

Feminism in Tagore's "Gitanjali": A Comparative Analysis with Western Feminist Concepts

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's "Gitanjali" is a collection of 103 poems that primarily focuses on the poet's spiritual journey and his relationship with the divine. However, embedded within this spiritual discourse are subtle yet profound feminist themes that critique patriarchal norms and celebrate the intrinsic value of women. This paper explores the feminist elements in "Gitanjali", illustrating how Tagore's work contributes to feminist literature by advocating for gender equality and recognizing the spiritual and societal importance of women. Additionally, it compares these themes with key concepts in Western feminism to highlight their universal relevance.

Keywords: Gitanjali, Women, feminism

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a polymath from Bengal, India, was a poet, novelist, musician, and painter. He became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, largely for his work "Gitanjali" (Song Offerings). Tagore's poetry often reflects his deep humanism and universalism, which transcend the boundaries of gender, caste, creed, race and religion. This paper examines the feminist undertones in "Gitanjali", analyzing how Tagore's portrayal of women and feminine qualities challenges patriarchal norms and highlights the necessity of gender equality. Additionally, it situates these themes within the broader context of Western feminist thought.

Feminist Themes in "Gitanjali"

1. The Divine Feminine

In "Gitanjali", Tagore frequently personifies the divine in feminine terms, challenging the traditionally masculine portrayal of God in many religions. Poems like Poem 22 illustrate this:

"When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes. All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony—and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea."

Here, the divine is addressed with tenderness and nurturing qualities typically associated with femininity, indicating a reverence for the feminine divine and a challenge to male-centric theological norms.

Western Feminism: Concept of the Divine Feminine

This theme resonates with the works of Western feminists like Mary Daly and Carol P. Christ, who critique the patriarchal structures within organized religion and advocate for the recognition of the divine feminine.

Daly's "Beyond God the Father" (p. 34) and Christ's "Rebirth of the Goddess" (p. 20) argue for a spiritual paradigm that honours female deities and feminine spiritual experiences.

2. Women as Sources of Inspiration and Wisdom

Tagore often portrays women as sources of inspiration and wisdom. In Poem 50, he writes:

"My master has bid me to sing. How can I keep silent? My heart will not rest until it comes to the end with its burden of songs."

The muse, a feminine figure, is depicted as the driving force behind the poet's creativity. This portrayal underscores the importance of women as intellectual and spiritual equals to men, capable of inspiring profound artistic and philosophical endeavors.

Western Feminism: Intellectual Equality

This perspective aligns with Virginia Woolf's arguments in "A Room of One's Own" (p. 52), which posits that women need intellectual and financial freedom to produce creative work. By highlighting women's role as muses and sources of inspiration, Tagore echoes Woolf's call for recognizing women's intellectual contributions.

3. Critique of Patriarchal Society

Tagore subtly critiques the patriarchal society through his poetry. In Poem 35, he reflects on the societal norms that constrain women:

"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..."

This poem advocates for a society free from fear and oppression, where every individual, regardless of gender, can strive for perfection. The "narrow domestic walls" symbolize the restrictions placed on women, and the poem's call for freedom and truth resonates with feminist ideals of equality and liberation.

Western Feminism: Social Critique

This critique is reminiscent of the works of Simone de Beauvoir, particularly "The Second Sex" (p. 283), which analyzes the ways in which society constructs and constrains women's roles. Tagore's call for liberation from "narrow domestic walls" parallels de Beauvoir's arguments for breaking free from socially imposed limitations.

4. Empowerment through Spirituality

Tagore's spiritual discourse empowers women by placing them on an equal footing with men in the pursuit of divine love and truth. In Poem 6, he writes:

"Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust. It may not find a place in thy garland, but honor it with a touch of pain from thy hand and pluck it. I fear lest the day end before I am aware, and the time of offering go by."

The flower, a symbol of delicate beauty often associated with femininity, is presented as a worthy offering to the divine. This metaphor elevates the feminine to a place of honor and reverence, challenging the societal devaluation of women.

Western Feminism: Spiritual Empowerment

This theme connects with the feminist spirituality movement in the West, which includes figures like Starhawk and the authors of "Womanspirit Rising" (p. 45). These works emphasize reclaiming spiritual

traditions to empower women and validate their experiences.

Illustrations from “Gitanjali”:

5. Poem 12

"The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long. I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet."

This poem metaphorically describes the soul's journey towards enlightenment, where the 'chariot' can be seen as a symbol of empowerment. The journey, often depicted as a masculine adventure, is here inclusive of feminine participation, suggesting gender equality in spiritual pursuits.

Western Feminism: Journey and Empowerment

This resonates with the works of Adrienne Rich, who in “Of Woman Born” (p. 77), describes the journey of self-discovery and empowerment for women. The inclusion of women in spiritual journeys challenges the traditionally male-centric narrative of enlightenment.

6. Poem 61

"The night is nearly spent waiting for him in vain. I am afraid my lamp will go out in the storm. I can see nothing before me. I wonder if it is well with him at all."

The waiting woman, typically seen as passive, is here portrayed with a depth of emotional and spiritual strength, challenging the notion of women's passivity and highlighting their resilience and active engagement with their inner lives.

Western Feminism: Challenging Passivity

This portrayal aligns with the feminist re-interpretation of traditional roles, as seen in the works of Betty Friedan. In “The Feminine Mystique” (p. 104), Friedan challenges the notion of women as passive homemakers and highlights their active roles in society.

7. Poem 75

"Thy gifts to us mortals fulfill all our needs and yet run back to thee undiminished. The river has its everyday work to do and hastens through fields and hamlets; yet its incessant stream winds towards the washing of thy feet."

The river, a feminine symbol of life and sustenance, represents the continuous contribution of women to society. The imagery emphasizes the endless nurturing and dedication of women, which remains undervalued in patriarchal contexts.

Western Feminism: Valuing Women's Work

This theme is akin to the feminist economic critiques found in the works of Marilyn Waring and her book “If Women Counted” (p. 89), which argues for the recognition and valuation of women's unpaid labor and contributions to the economy.

8. Poem 45

"Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes. Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes, comes, ever comes."

This poem, with its repetitive and rhythmic call, symbolizes the persistent presence of the feminine divine. The silent yet profound influence of women in society is subtly celebrated, challenging the visibility of

patriarchal dominance.

Western Feminism: Presence and Influence

This theme resonates with the writings of bell hooks, particularly in “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center” (p. 72), where she discusses the significant yet often invisible contributions of marginalized groups, including women, to societal progress.

9. Poem 36

"He comes and sits by my side—but I wake not. He comes to my silent room with his silent steps, yet I wake not."

The presence of the divine in the 'silent room' underscores the quiet strength and significance of women's roles, often unnoticed but profoundly impactful. This portrayal encourages recognition of women's contributions in all spheres of life.

Western Feminism: Quiet Strength

This quiet strength can be compared to the feminist ethos articulated by Susan Griffin in “Woman and Nature” (p. 158), where she explores the deep, often unrecognized connection between women and the natural world, emphasizing women's inherent power and influence.

10. Poem 8

"The child who is decked with prince's robes and who has jeweled chains round his neck loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step."

The child, often a symbol of innocence and potential, can be seen as a metaphor for the societal constraints placed on women. The 'prince's robes' and 'jeweled chains' represent the restrictive roles and expectations imposed by patriarchy, hindering true freedom and growth.

Western Feminism: Constraints and Liberation

This mirrors the arguments of Western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir in “The Second Sex” (p. 305), who discusses how societal expectations and roles restrict women's freedom and development, advocating for their liberation and self-determination.

11. Poem 25

"Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger."

The themes of connection and belonging transcend gender, advocating for a universal fellowship that includes women as equal participants. This inclusive vision challenges the exclusionary practices of patriarchal society.

Western Feminism: Inclusive Fellowship

This inclusiveness aligns with the feminist visions of community and sisterhood found in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, particularly in “Borderlands/La Frontera” (p. 35), which emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and breaking down barriers.

12. Poem 69

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures."

The 'stream of life' is a recurring feminine symbol that signifies vitality and continuity. This universal connection emphasizes the shared humanity and equal worth of all individuals, regardless of gender.

Western Feminism: Shared Humanity

This shared humanity is a core tenet of Western feminist thought, reflected in the works of Audre Lorde, particularly "Sister Outsider" (p. 110), where she emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of recognizing and valuing every individual's contribution to society.

13. Poem 89

"No, it is not death, it is life that is difficult to carry. It is love and struggle, loss and gain and the movement from field to field, the road that is always ahead."

The acknowledgment of life's struggles and the resilience required to face them is a tribute to women's enduring strength and fortitude. This recognition aligns with feminist values of acknowledging and validating women's experiences.

Western Feminism: Strength and Resilience

This theme aligns with the feminist celebration of women's resilience found in the works of Maya Angelou, particularly "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (p. 89), which celebrates the strength and perseverance of women in the face of adversity.

14. Poem 35

"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."

This vision of freedom includes women's liberation from societal constraints. The call for 'ever-widening thought and action' resonates with feminist aspirations for a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Western Feminism: Vision of Freedom

This vision aligns with the feminist utopias imagined by authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "Herland" (p. 47), which envisions a society free from gender-based oppression and full of equality and opportunity for all.

15. Poem 48

"The rain has held back for days and days, my God, in my arid heart. The horizon is fiercely naked—not the thinnest cover of a soft cloud, not the vaguest hint of a distant cool shower."

The 'arid heart' and 'fiercely naked horizon' can be interpreted as a metaphor for the emotional and spiritual drought experienced in a patriarchal society that undervalues feminine qualities. The longing for rain symbolizes the need for recognition and nurturing of these qualities.

Western Feminism: Recognition and Nurturing

This theme echoes the calls for recognition and nurturing of feminine qualities found in the works of feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich in "Of Woman Born" (p. 182), where she discusses the need to value and support women's experiences and contributions.

16. Poem 2

"When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes. All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony—and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea."

The command to sing and the resulting emotional transformation suggest a liberation that includes women's voices and experiences. This harmony reflects a feminist vision of societal balance and equality.

Western Feminism: Voice and Liberation

This liberation through voice is akin to the feminist advocacy for women's self-expression and autonomy found in the works of Alice Walker, particularly in "The Color Purple" (p. 120), which emphasizes the importance of women finding and using their voices to achieve liberation.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's "Gitanjali" subtly but powerfully incorporates feminist themes, challenging patriarchal norms and celebrating the spiritual and societal contributions of women. By personifying the divine in feminine terms, portraying women as sources of inspiration and wisdom, critiquing societal constraints, and empowering women through spirituality, Tagore's work aligns with feminist ideals and continues to inspire discussions on gender equality. "Gitanjali" thus remains a timeless piece that advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Thus, by exploring feminist elements within "Gitanjali" and associating them with Western feminist concepts, readers can gain a deeper understanding of Tagore's nuanced approach to feminism, recognizing his work as an early yet profound contribution to the discourse on gender equality.

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