

Genesis of Gitanjali

In a letter, dated May 6, 1912, written from London to his niece, Mrs. Indira Devi, Rabindranath Tagore described the circumstances in which "*Gitanjali*" was translated. On the eve of the voyage, due to some indisposition, he had to postpone his scheduled journey to England and he retired to Shilaidaha, the headquarters of his family estate for rest. There, he started translating *Gitanjali* most casually or possibly as an experiment. The rest of the poems were translated during the voyage to London. There he met his old acquaintance, William Rothenstein, an English artist, author and later the principal of the Royal College of Art. His nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, an artist introduced him to Rothenstein earlier in India. Tagore passed on the manuscript of *Gitanjali* with some reluctance, to Rothenstein who handed it to the English poet, W. B. Yeats. Yeats who was amazed at its originality, later wrote its preface. As his son Rathindranath Tagore recalls in his "ON THE EDGES OF TIME", page 116 [Orient Longmans, Bombay, 1958], in Hampstead Heath home of Rothenstein, "The historic evening at Rothenstein's, when Yeats read out the *Gitanjali* poems in his musical, ecstatic voice to a choice group of people like Ernest Rhys, Alice Meynell, Henry Nevinson, Ezra Pound, May Sinclair, Charles Trevelyan, C. F. Andrews and others gathered in the drawing room. "Rothenstein persuaded the India Society in London to publish a selection of Tagore's poems in English.

As Anders Osterling narrates in his essay "TAGORE AND THE NOBEL PRIZE", on the occasion of Tagore Centenary, that T. Sturge Moore, an English author and member of the Royal Society, submitted his name for consideration for the prize. According to the minutes of the Selection Committee, it was an interesting surprise for the Swedish Academy. The then chairman of the Academy, Dr. Harald Hiarne was reluctant to consider Tagore's entry and was in favor of awarding the prize to the French literary historian and moralist, Emile Faguet; because Hiarne was not fully convinced of the originality of Tagore's enchanting poetry and was uncertain if it was not influenced by his rich heritage of Indian culture. But Tagore's candidature was strongly supported within the Academy by scholars like Dr. Per Hallstrom and Dr. Vetner von Heidenstam. Later, with worldwide applaud of his genius, it has been confirmed that the choice was not wrong.

It would not be out of place to quote the comments by Ernest Rhys, in the preface of his "RABINDRA NATH TAGORE: A Biographical Study" [page xiv], "It is hardly necessary to add anything about the honour rendered [to] the poet by the Nobel Prize award, unless to say that it was due to a distinguished Swedish Orientalist who had read the poems in Bengali before they appeared in English." In the same essay mentioned above, Anders Osterling also confirms that Dr. Esaias Tegner was the only one in the Academy who read Tagore's poems in original Bengali.

Yet another interesting point to mention that the West knew Tagore before he won the Nobel Prize; Harriet Monroe in her article, "POETRY: A Magazine of Verse" narrates, ". POETRY: A Magazine of Verse had the honor of being the first occidental publication to print Tagore's poems in English. His six *Gitanjali* poems, appearing in POETRY for December 1912, preceded by a few weeks the London

India Society's private edition, which, though dated 1912, was not distributed until 1913. POETRY, published in Chicago, was far away from India and even from London where the Bengali poet was sojourning, and its founder and editor had never heard of Tagore. But Ezra Pound, our foreign correspondent, had met him in London and had induced him to permit the sending of some of the *Gitanjali* poems to the new little poet's magazine." [Golden Book of Tagore.]

The poems included in *Gitanjali* [English] were edited from "*Kheya*" [a ferry-boat, virtually a transition - a book of lyrics], "*Naivedya*" [dedication - a book of sonnets], "*Gitanjali*" [song offerings - book of songs] and some other pieces appeared in different contemporary literary periodicals, which were later, published in "*Gitimalya*" [a lei of songs], "*Gitali*" [a bouquet of songs]. It would not be out of place to mention that these are not literal translations. As Czech scholar of Sanskrit, Dr. V. Lesny, who spent long time with the poet in *Shanti-Niketan* and studied Bengali, writes in his "RABINDRANATH TAGORE - his personality and work", pages 179-80, "It is certainly incorrect to blame the poet for frequently changing the expression and length of his Bengali poems, in places also their meaning. It is true that his translations are frequently mere paraphrases, not so rich as the original text, for the English version has neither the wealth of metrical forms, the melodiousness of language, nor the swinging rhyme of the Bengali original".

Though Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for "*Gitanjali*", it is not his masterpiece. In fact, he did not have any masterpiece at all. All his works are of equally supreme quality and of equally sublime standard.