



From Admiration to Detraction: On Pound's Shift in Evaluation of Tagore and Its Causes

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Abstract

This paper explores the shift in Ezra Pound's evaluation of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and his work *Gitanjali*, as well as the underlying reasons for this change. Between 1912 and 1917, Ezra Pound's attitude towards Rabindranath Tagore underwent a significant transformation, shifting from high praise to skepticism and denigration. This dramatic change was closely associated with Pound and his contemporaries' deepening understanding of *Gitanjali*. Regardless of Western evaluations, the Western audience, as the primary recipients of the work, serves as a mirror reflecting their own anxieties and the arduous search for spiritual solace. Consequently, the judgments made by readers like Pound were highly subjective, revealing the complex dynamics of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural interactions. Pound's evaluations of Tagore and *Gitanjali* essentially reflect the clash between the heterogeneous cultural systems of the West and the East. As an observer of the East from a Western perspective, Pound did not and could not remain faithful to the objective image of the "Other." Despite this, Tagore showcased the unique charm of Indian culture through this work, which remains significant in promoting cultural exchange between the East and the West.

Keywords

Gitanjali; Ezra Pound; Rabindranath Tagore

1. The Dissemination of *Gitanjali* in the United Kingdom

In November 1912, the Indian Society in London published 750 copies of the English version of *Gitanjali*, which included 103 poems. In March 1913, before *Gitanjali* won the Nobel Prize, Macmillan released a popular edition of the collection. This edition brought *Gitanjali* widespread acclaim, and it was reprinted 20 times within the following 20 years. This work is still very popular in China to this day. There are already many versions available, including those translated by Bing Xin, Wu Yan, and Bai Kaiyuan (Wang, 2021). Tagore expressed his delight at the success of *Gitanjali* in the UK in a letter to Charu Chandra Bandopadhyay, the editor-in-chief of *The Foreigner* magazine, stating: "The first printing of *Gitanjali* has sold out. Local readers have read my translation with great interest and said that they like it very much" (Tagore, 2016).

The immense success of *Gitanjali* in the Western world is inseparable from the support of Westerners. The first to publicize *Gitanjali* was the British painter William Rothenstein, who had long been aware of Tagore's writing. In May 1912, before Tagore's departure to England, Rothenstein had already read the English translation of Tagore's novel in *The Modern Review* and was deeply captivated by Tagore's artistic charm. After reading the translation manuscript of *Gitanjali*, Rothenstein exclaimed, "Those mystical poems struck me as possessing a more astonishing artistic appeal than the novels" (Kripalani, 2011). Rothenstein introduced *Gitanjali* to writers and artists such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, May Sinclair, and Ernest Rhys. Yeats regarded *Gitanjali* as a treasure and wrote in his preface

to the first edition: “As I read them on trains, buses, or in restaurants, I often had to close the book and cover my face to hide my emotion from strangers... The emotions in these poems reveal the world I have longed for all my life. These poems are the products of a highly civilized mind, growing from the soil like sedge and other grasses.” (Kripalani, 2011) Pound also highly praised the author of *Gitanjali*, describing himself as “a wild man armed with a stone club and clad in animal skins” compared to Tagore (Kripalani, 2011).

Such praise was abundant in Pound’s early evaluations of Tagore. However, within the brief span of five years from 1912 to 1917, Pound’s evaluation of Tagore shifted from high praise to sarcasm and denigration. Other supporters who had assisted in the Western publication of *Gitanjali*, including Yeats, also exhibited a similar shift. The underlying reasons for this phenomenon are worth exploring, as they can offer insights into the dissemination and reception of literary works within heterogeneous cultural systems.

2. Pound’s High Praise for *Gitanjali* and Analysis of the Reasons

On July 7, 1912, at the “Tagore Evening”, hosted by William Rothenstein, Pound first encountered Tagore and was deeply moved by several poems from the English version of *Gitanjali*, recited by Yeats. Pound later described his discovery of Tagore as comparable to Boccaccio’s discovery of Greek works and Dante, expressing relief at having encountered Tagore’s works before the general public: “I think what Boccaccio felt is not unlike what we feel here, that we few are fortunate in having had the opportunity to appreciate Mr. Tagore’s works before the public at large” (Hurwitz, 1964).

The spiritual crisis in the early 20th-century Western world, intensified by modern life, significantly contributed to Pound’s admiration for Tagore and *Gitanjali*. The Orientalist trend since the 17th century also redirected Pound’s focus towards the East, with Tagore’s revisions of *Gitanjali* conveniently meeting Western expectations.

The rapid development of capitalist economies has led to commercial civilization overshadowing religious civilization, becoming the dominant force. This shift, coupled with the constraints of industrial machinery and the collapse of traditional faith, deepened alienation and precipitated a profound spiritual crisis. Tagore, sensitive to these changes, described the dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization during his 1912 visit to London: “When I stand by the window and see the crowds surging in all directions, it seems to me that they are but tools in the hands of some invisible mechanic... It is like a vast factory where history is being made, with millions of hammers striking down fiercely and swiftly in a thousand different places” (Kripalani, 2011). In contrast, Tagore emphasized the harmony between the individual and the universe, a concept that resonated with Western readers seeking spiritual solace. Pound, in particular, found in *Gitanjali* a “profoundly quiet spirit” (Kripalani, 2011), describing it as a form of spiritual redemption for the West.

The Orientalist trend, popular since the 17th century, laid the groundwork for the reception of *Gitanjali* in the West. This trend continued into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with numerous texts on Indian literature and philosophy flowing into the West. Tagore’s use of biblical language and pantheistic ideas in *Gitanjali* reduced cultural alienation for Western readers, allowing them to interpret the work through a familiar religious lens. Pound, himself drawn to religious themes in poetry, was deeply moved by the pious nature of Tagore’s work (Hurwitz, 1964).

In summary, the popularity of *Gitanjali* in the West was a result of the spiritual crisis in the Western world, the existing Orientalist trend, and Tagore’s creative revisions that aligned with Western expectations.

3. Pound’s Detraction and Satire of Tagore and Analysis of the Reasons

In March 1913, shortly after Macmillan published the popular edition of *Gitanjali*, Pound published a highly laudatory review in *The Fortnightly Review*, comparing it to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: “To find a comparison worthy of the book before us, I must resort to the only familiar Dante’s *Paradiso*” (Hurwitz, 1964). However, within five years, Pound’s attitude shifted dramatically from praise to derision.

In April 1913, just one month after his review, Pound questioned Macmillan’s plan to publish more of Tagore’s works in a letter to Miss Monroe: “To publish Tagore’s less than best work would be an embarrassing thing for his London supporters” (Hurwitz, 1964). He criticized the philosophical ideas in Tagore’s works as redundant and insignificant for those entangled in Western civilization.

Other critics shared Pound’s skepticism. Reviewer Charles Whibley deemed publishing a large volume of Tagore’s poetry “an artistic mistake.” John Masefield asserted that Tagore’s dramatic dialogues would not resonate with Western audiences (Kripalani, 2011).

Pound's disillusionment stemmed from his high expectations for *Gitanjali* as a remedy for the spiritual malaise of the Western world. He hoped that Tagore's work would provide relief for those suffering under Western civilization. However, upon reading subsequent manuscripts intended for publication, Pound was disappointed, finding them lacking in comparison to *Gitanjali* (Hurwitz, 1964).

Moreover, Pound developed a clearer understanding of the differences between the original Bengali version of *Gitanjali* and its English translation. He noted that the original's musical rhythms and expressions were lost in translation, which contributed to his disappointment (Hurwitz, 1964).

Indian readers, familiar with the original *Gitanjali*, did not find it particularly novel, viewing it as one of many similar works in India. This is because, as the scholar said, "*Gitanjali*" means "offering of songs" in Bengali. The collection showcases the long-standing and excellent culture of India. Tagore delved into the lives of the Indian people and refined their simple and beautiful language into fresh and graceful poetry. It expresses praise for the divine and reflects the profound Vedic culture of India (Liu, 2024). For Indian readers, the content of *Gitanjali* is something they are very familiar with. However, British readers interpreted the deity mentioned in the work as "God," which naturally resonated with Western readers. It is important to note that the God presented in *Gitanjali* is neither the same as the Western God nor the Jade Emperor in China. This deity is not distant and detached from the secular world, but rather lives among people, omnipresent and ever-present, like a shadow that never leaves one's side (Liu, 2024). Naturally, when Western readers gradually realized this, they could not help but feel disappointed with *Gitanjali*.

Ultimately, Pound's denigration of *Gitanjali* reflected his frustration with its failure to meet his expectations as a spiritual antidote for the West. His initial enthusiasm and subsequent disappointment led him to attack Tagore, transforming his unmet hopes into criticism.

4. Conclusion

Reception theory emphasizes the interactivity between the text and the reader, positing that readers develop a certain horizon of expectations before engaging with a literary work, which influences their selection and evaluation of the text. In other words, readers naturally filter and interpret the work through their own expectations, meaning that what they actually receive is not the work itself, but rather what they anticipate reading. Thus, despite the fact that Pound's praise for *Gitanjali* may seem exaggerated and his criticism of Tagore overly harsh, his evaluations in fact reveal the expectations he, as a Western reader, had for *Gitanjali*.

Recognizing this is of great significance for dismantling Western centrism and eliminating its interference, allowing us to evaluate literary works in a more calm, objective, multifaceted, and multidimensional manner. Regardless of how Western readers evaluate Tagore and *Gitanjali*, it is only their subjective judgments that change, while *Gitanjali* itself remains unchanged. Western readers, including Pound, in their evaluations of Tagore and *Gitanjali*, also speak of themselves in an enclosed manner. It must be said that this limitation in the way Western readers approach the text does indeed influence other readers' perceptions of it. However, from Pound's initially positive but later negative evaluations of *Gitanjali*, we can clearly see that his judgments are actually highly influenced by his expectations. Therefore, when confronted with the clash between Eastern and Western cultures, we should maintain a certain distance from Western evaluations, which can serve as a reference for further understanding the text and the dissemination and reception of Eastern and Western cultures, providing us with a more diverse perspective on reading *Gitanjali*.

On the other hand, Pound's evaluation of Tagore is a vivid spark resulting from the collision of Eastern and Western cultures, offering another concrete example for understanding the interaction between Eastern and Western literatures and cultures. Despite the Nobel Prize committee's affirmation of Tagore, a Western-centric tendency can still be discerned from the award citation, which views *Gitanjali* from the perspective of British literature: "For the past year, this book has truly been incorporated into British literature, for although the author is a poet of his own Indian language by education and creative practice, he has given these poems a new dress, equally perfect in form and equally original in inspiration. This has enabled them to be accepted by readers in Britain, America, and the entire Western world, who consider great literature to be beneficial and important" (Liu, 2013). Pound's evaluations, too, are centered on his own horizon of expectations. The emergence of *Gitanjali* further reveals the spiritual dilemmas that Westerners urgently need to address. Although Pound later criticized *Gitanjali*, in this interaction, he actually deepened his understanding of Indian and even Eastern literature and culture. As scholars have said, "Tagore was an inspiration to Pound, who was not only an admirer but also a disciple of Tagore. Pound's early contact with Indian

poets led to three essays, a review, and a short story, as well as a new interest in Indian poetry, which is reflected in his translations of several poems by the 15th-century Indian poet Kabir, published in the *Modern Review of Calcutta* in June 1913” (Hurwitz, 1964). From another point of view, as early as 1907, Tagore published “World Literature,” putting forward his theoretical conception, which concerns literary works from all over the world with a broad mind and a grand vision. As a representative of non-Western discourse, Tagore actively participated in the construction of the theory of world literature. His thoughts on world literature are also the originative documents and an important part of the genealogy of world literature theory (Huang & Li, 2025). Undoubtedly, Tagore’s translation made *Gitanjali* a global work, which further promoted the clash between Eastern and Western cultures.

In summary, Pound’s evaluations of Tagore and *Gitanjali* essentially reflect the clash between the heterogeneous cultural systems of the West and the East. As an observer of the East from a Western perspective, Pound did not and could not remain faithful to the objective image of the “Other.” Instead, in the process of “constructing” the Other, he “articulated the cultural ‘differences’ that he perceived and sensed between the self and the ‘Other,’ between the native and the foreign.” This act of observing and speaking about the image precisely reflects a cross-ethnic, cross-cultural relationship. This example of transcultural interaction holds practical significance for understanding the formation of cultural prejudices and promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West.

Gitanjali brought Western readers a momentary sense of stability far removed from the realities of the world. From Tagore’s understanding of “world literature,” we can glimpse his intention to transcend personal limitations and observe the world more broadly: “The meaning of our existence is contained within the entirety of humanity. Anyone who understands this fact, even partially, has stepped out of the circle of the individual and realizes that confining oneself to one’s own small circle is a form of self-diminishment” (Tagore, 1988). The award citation also states: “The poet aims to reconcile two vastly different cultural regions” (Liu, 2013). Through *Gitanjali*, Tagore showcase the uniqueness of Indian culture on the platform of international exchange (Wang, 2024). And his engagement with heterogeneous cultural systems has contributed to their mutual understanding and integration.

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