

Psalms of Davidic Authorship*¹ and *the Gitanjali of Tagore: Poets' Search for Meaning

Peter Lepcha is the Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Campus Co-ordinator of the day session, Salesian College Siliguri Campus. He has been the Editorial Assistant for *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. He has participated and presented papers in national and international seminars and conferences. His areas of interests are Translation Literature, Romantic Literature, Apologetics and Christian Theology.

Abstract

Psalms are Hebrew poems which have been translated in over five hundred languages and have become an important part of the prayer recitals of the Judaeo-Christian liturgical expressions. There are various authors and composers of the psalms and King David is one of the chief authors of the psalms. Davidic psalms have been fascinating to the psalmists and poets, and therefore have been an important part of prayer recitals in the psalter. *The Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore on the other hand, has a universal appeal as an anthology of poems to the universal readership. Reading these poems of David and Tagore from the perspective of finding meaning in the existential experiences of day to day life as we understand from Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, is the sole intent of this paper. Purpose and meaning can keep one going from situation to situation despite unpleasantness the experiences of the authors delineated in their texts lead one to understand how they preserved the momentum in life. The poems they wrote became a ways to find meaning and connect with the divine.

Keywords: Psalms, *The Gitanjali*, Divine, Meaning, Existence

Introduction

The word 'Psalms' is derived from the Hebrew word *Tehillim* meaning 'praises'. The English title 'psalm' is derived from the Greek translation *psalmoi* meaning 'instrumental music' and by extension, it means 'the words accompanying the music'. There are a hundred and fifty psalms in the Jewish and Western Christian traditions (more in the Eastern Christian churches), and quite many of them linked to the name of King David, the second king of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah, but his authorship for some psalms are not accepted by all modern Bible scholars.² Psalms have been an important part of the rubrics of prayer recitals in the Jewish as well as Western Christian traditions. In the Catholic Christian practices, the recitals of the psalms is part and parcel of the Eucharistic celebrations which is the central to the faith of Catholic tradition and considered the most important sacrament, in fact it is known as 'the sacrament of the sacraments'.³ The monks and nuns of special orders of the Christian traditions use Psalter

¹King James Version of *The Bible* records total of a hundred and fifty Psalms out of which seventy three Psalms have been assigned authorship to King David. However, many modern Bible Scholars do not accept his authorship. Nine Psalms have been quoted within *The Bible* (especially in the New Testament) which attribute Davidic authorship. I have taken these nine Psalms for my study.

² <http://www.biblicalreader.com> (accessed on May 2016).

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article no. - 1211.

for their morning prayers and vespers by way of singing, reciting and intoning them. Psalms, therefore, take an important place in the expressions of all religious rubrics for the Christian faith.

The Gitanjali literally means the 'song offerings', is composed by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Popularity of this anthology of poems has been so profound that these songs not only appeal the Asiatic readers but to the readers around the world thereby, creating a universal appeal. Psalms have been translated in than five hundred languages of the world. Similarly, *The Gitanjali* has been translated over fifteen languages including more than thirteen European languages. So the Psalm literally means 'praises' and *Gitanjali* means 'song offering' indicating to the worship of the divine. Thus there is a common ground of understanding these rich poetry of two rich cultures. This paper, seeks to understand, compare and investigate the search of meaning of life which kept the poet and the Psalmist anchored and gave them momentum in life and today we revere them as the Nobel Laureate and one of the greatest kings of Israel respectively. The Psalms of Davidic authorship is originally written and sung in Hebrew language but this paper investigates the psalms translated in English found in New King James Version (NKJV) of *The Bible*. Similarly, *The Gitanjali* was composed in Bengali and later was translated into English by Tagore himself. Therefore, the English translation of the same is under discussion in this paper.

It is important to understand that Psalms of David have formed an important part of the rubrics, tradition and religion imbedded into the Judeo-Christian worldview. Unlike how we might understand the *The Gitanjali* and *Rabindra sangeet* which forms an important part of the Bengali culture, music and ethos. Psalms have a religio-cultural appeal and importance as it forms the daily prayer recitals of the Christian payer services and common fellowships of the believers. Similarly, the *Gitanjali* is not an ordinary anthology of poems. Paul Nash, a British surrealist painter and war artist, as well as a photographer, writer and designer of applied art writes,

One feels about them (the poems of *Gitanjali*) that they are the thoughts that come to our minds in the moments of deep feeling, to quite often to other rarely, written down for us in the simplest way. And so they delight me: for everywhere I am glad to find my confused thoughts and feelings expressed so clearly and so beautifully that I have sometimes laughed for joy, sometimes felt tears come. There is certainly a music in some of the poems but most of that I suppose is lost in the translation. As to style, beauty of language, craft of any kind I am not bothered by it. I would read *Gitanjali* as I would read *The Bible* for comfort and for strength.⁴

The two poets are of different cultures and centuries altogether. David was a Hebrew king, a successor of the very first king of the nation of Israel, Saul. Book of Samuel from *the Bible* gives the reign of King David which roughly falls on c. 1040 to 970 BCE. Book of Samuel, First book of Kings and First Book of Chronicles are the only biblical sources

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, Santiniketan, UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd., , 2011.

of the life of King David. Some psalms of his authorship were written when he was running away from the then king of Israel Saul as he sought the life of David because he was anointed to be the next king by Samuel and an evil spirit troubled Saul while others were written when he was the king of Israel, while still others were composed when his son sought to take his life.⁵ Similarly, we get to know from the autobiography of Tagore that he met with so many losses of the significant persons of his life that left him with so many an emotional, spiritual churning perhaps that gave us some of the most eternal songs we have today in the compilation of *The Gitanjali*. WB Yeats, in his introduction to the book *Gitanjali* wrote "... we are not moved because of its (*The Gitanjali's*) strangeness but because we have met our own image." As an Irish poet of such renown, to have made such a commentary itself stands a strong testimony to wonder about the universal nature and appeal of *Gitanjali* across continents from generation to generation.

Search for Meaning : Operational Understanding of the Concept

Meaning is the most important strand that we seek in life. Viktor Frankl, a medical doctor who survived the concentration camp wrote in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning* that purpose and meaning is something that keeps us going from situation to situation despite unpleasant situations one may need to endure.⁶ Frankl gave optimism to the human tragedy by looking at the present and drawing from the resources and perennial reservoir of the divine. He was with the Jews at the concentration camp and he observed how they chose to hang written text of the psalms in their forehead and how they drew inspiration from Psalms. Frankl was counselling a rabbi whose first wife and their six children were gassed in Auschwitz, and his second wife turned out to be sterile. Frankl tries to show the distraught rabbi the bright side of this tragedy:

Is it not conceivable, Rabbi, that precisely this was the meaning of your surviving your children: that you may be purified through these years of suffering, so that finally you, too, though not innocent like your children, may become worthy of joining them in Heaven? Is it not written in the Psalms that God preserves all your tears?" For the first time in many years he found relief from his suffering through the new point of view which I was able to open up to him.⁷

The psalm verse Frankl was alluding to is: "Thou has kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?" (Ps. 56, 8). So, Frankl was at any given time trying to find the relevance and an explanation for the survival towards wellbeing and future rather than giving up and becoming hopeless. So in this sense he was a logo-therapist who was always trying to find meaning and understanding. Here 'meaning' is not to be understood as the semiotic understanding of the discourse in theory of sign as spoken by Victoria Lady Welby but we are understanding meaning

⁵ Jack Hyles, *The Story Behind the Psalms*, New York, Hyles-Anderson Publishers, 1979.

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2000.

⁷ <https://onedaringjew.wordpress.com> (accessed on 23-12-2016)

as that anchorage point and platform which kept the psalmist and the singer moving and singing despite apparent hardships being faced in the existential and experiential world.⁸ Søren Kierkegaard believes:

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. (...) I certainly do not deny that I still accept an imperative of knowledge and that through it men may be influenced, but then it must come alive in me, and this is what I now recognize as the most important of all.⁹

Jean-Paul Sartre gives his view quite differently in the light of what meaning is, "Existence precedes essence" meaning that a human exists first before they have meaning in life. Meaning is not given, and must be achieved. It is something truly unique to each person – separate, independent."¹⁰ From the above survey one can be clear that meaning is the most important notion whether independent or assigned to an external/internal agency and in the existential and experiential reality one is in constant search for it. This given understanding of meaning which is understood to radar, propel and steer life will be used as standard operational definition for this paper.

Search for Meaning by David in his Psalms

David presents a monotheistic view of his God he believed in and he presents that his God is his shepherd, *Yahuwah Rohi* in Hebrew, and therefore he shall not be in want; because his God takes him near the flowing water and his God satisfies his thirsting soul.¹¹ In Psalm 91, which is considered a conversation among David, his son Solomon and *Yahuwah*, David declares the might and the protective power of his God. This psalm is mostly prayed in Jewish and Christian traditions for the psalm for protection. Psalm 42 has an explanation in *the Bible* as 'to the chief musician, Maschil, for the sons of Korah'. However it is not clear that the authorship of this psalm is to be assigned to Maschil, Korah or to David. Since David referred to this psalm later in his life and he being one of the greatest psalmists of his time, he must have sung this psalm just the way great songs are sung by many singers of renown.¹² While still shepherding his father's herd, he found this profound Psalm 23 an important song offering to his God and as a wealthy king, he sang Psalm 91 with his son to *Yahuwah*. The psalmist says,

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.

⁸ Victoria Lady Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance*, Amsterdam, John Benjamin Publishing Co., 1903.

⁹ Jon Steward, (Ed) Volume 10, *Tome II: Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology*, London, Routledge, 2012.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, (Lecture) *Existentialism is a humanism, (L'existentialisme est un humanisme)*, Les Editions Nagel, 1946.

¹¹ Psalm 23, NKJV Bible.

¹² 1 Chronicles 6:22-23, 6:31 NKJV Bible.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me,
“Where is your God?”

Here, the psalmist longs for his God and it is evident that psalmist looks for and finds meaning in his God much more than other things available to him. The picture given here is very strong and drawn from the deserts and shepherds eyes have caught the longing and parching tongue of a deer which is thirsty in the desert. A pastoral picture is presented to the readers in this psalm. David himself was a shepherd before he became the king. Reading *Gitanjali* No. 14 together with this psalm gives us a picture similar cry of a poet:

That I want thee, only thee-let my heart repeat without end. All desires that distract me, day and night, are false and empty to the core.

As the night keeps hidden in its gloom the petition for light, even thus in the depth of my unconsciousness rings the cry-I want thee, only thee.

As the storm still seeks its end in peace when it strikes against peace with all its might, even thus my rebellion strikes against thy love and still its cry is-I want thee, only thee. (*Gitanjali* 38)

In consonance with the psalmist of Psalm 42, Tagore is harping on the point ‘That I want thee only thee-let my heart repeat without end’. The repetition of the lines ‘I want thee, only thee’ in the poem brings forth the strong urge and thus the repetition is understood as emphasis. Reading both of these great poet songsters, it is quite evident that they shared a close relationship with the divine they believed in. It is evident that both songsters drew their inspiration from the divine.

Tagore's search for meaning

In *Rabindrajeewani* of Tagore by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, he mentions that Tagore lost his first wife in 1875, sister-in-law in 1884, younger son in 1890, second wife in 1902, his father 1905, and one of his daughters in between 1900 – 1910.¹³ *Gitanjali* was first published in 1910. David was running away from his enemy, the most powerful man of Israel, king Saul and he kept on singing. He was sought to be killed by his own begotten son Absalom. Tagore lost six significant persons from his family within a time span of thirty five years. From all these experiences of loss also he cries out to his God:

By all means they try to hold me secure who love me in this world. But it is otherwise with thy love which is greater than theirs, and thou keepest me free.

¹³ P. K. Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajeewani*, Visva Bharati Publications, Shantiniketan, 1933.

Lest I forget them they never venture to leave me alone. But day passes by after day and thou art not seen.

If I call not thee in my prayers, if I keep not thee in my heart, thy love for me still waits for my love.

Tagore is crying out for the love divine where he is assured of such kind of love which 'keepeth me free'. We do not seek to find melancholy note but definitely he looks for refuge in the love divine. Similar note of longing and seeking the face of their gods can be seen in Gitanjali No 76 and Psalm 27 of David. Tagore further says;

Day after day, O lord of my life, shall I stand before thee face to face? With folded hands, O lord of all worlds, shall I stand before thee face to face?

Under thy great sky in solitude and silence, with humble heart shall I stand before thee face to face?

In this laborious world of thine, tumultuous with toil and with struggle, among hurrying crowds shall I stand before thee face to face?

And when my work shall be done in this world, O King of kings, alone and speechless shall I stand before thee face to face?

Similarly, David as we understand to be one of the greatest kings of Israel with all the might, wealth, pomp and glory desires to see the face of his God. Interestingly, he does not desire for wealth and material possessions and powers that might have been more visible to a king to possess but he, instead says,

One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.
For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.

Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the LORD.

Hear my voice when I call, LORD;
be merciful to me and answer me.
My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, I will seek.
Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
Do not reject me or forsake me,
God my Saviour.
Though my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will receive me.
Teach me your way, LORD;
lead me in a straight path
because of my oppressors.
Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.

I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.

His desire is just 'one' and that is to 'dwell in the house of the Lord'. This one desire is so unique for us to understand especially when it comes from the man of such stature and background.

Conclusion

David and Tagore both have so many differences of time, space, ethnicity and so forth. It is but a herculean task to even keep them in a same plane and weigh their outcry as poets who have mystical dialogues in the poems referred here for study. It is only proper and noteworthy that one can appreciate their worth and merits independently and separately. As the day is understood in the background of night and so is the case with white against the black; this paper merely attempted to understand their search for meaning in their life as a king of Israel and as a poet laureate from Bengal in the light of each other's works. David did not find so much worth in what he possessed in material form, therefore he strong desire, "One thing I ask from the Lord, this *only* do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple."

Tagore's personal life as a rich *zamindar* of his time compels us to understand that he lacked nothing materially. But he too is looking for much more than the material and physical. He categorically asks, "Day after day, O lord of my life, shall I stand before thee face to face? With folded hands, O lord of all worlds, shall I stand before thee face to face?" The desire to seek His face is so ardent and burning. Both of these poets are seeking for the metaphysical reality. And to that reality they find 'meaning' that drew them, kept them propelled and sustained their music. Sufferings, losses, hardships, death could not move them but it only gave them a greater meaning of life. They looked up to the divine and soaked the inspiration. Just the way a Jew in the concentration camp tied the psalm as a *bandana* on his forehead (symbolical from the book of Exodus 13 verse 9), which became a source of inspiration for Frankl, the divine became the source of life for David and Tagore. In the ontological order, the history and background of the author is essentially important to understand to create the work of art. Author precedes the created work. So, biographical evidences and information are sieved in this paper to understand their poetry that has been so popular.