation, corruption, hypocrisy, injustice, and dominance. Since all human souls inevitably return to the Absolute, it is pointless to be preoccupied with the temporal world. Tagore's goal is to pique the reader's curiosity about the wonders of Mother Nature's creation, the natural world. This beauty has the power to keep a man's heart pure and untainted. He displays his worldview of love for nature and resistance to social follies in this poem as well.

To convey his compassion and love for all of the Divine's creatures, song number 63 (*"Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not"*) is a perfect fit. In this poem, the author expresses his belief in the immortality of the soul and in the unity of all things, in which Man, God, and Nature are all one. The Absolute is a single entity that manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways. Poetry argues that a person's dread of the unknown and unfamiliar stems from their lack of knowledge of the Divine, which is depicted in this line: *When he/she realises that all things and people are expressions of the One, nothing is new to him or her.* As a result, he or she is able to share a loving hug with all of creation. Then, man is not bothered with being rich or poor, black or white, animal or human, and so on and so forth. There will be no one greater than him/her because all beings are different manifestations of the One, and as the poet once said: *"When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many"* (song 63). This is the poet's method of expressing love. This world can be a better place if we all have more love for the things around us.

With his eleventh poem, the poet successfully conveys his point with precision and sincerity. Isolation is condemned throughout the poem and a strong call is made for people to participate in community activities to help others and do good deeds. He summons the priests from their slumbering corner of the temple to come out and join him in chanting mantras. He spends his days and nights in the company of hard-working folks. The hermits seek salvation by severing ties with the rest of the world and living in isolation. They think that only by repeating, singing, and chanting some phrases from the Holy book can they approach the Absolute. All creations are equal in the poet's sight. All of God's attributes are of equal importance. *"Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!"* he says. For we are all made of the One's essence. Meditation and separation from the Divine's creations do not bring us closer to the Absolute or bring us peace. Only through serving His intentions, we can find relief. Worshiping in a secluded area of the temple is a waste of time and resources. The poet's voice trembles as he declares,

*"Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found?  
Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him*

*The bonds of creation;  
He is bound with us all for ever.  
Come out of thy meditations and  
Leave aside thy flowers and incense!  
What harm is there  
If thy clothes become tattered and stained?  
Meet him and stand by him  
In toil and in sweat of thy brow.” (Song 11)*

His Humanism, founded on the conceptualisation of Brahman or the Universal Consciousness, is revealed through people as the manifestation of the Absolute. This understanding demolishes both the biased attitude toward nature and the stigma that breeds violence or hatred (Rajaratnam, 2020). Embodying all the traditional values of religion, philosophy, and art, He celebrates an all-pervading power, humanity, that defies definition and individuality. Truly aesthetic development of the senses was just as vital as cerebral growth, and music, literature, painting, and dance are all given prominent roles in his creations. We see an admixture of traditionalism and modernity in his philosophy (Kopf, 2015).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Tagorean verses propagated societal union since he found mental barriers unpleasant. While portraying a world in the grip of complete chaos and terror, Tagore was able to convey that goodness is the human race’s final destination through, “*Men are cruel, but man is kind*” (Stray Birds, 1916). The poet is against institutionalised religion as Rousseau says, “*Man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad.*” Human beings are inherently good and all kinds of institutions corrupt them through all means destroying their inner purity and innocence. Today, we all need to adopt the same sympathetic approach toward one another if we are to resist the threats of extremism and global violence. Education is another medium that may go a long way toward removing the inhibitions and stigma that saturate the human mind. Tagore is also an outspoken opponent of cultural conservatism and separatism and teaches us about the qualities that maintain the human spirit of survival. He has sympathy for each individual and goes deeper than statistics or historical records. His literary creativity continues to shine, illuminating the different psychosocial aspects of welcoming differences, for he stands immortal even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can be concluded by endorsing that Tagore's contribution to the development of spiritualism and humanism in one's heart and spirit, as well as devotion to humanity, is the unadulterated acknowledgment of God. He also wishes to emphasise in his poetry that human existence is valuable and that one's primary concern should be devoted to one's job and attention to goals, not acting out of prejudice and bigotry. Henceforth, poem 35 calls for a society free from all sorts of intolerance and dreams of a utopia –



*“WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert  
Sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action—  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”*

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author**

Shaila Binte Sattar works as a Lecturer in English at the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Science & Technology Chittagong (USTC), Bangladesh. She cherishes a keen interest in writing about comparative literature, academic writing, and diasporic literature.

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