

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet
president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk

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The Birth of a Song: Gitanjali Ghei (1961 – 1977)



Gitanjali Ghei had much in common with the diarist, Anne Frank. They both died at the age of just sixteen. Whereas Anne's battle was with the Nazis; Gitanjali's battle was with cancer. Ann chose to express her thoughts in prose but Gitanjali expressed her deepest feelings mostly through poetry. However, they both had a need to keep their writings secret. Early on in her diary, Anne Frank states that pen and paper were her only true friends. There is no more patient listener than paper.

I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart. . . . Yes there is no doubt that paper is patient and as I don't intend to show this cardboard-covered notebook, bearing the proud name of "diary," to anyone, unless I find a real friend, boy or girl, probably nobody cares. And now I come to the root of the matter, the reason for my starting a diary: it is that I have no such real friend.

Although Gitanjali was surrounded by a loving family, the diagnosis of terminal cancer when she was fourteen created a distance between them. Her parents did everything in their power to hide the truth from their daughter. At the same time, Gitanjali sensed that death would

too soon claim her, and she in turn tried to conceal this knowledge from her parents and she also strived to conceal the agony she suffered. It was only after her death that poem after poem written on spare scraps of paper were found hidden under her mattress, behind chair cushions and in other unlikely places. It came as a shock to her parents to find that their daughter had had been capable of such depth of insight just as it came as a shock to the father of Anne Frank when he first read the diary that his daughter left behind before she was taken to Auschwitz.

What Anne and Gitanjali share above all else is a overwhelming sense of their loneliness. They wrote because they had no one to whom they could express the deep promptings of their hearts. Gitanjali wrote:

In the prime of my youth I had to accept the aloneness as my 'birthright', I felt alone despite the fact that I was never left alone. The windows of my eyes and the doors of my soul were always left open. Then came a time, a stage when my inside loneliness ate up.

the fear of loneliness. I managed to get on top of my hurt. And finally grew up.

Her poems, reflections and prayers - according to Franz Kafka, writing is itself a form of prayer - were Gitanjali's solace in the face of immense suffering. Like many people in Third World countries today, pain relief was totally inadequate. But in her case, the suffering gave rise to something beautiful. Gitanjali wrote:

In everyone there is a little bit of a dreamer, the poet. We are a composition of all these things and when the feelings lie low and we are caught in sad, hearth-breaking situations then somehow, somewhere suddenly a song is born. Just like a rainbow appears after rain.

Gitanjali was born into a Sikh family in the town of Meerut, near Dehli but spent most of her life in Bombay (now Mumbai). Her parents were remarkably prescient as they named their daughter after a series of poems entitled **Gitanjali** by India's Nobel Prize winning poet, Rabindranith Tagore. One of the series is called **Song Unsung**:

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day.
I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set;
only there is the agony of wishing in my heart.
The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by.

Although she was a very lively girl with many school friends, even before her illness, she seemed to possess a spiritual depth which set her apart from the norm. The maturity of her thought and feelings led to her being given the nickname of *Little Grandma*. When cancer struck, she matured still more rapidly.

Sometimes she felt that God was using her like a musical instrument with piercing discords followed by strange, sweet melodies. In a poem entitled *The Harp*, she writes:

I am being used
by God like a
Harp.
One moment he caresses me
like a fond child,
next minute
He grasps me firmly
and strikes.
A sharp quick blow
that wrings me with
pain
torturing me by
pulling at my
heart strings
in vain.
And just when I am
about to snap,
He rests my head
with warmth on His chest.
Softly and tenderly
He holds me to His heart
and wipes away my tears
to replace them with . . .
laughs.

Although you might say that Gitanjali's poetry arose out of her terminal illness and her suffering, her poems are on the side of life. Tolstoy has expressed better than anyone one else the paradox that it when one is closest to death that one feels most alive and Gitanjali's poems are a celebration of the wonder of living. In one of her brief meditations written on a scrap of paper and hidden along with her poems, she writes:

I am no doubt scared, I'm scared to death. But, I'm not going to sit down and brood about what or may not happen. My illness is a very small part of my life, what is important in my life is life, and I'm going to live it to the best of my ability in the allotted time God has given me.

However, in the end, the ravages of her illness made her regard death as a blessed release. In a

poem, rather like Emily Dickinson, she describes death as *an honoured guest*. In her simple, heartfelt poem, *Farewell My Friends* which has been translated into many languages and read at gravesides throughout the world, (it was read a couple of years ago by the Duchess of Cornwall at her brother's funeral) Gitanjali states that her life was *beautiful as long as it lasted*.

It was beautiful
as long as it lasted
the journey of my life.
I have no regrets
whatsoever save
the pain I'll leave behind.
Those dear hearts
who love and care
and the heavy with sleep
ever moist eyes.
The smile, in spite of a
lump in the throat
and the strings pulling
at the heart and soul.
The strong arms
that held me up
when my own strength
let me down.
Each morsel that I was
fed with was full of love divine.
At every turning of my life
I came across
good friends.
Friends who stood by me
even when the time raced by.
Farewell, Farewell
my friends.
I smile and bid you goodbye.
No, shed no tears,
for I need them not
All I need is your smile.
If you feel sad
think of me
for that's what I'd like.
When you live in the hearts
of those you love,
remember then....
you never die.