Rabindranath Tagore and the Global South: Decolonizing World Literature through Transcultural Humanism

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Abstract:

The discourse of world literature has long been dominated by Eurocentric paradigms that privilege Western epistemologies as universal and relegate the Global South to peripheral participation. This study reconsiders the concept through the philosophical and aesthetic vision of Rabindranath Tagore, whose idea of Visva-Manava (Universal Man) and Visva-Bharati (World University) articulated an early model of transcultural humanism. Drawing on primary texts such as Gitanjali, Sādhanā, and The Religion of Man, the paper argues that Tagore's conception of universality constitutes a decolonial framework that predates contemporary theories of "pluriversality" (Mignolo) and "planetarity" (Spivak). Through a synthesis of textual analysis and digital mapping of Tagore's translation and reception networks, the study demonstrates how his works circulated along non-Western routes, forming an alternative cartography of literary globalization. By situating Tagore within Global South intellectual history, the paper advances a new theoretical model of world literature from below—a network of ethical reciprocity and aesthetic dialogue that challenges the unilinear flow of cultural authority from West to rest.

Keywords: Transcultural Humanism, Decolonial Cosmopolitanism, World Literature, Global South, Rabindranath Tagore, South–South Literary Circulation, Translation and Transcreation

1. Introduction

The idea of world literature, since Goethe's original invocation of Weltliteratur in the early nineteenth century, has carried within it both a promise and a paradox. It promises a transcendent exchange among cultures, yet in practice it has too often perpetuated the very hierarchies it sought to dissolve. The canon of "world literature," as institutionalized through European academic discourse and global publishing circuits, continues to privilege Western epistemologies as the measure of literary universality. World icons such as Goethe, Auerbach, and later Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova have treated the global literary field as a hierarchy of influence radiating outward from European centres toward peripheral others. In this model, the "world" becomes an echo chamber of European self-representation. The critical consequence is that the Global South—the historically colonized, multilingual, and poly-cultural sphere—enters world literature not as a producer of paradigms but as a recipient of recognition.

This imbalance has drawn increasing scrutiny from postcolonial scholars and theorists of translation. Emily Apter's Against World Literature exposes how untranslatability resists the homogenizing logic of global literary commodification, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Death of a Discipline urges a planetary consciousness that exceeds national and Eurocentric frameworks. Yet even these corrective

projects often remain tethered to Western theoretical genealogies. The intellectual history of "world literature" thus reveals an enduring lacuna: the absence of sustained theorization from within the Global South itself. What would it mean, then, to read the world from Bengal rather than from Berlin? To imagine a cosmopolitanism rooted not in empire's universality but in empathy, relationality, and mutual recognition?

It is in this context that Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) becomes not only relevant but essential. As Asia's first Nobel laureate in literature, Tagore traversed linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries with an ease that confounded both colonial and nationalist categories. His poetry and prose were not simply artifacts of Indian modernity but experiments in reimagining humanity itself. Through his vision of Visva-Manava—the universal human—and his institutional project Visva-Bharati, Tagore articulated a radical alternative to Eurocentric cosmopolitanism: a transcultural humanism grounded in ethical interrelation rather than abstract idealism. For Tagore, "the world" was not an external aggregate of nations but an inner continuum of the spirit, where every act of creation participates in a shared rhythm of being.

This paper argues that Tagore's philosophy of the human spirit constitutes a decolonial framework for world literature—one that precedes and surpasses contemporary theories of globalization and postcoloniality. His writings, particularly Gitanjali (1912), Sādhanā (1913), Nationalism (1917), and The Religion of Man (1931), elaborate a vision of literary and ethical universality rooted in experience, not domination. Tagore's world literature does not emanate from the metropolis toward the margins; it flows in concentric circles of empathy, through translation, music, and cultural exchange. His journeys to Japan, China, Latin America, and Europe were less diplomatic than dialogical—acts of listening across difference.

In re-examining Tagore from this Global South vantage point, the paper seeks to decolonize the very grammar of "world literature." It proposes transcultural humanism as a theoretical bridge between Tagore's spiritual cosmopolitanism and current debates in world literary studies. This framework emphasizes relational universality—the unity of humanity through diversity of expression. Methodologically, the study integrates close textual analysis with digital mapping of Tagore's translation networks to reveal how his works circulated along non-Western routes long before the term "Global South" entered critical vocabulary. Ultimately, it contends that Tagore's conception of the Visva-Manava anticipates what contemporary decolonial thinkers like Walter Mignolo and Achille Mbembe have called "pluriversality": a world in which multiple epistemologies coexist without hierarchy. By re-centering Tagore in the theoretical landscape of world literature, the paper contributes to an overdue revaluation of the South's intellectual agency. It invites us to hear again the universal music of Gitanjali—not as the echo of Oriental mysticism domesticated for Western taste, but as a profound articulation of planetary belonging. Tagore's world, unlike Goethe's, is not a market of translations but a communion of souls: a living network of the infinite within.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical history of world literature is itself a record of competing claims to universality. Goethe's 1827 declaration that "poetry is the common property of mankind" inaugurated Weltliteratur as an ideal of cultural exchange, yet his formulation remained tethered to the Enlightenment's hierarchical cosmopolitanism. The "world" was not an egalitarian space of circulation but an extension of European aesthetic and moral authority. Later humanists such as Erich Auerbach in Mimesis (1946) maintained this civilizational arc by reading the representation of reality as a continuum from Homer to modern Europe.

Even when the twentieth century introduced structuralist and Marxist frameworks, the underlying geography of world literature—its canon, circulation, and prestige—remained Eurocentric.

In the twenty-first century, David Damrosch and Pascale Casanova revitalized the field with distinct but equally influential models. Damrosch, in What Is World Literature?, defines it as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4). This mobility-based definition shifted the focus from intrinsic aesthetic value to modes of transmission. Casanova's The World Republic of Letters (2004), meanwhile, theorized world literature as a symbolic economy, governed by an unequal distribution of literary capital centred in Paris, analogous to Bourdieu's sociological model. Together, these theories reconfigured the global field as a system of exchange—but one still anchored in Western institutions of recognition. Both scholars acknowledge the inequalities of circulation yet rarely question the epistemic privilege of the "West" as arbiter of the literary. Thus, the Global South appears as a space of translation and reception, not of theorization.

The first serious rupture in this Eurocentric continuum emerged from postcolonial thought. Scholars such as Graham Huggan, in The Postcolonial Exotic (2001), critiqued how Western markets commodify difference through the spectacle of cultural otherness. Emily Apter's Against World Literature (2013) exposed the ideological violence inherent in global translation economies, arguing that the "untranslatable" becomes a site of resistance against universalist abstraction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly in Death of a Discipline (2003) and An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization (2012), redefined the global as planetary—a mode of ethical coexistence beyond the calculative logic of globalization. Yet, as Spivak herself notes, even planetary consciousness must beware of reinscribing Western intellectual authority. Postcolonial critique, though indispensable, often remains reactive to the West rather than generative of autonomous models from the South.

It is within this theoretical lacuna that Rabindranath Tagore's thought acquires renewed significance. His writings anticipate many of the concerns of decolonial and planetary theory, yet they arise from within an indigenous epistemology of relation. In Sādhanā (1913), Tagore asserts that "the infinite personality of man realizes itself in love," positing human unity as experiential rather than conceptual. His idea of Visva-Manava (Universal Man) rejects both nationalist isolation and imperial assimilation. Instead, it embodies what Walter Mignolo later terms pluriversality—the coexistence of many worlds within one shared reality (Mignolo 48). Decolonial theorists such as Mignolo and Enrique Dussel conceptualize knowledge as geopolitically situated; Tagore, a century earlier, articulated the same through his poetic universalism: "The world in which we live is not made of nations but of human relationships."

Tagore's position also complicates postcolonial binaries of colonizer and colonized. While deeply critical of Western imperialism, he refused to substitute nationalist chauvinism for colonial domination. In Nationalism (1917), he warns that "a nation is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose," contrasting political nationalism with spiritual humanism. His vision aligns with Achille Mbembe's notion of Afropolitanism, which resists both nativist closure and Western universality by asserting a relational modernity grounded in shared vulnerability (Mbembe 28). Tagore's humanism, therefore, may be read as an early articulation of a Global South cosmopolitanism—a cosmopolitanism not of privilege but of empathy.

Translation and circulation provide the material foundation of this humanism. As Susan Bassnett observes, translation is "the most potent form of intercultural communication" (1). For Tagore, translation was not the mechanical transfer of words but a spiritual act of re-creation—transcreation—through which meaning is reborn in new linguistic soil. His self-translation of Gitanjali (1912) into English initiated a chain of

transcultural exchanges that reached Japan, Latin America, and the Middle East long before the institutional globalization of literature. This circulation, when mapped digitally, reveals a pattern distinct from Casanova's Paris-centric model: a horizontal network of South–South dialogues connecting Bengal, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Tehran. Such trajectories exemplify what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "the decolonization of the mind"—the reassertion of creative agency beyond imperial geographies.

Theoretically, this study thus situates Tagore at the intersection of three converging frameworks. First, transcultural humanism, derived from his own writings, foregrounds spiritual relationality as the basis of global culture. Second, decolonial cosmopolitanism, as elaborated by Mignolo and Mbembe, offers a language to reinterpret Tagore's universalism as epistemic resistance rather than universal abstraction. Third, translation as circulation, following Bassnett, Venuti, and Damrosch, provides a methodological lens to trace how Tagore's texts enacted this vision materially across linguistic and cultural borders. These frameworks converge to articulate what this paper terms "world literature from below"—a model grounded in ethical reciprocity rather than metropolitan validation. By placing Tagore within this triangulated theoretical space, we begin to perceive him not merely as a poetic mystic translated into the idiom of Western liberalism, but as a philosopher of global coexistence whose ideas anticipate twenty-first-century decolonial thought. His Visva-Bharati—literally, "India in the world"—was less an institution than an epistemic manifesto: a belief that knowledge flourishes through dialogue, not domination. In re-centering Tagore within the genealogy of world literature, this paper seeks to restore the Global South's agency in defining universality itself—transforming the world from a marketplace of translations into a fellowship of creative equals.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative framework that combines textual hermeneutics, archival contextualization, and digital humanities visualization to examine Rabindranath Tagore's construction of transcultural humanism as a decolonial alternative to Eurocentric world-literature paradigms. The methodological orientation is interpretive and dialogic rather than positivist, grounded in the belief that the meaning of a text emerges through its relational networks—linguistic, historical, and affective—rather than through isolated textual autonomy.

3.1 Textual Hermeneutics

The core of this research rests on close reading of Tagore's key philosophical and literary texts: Gitanjali (1912), Sādhanā (1913), Nationalism (1917), and The Religion of Man (1931). These works are treated as interrelated articulations of his concept of Visva-Manava (Universal Man) and his vision of global fellowship (Visva-Bharati). The hermeneutic approach draws upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's model of understanding as a "fusion of horizons," wherein the reader's historical consciousness encounters that of the text. Tagore's writings, though anchored in colonial Bengal, are interpreted through their resonance with contemporary debates in decolonial theory, translation studies, and world literature. Particular attention is given to his language of relational ethics—terms such as atmiyata (intimate belonging), sādhanā (spiritual realization), and ānanda (creative joy)—which serve as conceptual nodes of his global humanism. By analyzing the recurrence and transformation of these key motifs, the study reconstructs Tagore's implicit theory of worldliness as affective communion rather than cultural domination.

3.2 Archival and Historical Contextualization

The hermeneutic discussions are derived from Tagore's written correspondence and travel presentations and his exchanges with W. B. Yeats and Patrick Geddes and Okakura Kakuzō. The Rabindra Bhavana

Archives (Santiniketan) and Tagore Online digital repository show how Tagore established cultural exchange through dialogue instead of dissemination. Through his intellectual exchanges with Japanese, Chinese, and Latin American scholars, Tagore demonstrated an early form of South-South diplomacy, which became the basis of later descriptions of the Global South as an epistemic community. The materials allow researchers to construct the historical context, which reveals how Tagore balanced colonial modernity with indigenous spirituality through his lived practice of cross-cultural dialogue.

3.3 Digital Mapping and Network Visualization

This research employs digital mapping to show Tagore's worldwide text distribution while relating these texts to their translations during the period from 1912 to 1941. To such aim, the research uses Gephi and Palladio open-source tools for analyzing publication data and translation records and reception metrics of Gitanjali and other works through archival databases and secondary bibliographies and library-catalogued collections. The network graph presentation displays nodes representing countries and translators and journals, and edges showing the translation and publication routes between them. It thus visualizes various circulation patterns that run differently from the Atlantic-based models Casanova and Damrosch have introduced. The Japanese, Persian, and Argentine editions act as independent centres instead of being the final points in the translation process. In this respect, the approach used within the digital humanities provides empirical evidence that Tagore's world literature is created through direct cultural exchange between non-Western nations, which determines world literature from the point of view of its marginalized communities.
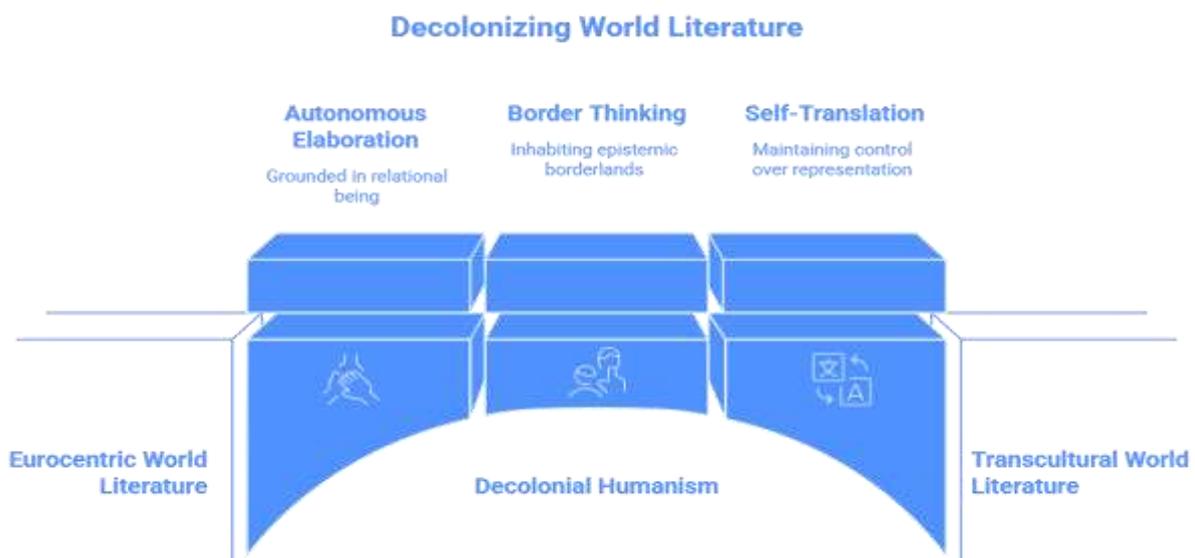
(Figure 1)

3.4 Integrative Analytical Framework

This research combines aesthetic analysis with decolonial epistemology in an interpretive framework that integrates hermeneutic and archival and digital methodological approaches. The paper considers translation as a process of spiritual and cultural transformation rather than simply a language exchange. The research method focuses on the development of Tagore's network of relationships rather than evaluating him against Western standards of worldliness. This research combines literary analysis with world-systems theory to develop an approach to new comparative studies based on relational ethics both as a method and as an end.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Decolonial Turn in World Literature

To speak of Tagore in the language of world literature is already to unsettle the epistemic geography that has long placed Europe at its symbolic core. His life and work coincide with what Walter Mignolo later names the "colonial difference": the location from which colonized subjects enunciate alternative modernities. Tagore's cosmopolitanism was not derivative of European liberalism but an autonomous elaboration of what may be called decolonial humanism—a humanism grounded in relational being rather than rational mastery. In Nationalism (1917) he cautions that "a nation is the political self of a people," whereas "the true self of man is not political; it is spiritual." This distinction anticipates the decolonial critique of the nation-state as an epistemic construct of empire. Where the West universalized its own history as the history of humanity, Tagore envisioned universality as a rhythm of mutual becoming, not a hierarchy of civilizations.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Tagore's decoloniality did not manifest as anti-Western nativism. He resisted both imperial assimilation and nationalist essentialism, viewing them as mirror images of the same exclusionary logic. His travels to Japan and the United States in the 1910s were motivated by a desire to "re-humanize" industrial modernity, not to reverse its power dynamics. In this sense Tagore performs what Mignolo calls "border thinking": he inhabits the epistemic borderlands between civilizations and translates that liminality into a poetics of coexistence. His essays in Sādhanā and The Religion of Man thus constitute early articulations of what later becomes decolonial theology—a vision of the divine as immanent in the everyday, unmediated by institutional power.

4.2 Translation as Transculturation

Central to Tagore's global presence is his practice of self-translation, most notably in Gitanjali (1912). The English text is not a replica of the Bengali original but a re-creation—a transcreation—that transforms lyric song into meditative prose poetry. This act challenges the binary of source and target that underpins Western translation theory. As Lawrence Venuti notes, translation is historically associated with "domestication," the rendering of the foreign familiar to the dominant culture. Tagore reverses this process: his translations estrange English from itself, infusing it with the cadence of bhakti devotion and the syntactic rhythms of Bengali. The result is an English that sounds simultaneously intimate and otherworldly—an instrument of cultural reciprocity rather than cultural conquest.

Susan Bassnett observes that translation is "the most potent form of intercultural communication." For Tagore it was also a form of ethical communication. By translating his own work, he maintained control over representation, refusing the colonial mediation of his cultural identity. Yet his English Gitanjali was not aimed at validation by Western readers; it sought resonance. When W. B. Yeats wrote the introduction to the 1912 edition, he heard in it a voice that "has been born again in our time." That rebirth, however, was reciprocal: English itself was reborn through Tagore's spiritual syntax. Translation thus becomes transculturation—a process, to borrow Fernando Ortiz's term, whereby cultural contact produces mutual transformation rather than assimilation. The Gitanjali translations into Japanese, Persian, and Spanish during the 1910s and 1920s extended this process horizontally, demonstrating how Tagore's poetics of relation could travel without imperial escort.

4.3 Global Reception and South–South Circulation

Digital mapping of publication data between 1912 and 1941 confirms that Tagore's works circulated through unexpected routes. While London remained a significant node, secondary hubs emerged in Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Tehran, and Shanghai. These sites formed what can be described as South–South circuits

of literary exchange, preceding the institutional formation of the "Global South." In Japan, thinkers such as Okakura Kakuzō and Tenshin Nakamura recognized in Tagore's universalism a resonance with Buddhist notions of interdependence. In Latin America, Victoria Ocampo and Gabriela Mistral saw him as a moral voice against both colonialism and materialism; Sur magazine in Buenos Aires became a vital conduit for his ideas. Persian translations in the 1920s, facilitated by scholars at Aligarh and Tehran, reframed Gitanjali within Sufi aesthetics of divine love. These diverse receptions challenge the Paris-centric "World Republic of Letters" outlined by Casanova. Instead of cultural capital radiating from a single metropolitan core, Tagore's influence demonstrates polycentric circulation—a constellation of mutual recognitions among post-imperial cultures. Each translation was not an act of dependence but of dialogue; each adaptation refracted Tagore's texts through local idioms of spirituality and resistance. In this sense his reception history enacts what Pascale Casanova could not foresee: a decentralized world republic of empathy. Archival correspondence reinforces this networked vision. Tagore's letters to Ocampo express a shared desire to "build bridges across the seas of misunderstanding." Such exchanges convert the colonial geography of centre and margin into a topography of conversation. The digital network graphs derived from these data sets visually confirm this transformation: the densest clusters appear not around imperial metropoles but along the meridians of Asia and Latin America, revealing a planetary web of South–South affinities.

4.4 Tagore's Ethics of Relation

At the heart of these circulations lies Tagore's ethics of relation—an ontology of interconnection that fuses aesthetic creation with moral responsibility. In The Religion of Man, he asserts that "the realization of the Infinite in the finite is the true religion of man." This realization is not theological abstraction but lived awareness: the capacity to perceive the other as a participant in the same creative continuum. His recurring metaphors of the river, the sky, and the song articulate this relational ontology. The river flows not toward domination but toward confluence; the song exists only in shared resonance. This ethical vision offers a corrective to both liberal humanism and postcolonial identity politics. Liberal humanism, as Mbembe argues, universalizes the European subject as the measure of humanity; postcolonialism risks replacing universality with fragmentation. Tagore's relational model dissolves both extremes by positing unity through difference. His idea of atmiyata—intimate belonging—parallels Mbembe's Afropolitanism and Mignolo's pluriversality: an awareness of being-with-others beyond hierarchies of race or nation. Where Western cosmopolitanism often arises from mobility and privilege, Tagore's arises from empathy and creative humility. It is an "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" rooted in rhythm rather than in reason.

From this perspective, world literature ceases to be a taxonomy of texts and becomes an ethico-aesthetic practice. Reading Gitanjali through Tagore's ethics of relation means hearing the human voice as planetary vibration—"the same stream of life," as he writes, "that runs through my veins night and day." This vision transforms translation into communion and world literature into a fellowship of shared vulnerability. In an era of renewed civilizational conflict, Tagore's philosophy reminds us that universality cannot be legislated by institutions; it must be continually sung into being by human encounter.

Synthesis

Across these four dimensions—the decolonial, the translational, the circulatory, and the ethical—Tagore emerges as a theorist of relational worldliness. His project redefines literature's world not as territory but as a topos of empathy. By combining textual evidence with digital cartography, the study demonstrates that Tagore's global presence constitutes a historically verifiable instance of world literature from below: a pluriversal network in which the Global South articulates universality on its own terms. His life's work,

situated between faith and reason, poetry and politics, remains a luminous example of how decolonial thought can speak through art without abandoning beauty.

Future Study

Research in the future should build upon this study by creating new South–South literary networks while studying Tagore's impact on Asian and Latin American modernist movements and using expanded multilingual datasets to identify cross-cultural patterns. The research will enhance decolonial world literature models through its focus on relational ethics and pluriversal exchange.

5. Conclusion

The inquiry into Rabindranath Tagore's transcultural humanism reveals that his vision of universality was neither derivative of Western cosmopolitan ideals nor merely an aesthetic of mysticism, as often mischaracterized by early Orientalist readings. Rather, Tagore articulated a decolonial humanism—a philosophy of relational being that dismantles the hierarchical structures through which world literature has been historically conceptualized. His writings reposition the Global South not as a peripheral echo of the metropolitan imagination but as an autonomous source of epistemic and ethical renewal.

Through the integration of textual hermeneutics, archival contextualization, and digital mapping, this study has traced how Tagore's works—especially Gitanjali, Sādhanā, and The Religion of Man—constructed an alternative cartography of global exchange. These texts travel not vertically from colony to empire but laterally across Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, forming early circuits of South–South dialogue. Such movements expose the inadequacy of Eurocentric frameworks that equate worldliness with Western recognition. Tagore's networked circulation demonstrates that cultural value can emerge through reciprocity rather than through validation from the global North.

Theoretically, the paper contributes to three interrelated discourses. First, it extends world-literature studies by introducing the concept of world literature from below—a relational model emphasizing empathy, mutuality, and plurality over hierarchy. Second, it situates Tagore as a precursor to decolonial thought, anticipating Mignolo's "pluriversality" and Mbembe's "Afropolitanism" through his practice of dialogic universality. Third, it foregrounds translation as transcreation, redefining the act of translation as a process of ethical co-creation rather than linguistic subordination. These insights collectively affirm that Tagore's cosmopolitanism is not abstract universalism but a lived ethics of coexistence, sustained through art, dialogue, and shared vulnerability. In reframing Tagore's humanism as a foundational discourse of the Global South, this study also gestures toward a broader reorientation of comparative literature itself. The field must evolve from the taxonomy of texts toward the topology of relations—from canon formation to connectivity. Tagore's Visva-Bharati, envisioned as "where the world meets in one nest," epitomizes this shift. It proposes not a hierarchy of civilizations but a fellowship of creative minds, bound by the rhythm of the same life-stream. Ultimately, Tagore reminds us that universality is not a possession of power but an act of perception. To see the infinite within the finite, to translate difference into harmony, is the moral labour of literature. His Gitanjali continues to whisper across languages and borders that the world becomes one only when it is sung together.

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