



WHERE THE MIND IS WITHOUT FEAR - RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall

- be getting an introductory information about the present Poem and Poet
- be having a firsthand experience of the text of the poem
- be getting an overview of the analysis and explanation of the poem
- be learning about the tone and theme of the poem

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore was a great poet, novelist, dramatist, educationist and a multi-faceted artist. He reshaped Bengali literature and music extending its influence on Indian art and music. He was born on May 7, 1861. His collection of poems *Gitanjali* is profoundly fresh, beautiful and spiritual. He was the first non-European to win the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

He was a great humanist, Universalist and internationalist who always believed in the ancient maxim of India “VasudhaivKutumbakam” (The entire world is one family). He was against narrow-minded nationalism and therefore he differed from Mahatma Gandhi on several issues like, Swadeshi movement, spinning of charkha, boycott of foreign goods, etc. Tagore and Gandhiji respected and loved each other deeply despite their difference of opinions. He too denounced the British Rule in India and advocated independence from the British Raj. He founded a famous institution of education ‘VishwaBharati’ that sought to bridge India and the world.

Tagore's major literary works include *Gitanjali*, *Gora*, *GhareBaire* (The Home and the world), etc. He had composed 'Jana GanaMana' which was chosen as the national anthem of India. 'Amar Sonar Bangla' the national anthem of Bangladesh was also composed by Tagore. Tagore died at the age of 80 on August 7, 1941.

1.2 ABOUT THE POEM

The poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear* is taken from the English *Gitanjali* 'Song Offerings'. It is a collection of his 103 poems translated by Tagore himself from Bengali into English. It was published first in November 1912 by the Indian Society of London. It contained translations of 53 poems from Bengali *Gitanjali* and 50 poems from other Bengali collections of his poems *Gitimaya*, *Naivedya* and *Kheya*. The *Gitanjali* became quite popular in the West and was widely translated.

The poem *Where the Mind Is without Fear* is a prayer to the universal father, God Almighty. The poem displays Tagore's vision of true freedom and new enlightened India. The original poem titled "Prarthana" (Prayer) was included in an anthology called *Naivedya*. The poem was translated into English by the poet himself in 1911. It was included in the *Gitanjali* as poem 35 which was published in 1912. Tagore recited its English version at the Indian National Congress Session in Calcutta, 1917.

Rabindranath Tagore envisages an ideal nation in the poem. An ideal nation should be free in true sense, liberal in outlook, united in strength but free from narrow-mindedness. It should be an ideal combination of sensitivity and rational outlook. The people of an ideal nation should be hard working and dynamic. They should always strive for peace, progress and prosperity.

The prayer transcends both time and space, achieving the quality of a universal prayer.

1.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

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;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

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.

- Rabindranath Tagore

1.4 KEY WORDS

Fragments : Pieces, divisions

Domestic : Household, pertaining to home or family

Striving : Trying hard

Tireless	: Without getting tired, indefatigably
Head held high	: with self-respect and dignity
Stream	: Flow, river, brook
Dreary	: Dull
Reason	: Logic, intellect, rationality
Desert	: Dry, sandy area of land
Awake	: to wake up, stretch, extend, to get up from slumber/ sleep
Dead habit	: Conditioning, superstitious temperament, ritualistic mind
Ever -widening	: Always expanding, getting larger and larger

1.5 SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poet prays to God Almighty that the people of his country should be fearless and their heads should be held high with self-respect and human dignity. They should be free from fear, repression and coercion. The poet dreams of a nation where knowledge is free and education is available to all. Education must not be confined to rich and the elite people only but to all. Children should learn from nature and the world around them. They should be curious enough to learn new things all the time. Tagore's concept of education was quite liberal and therefore he believed that education should not be confined only to four walls of classrooms.

Tagore says that people should be united not only with the people of his country but with the entire world. He thinks that there should not be divisions among people on the basis of caste, creed, religion, colour, and race. Tagore believed that the whole world should be like one extended family. He was against narrow-minded nationalism. Tagore says that people of his country should be truthful. Their words should come out from the depth of their hearts.

Tagore further says that the people of his country should continuously endeavor to stretch their arms towards perfection. All should work hard to achieve their goals. These goals should not be materialistic alone but the realization of the self. Tagore believes that sensitivity is very important in life but one must not be superstitious and irrational. Clear stream of reason must not be lost into the desert of false beliefs, superstitions, prejudices and evil customs. Reason and intellect should always rule over dead traditions and beliefs.

The poet says that the people of his country should be progressive liberal and broad minded. He says that the minds of people should be led towards "ever widening thought and action" by the Lord Almighty. Broad minded people's actions are always generous and humane. They rise above narrow-mindedness and superstitious beliefs. In the final line of the poem, the poet addresses God as father and prays to awaken his country into the heaven of freedom.

Tagore was a mystic poet with profound faith in the Unknown power that operates in the entire Universe. For him, God is not just an incarnation but the Inner self within all of us. He invokes the Inner self to awaken ourselves into the Utopian world of peace, freedom and love.

1.6 ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Where the Mind is Without Fear was written during the British rule before India achieved independence. Tagore died in 1941, a few years before Independence in 1947. He wrote this poem when India was under the colonial rule and the people of India had become mentally enslaved. They felt that they would never be free. They had lost their self-confidence and dignity. Their spirit had been completely drained and depressed. They lived in poverty and ignorance. They were denied proper education and equal rights. Majority of them were illiterate, irrational and superstitious. The British Government employed the strategy of “Divide and Rule” in India and divided the country into fragments based on caste, creed, religion and economic status. Under the British Rule, the erstwhile Indian princely states fought among themselves and acted like the stooge of the British rulers.

Rabindranath Tagore was profoundly aware of the problems India was facing during the British Rule. He dreamt of free India. For Tagore, mere political freedom was not an end but a means to true inner freedom of the people of India. In this poem, Tagore envisions the “heaven of freedom” for India where the people of the country would live in fearlessness, harmony, love the world of knowledge and persistent efforts for perfection.

Where the Mind is Without Fear is a prayer to God almighty to awaken India into the heaven of freedom. The poem has been composed in simple diction, beautiful vivid images and other poetic devices. The verse form of the poem is free verse with no metrical patterns or rhymes. Though it has no meters and rhymes, it has natural musical flow. It can be called a prose poem too. The poem contains eleven lines with no ending rhymes. However the poem contains only one sentence that ends with the last line.

The poem implies freedom from the shackles that kept the people of India chained and enslaved during the British rule. The people of India were full of fear and their heads were bent in servility. They were ignorant and access to knowledge was limited. Therefore the poet wanted to reverse the prevalent condition of the people under the colonial domination.

Tagore wanted the minds of people to be fearless and free from oppression, narrow-mindedness and despair. He wanted their heads held high with self-confidence and dignity. In the first line the poet prays to God that the countrymen should be free from fear, oppression and slavishness. Their heads should be held high in dignity. They should have a deep sense of self-respect and equality. Bent head symbolizes slavishness and servility, raised head denotes honour and self-respect.

In the second line, the poet says that knowledge should be accessible to all without any restrictions and class distinctions. There the poet refers to education which is a means of providing knowledge to the people. The poet is a strong supporter of free knowledge and therefore he believes that education should not be restricted to the rich and the upper class people only. It should be open and available to all. The doors of the temples of learning should be open for all. Children should learn not only within the confine of classrooms but also from nature and the world around them. Tagore, like Wordsworth, believed that one could learn more from nature than from books. As an educationist, Tagore believed in Gurukul pattern of education of Ancient India

where students learnt directly from nature in a natural way instead of rote learning and bookish instruction. It was Tagore's concept of education which he put into practice in his educational institutions Shantiniketan and Vishvabharati University.

In the next two lines, the poet says that the people of his nation should live unitedly and harmoniously. For Tagore, unity and harmony is not important for the nation only but the entire human world. Therefore he says that the world should not be broken up into divisions based on caste, creed, religion, race etc. The greatest problem of human world is lack of unity, harmony and equality. People of the world are divided on the basis of nationality, religion and race. Every nation thinks that they are the best and others are inferior to them. People are usually intolerant towards others, their religions, beliefs and cultures. If we look at the history of humankind, we realize that most of the wars were fought because of intolerance, hatred towards others and rejection of the other people's religions, race, and colour of their skin. Prejudices and false assumptions about other people create enmity and conflict among people.

Tagore says that these are narrow domestic walls that divide people. India is a country with immense diversity of castes, religions, creeds and cultures. However there is a common thread of secular outlook (SarvaDharmSambhav) that binds all together. Even in Hinduism there are many gods, goddesses and practices of worship. The very idea of multiplicity of beliefs is the acceptance of other's beliefs cultures, religions etc. Unfortunately British Rule in India divided the nation by creating disharmony and conflicts among them. Therefore Tagore wants India to be undivided and united.

In the fifth line, Tagore wishes that the people of his nation are truthful and their words should come out from the depth of their hearts. There should be harmony among one's thought, speech and action. For Tagore, truth is not a remote ideal but it must be essentially human. Tagore says, "What we call truth lies in the rational harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of reality."

Tagore and Albert Einstein met in 1930 and discussed what Truth is. Tagore believed that the Divine is not isolated from the world and it proves that the Truth of the Universe is human Truth. It is interesting to note that for Tagore, Truth is not an inaccessible ideal but the part of human consciousness. One can practice it if one follows the voice from within. This inner voice connects all human world and the entire Universe.

In the sixth line, Tagore wants everyone to strive to achieve their goals and reach perfection. He says that people should continue to work ceaselessly for achieving perfection in all directions whether it is material or spiritual. However, true perfection is always spiritual because it is the flowering of one's inner self. Tagore wants people of his nation to be free from lethargy and laziness.

In the seventh line, Tagore compares 'reason' to a clear stream and 'dead habits' to dreary desert. He says that logical thinking should be clear and unaffected by superstitious beliefs and dull, dry customs and rituals. Tagore always stood for sensitivity but for him rational, intellectual attitude was equally important. If emotions are not monitored by reason, they turn into superstitious beliefs and dull rituals. This passion for freedom underlies his

firm rejection of irrational traditionalism which make people the prisoners of dead past. Tagore stood for modern development and scientific advancement. He differed from Mahatma Gandhi on spinningkhadi, charkha, and boycott of foreign goods. He believed that people should not be dominated by machines but he was in favour of reasonable use of modern technology.

In lines 9 and 10, the poet wants the people of his country to be liberal, broad minded and progressive. He wants minds to be “led forward” into ever widening thought and action by the God Almighty. He wants people of free India to overcome the narrow mindedness and bigotry. He prays to the Divine power to lead the people of India towards the world of liberal outlook and altruistic actions.

In the final line, the poet prays to God to awaken his country into such a heaven of freedom as described in the earlier lines of the poem. He prays to the Universal Father to raise his nation to the heights where freedom could be realized in its culmination. According to Tagore, God is not separate from the world and human heart. Tagore wants to awaken the God within us to free our minds from all shackles and bondages. Finally, the message of the poet is very clear. He wants the people of his country to be free mentally and spiritually. He wants them to be united, fearless, compassionate, self-dignified and truthful. He wants them to be curious to learn and know more with open mindedness. According to Tagore, this is the true freedom which the people of his country should achieve.

Tagore’s attitude toward politics culture, nationalism, internationalism, tradition and modernity is reflected in the poem. His concept of patriotism was quite different. He wanted India to be free from colonial rule but he did not want India to be confined to narrow domestic walls of traditions customs and rituals. He wanted the people of India to be global citizens with liberal outlook and compassion for entire world.

1.7 TONE OF THE POEM

Tone in literary writing refers to the methods by which writers and speakers reveal their attitudes or feelings. As tone is equated with attitude, it is important to realize the techniques and modes of revealing the attitudes. As a literary concept, it is adapted from the phrase ‘tone of voice’ in speech. Tone of voice reflects attitudes toward a particular experience or situation and also toward listeners.

In Tagore’s poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, there is a tone of longing or yearning for a free nation where there would be freedom from fear, narrow-mindedness, superstitions and irrational attitude. The first eight lines envision Utopian world of freedom which the poet calls “Heaven of freedom” in which he wants his country awake. He prays to the Universal Father to awaken India where there is peace, harmony, liberalism and equal opportunities for all. The poem was written several decades before independence and it inspired freedom fighters of India guiding them about what kind of freedom India should achieve. Tagore’s concept of freedom is quite radical and the message of the poem is highly relevant even today.

1.8 THEMES OF THE POEM

Themes can be defined as a main idea or an underlining meaning of any literary work which can be stated directly or indirectly. A major theme is an idea

that a writer repeats theme in his literary work making it the most significant idea. A minor theme is an idea that appears in the literary work briefly. Theme and subject are two different categories as subject is a topic of the literary work and theme is an opinion expressed on the subject.

The following are the important themes of the poem “Where the Mind is Without Fear”.

- (1) **Division of Bengal:** In 1905, the Indian State of Bengal was divided into two states West Bengal and East Bengal according to the divisive policy of the British Government known as ‘Divide and Rule’. It was divided on the basis of religion. In West Bengal the majority of population was Hindu while in East Bengal, the majority of people were Muslims. East Bengal came to be known as East Pakistan after partition. In 1971, it became Bangladesh. Tagore wrote this poem in around 1910, five years after Banga-bhanga (division of Bengal). He was profoundly saddened by the division of Bengal and therefore he referred to it in the poem, where he speaks of the nation broken into fragments. Tagore wants the nation undivided, unfragmented and united. He protests against the division based on religion, caste, race or creed. This is one of the major themes of the poem.
- (2) **East and West:** Tagore loved India and her culture profoundly but he was not a narrow-minded nationalist. He believed that both East and West have their own merits which should be incorporated into each other. There are several practices of the West that the East should adopt and the West should also learn certain good things from the East. In his novels *Gora* and *GhareBaire*, Tagore advocates the synthesis of the two cultures. Tagore was influenced by English poets and poetry. He was a great admirer of the Romantic poets. He also used similar themes employed by the Romantic poets in his own poems. He experimented with Bengali lyrics influenced by the Western poetry and their forms. Tagore was highly sensitive poet but he rejected sentimentalism and irrational attitude. He firmly believed the people of India should cultivate intellectual and rational attitude to free themselves from superstitions and blind faith. He was deeply influenced by the Age of Enlightenment that took place in England in 18th century. He believed that the people of India should adopt rational outlook and become open minded and liberal. He believed that India could achieve independence from the colonial rule through rational and intellectual attitude only. To encounter the British rule, India needed to adopt and employ intellectual stance. According to Tagore the ideal combination of the Eastern and the Western values would certainly improve the quality of life and make India a true heaven of freedom.
- (3) **Confluence of Cultures:** Rabindranath Tagore came from a Hindu family of landed gentry. He was against the clash of civilizations and stood for confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Islam and British. Tagore was brought up in a family where the knowledge of Sanskrit, Bengali, English and Persian was essential part of the family tradition. This outlook was non-sectarian and liberal. The greatest example of how Tagore was respected by independent Bangladesh was

the choice of its national anthem ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’ from Tagore’s songs.

- (4) **True Freedom:** Tagore dreamt of free India with rational attitude and broadmindedness. His attitude towards politics, culture, nationalism, internationalism, tradition and modernity is clearly expressed in the poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear*. He was a nationalist with a difference. He rejected unreasoned traditionalism which made people the prisoners of past. For him, humanity was above all beliefs and faiths. He abhorred untouchability but disapproved Gandhiji’s statement that the Bihar earthquake in 1924 was a divine chastisement for the sin of untouchability.
- (5) **Knowledge:** Tagore firmly believed that knowledge should be accessible to all. All people should be educated and knowledgeable. Education leads to true freedom, intellectual life and nation building. Tagore’s views on education are liberal and aim at creating global citizens. He believed that learning should not be confined to four walls of classrooms but rooted in nature and immediate surroundings. For Tagore, true education should aim at self-realization, intellectual development, and physical development, love for humanity, freedom and spiritual development. He advocated nature centered education rejecting bookish rote learning.
- (6) **Structure, Diction and Style :** The poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear* is written in free verse. It has no rhyme scheme or particular metrical pattern. It contains eleven lines. The whole poem is only a single complex sentence with one main clause at the end and several sub-ordinate clauses beginning with ‘where’. The style of the poem seems to have the influence of the Bauls of Bengal and their soulful rendition. The Bauls of Bengal were known for their mendicant’s life and their views on spiritual salvation.

The diction of the poem is simple lucid and rhythmical. Tagore has used several figures of speech that enhance the beauty of the poem. The poet uses the poetic device of metaphor in line 7-8 where he compares ‘reason’ with a stream of water and ‘habit’ with desert. The poet addresses God as ‘Father’ and prays to him to awaken India into the heaven of freedom. Here the poet uses the poetic device called ‘Apostrophe’. There are also several examples of alliteration in the poem such as “the head is held high”, “tireless striving stretches” and “the dreary desert sand of dead habit” etc. Anaphora runs throughout the poem as there is a repetition of ‘where’ at the beginning of seven lines in the poem “Tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection” is a fine example of personification.

Check Your Progress 1

1.9 ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

- (i) What kind of freedom does Tagore envisage?

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(ii) What does Tagore mean by “narrow domestic walls”?

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(iii) When can people hold their heads high according to Tagore?

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(iv) Where does the clear stream of reason lose its way?

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(v) What does dead habit imply?

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(vi) What does the poet pray to God for?

(vii) What does Tagore mean by “Where knowledge is free”?

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Check Your Progress: 2

1.10 CHOOSE THE CORRECT OPTION FROM GIVEN BELOW.

1. *Where the Mind is Without Fear* is taken from
 - (a) Gitanjali
 - (b) Tagore’s collection of poetry
 - (c) GhareBaire
 - (d) Gora
2. Tagore received the Nobel Prize in _____
 - (a) 1913
 - (b) 1941
 - (c) 1907
 - (d) 1947
3. *Amar sonar Bangla* was composed by _____
 - (a) Bankimchandra
 - (b) Sharatchandra
 - (c) R.C. Dutt
 - (d) Rabindranath Tagore
4. *Where the Mind is Without Fear* is
 - (a) A Prayer to God
 - (b) A eulogy to God
 - (c) A Complaint to God
 - (d) A Sermon
5. *Where the Mind is Without Fear* was included as poem _____ in Gitanjali.
 - (a) 12
 - (b) 15
 - (c) 35
 - (d) 100
6. The original title of the poem in Bengali was
 - (a) Naivedya
 - (b) Prasad
 - (c) Prarthna
 - (d) Mukti
7. The poem was translated from Bengali into English by
 - (a) The poet himself
 - (b) Isherwood
 - (c) W. B. Yeats
 - (d) KshitimohanSen
8. The British Rule divided India by using the strategy of
 - (a) “bribe and win”
 - (b) “educate to enslave”
 - (c) “divide and rule”
 - (d) “destroy the native culture”
9. The poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear* contains
 - (a) 10 lines
 - (b) 11 lines
 - (c) 14 lines
 - (d) 5 Couplets
10. Tagore founded educational institution called
 - (a) PremNiketan
 - (b) Shanti Niketan

- (c) Gram Vidyalaya (d) MuktiVidyalaya
11. Tagore believed in _____ education
 (a) Knowledge centered (b) Nature-centered
 (c) Village-centered (d) Skill centered
12. Tagore compares reason to
 (a) a clear stream (b) a river
 (c) the ocean (d) the lake
13. Bengal was divided into East Bengal and West Bengal in
 (a) 1905 (b) 1910
 (c) 1943 (d) 1947
14. Tagore advocated the synthesis of
 (a) spirit and matter (b) man and machine
 (c) art and science (d) East and West
15. *Amar Sonar Bangla* written by Tagore is the national anthem of
 (a) Bangladesh (b) Nepal
 (c) Bhutan (d) Brahma Desh

1.11 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we studied the famous poem of Rabindranath Tagore which is highly relevant today. It tells us what a true freedom is. It reflects Tagore's liberal views on education, culture, freedom and rational outlook. It is interesting to note that he has presented the vision of free India but the poem contains an important message for all free democratic and secular nations.

1.12 BOOKS SUGGESTED

Das Gupta T. *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historical Analysis*. AbhinavPrakashan, 1993.

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Guha, Ramachandra. *Makers of Modern India*. Cambridge, 2011.

Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on History, Culture and Identity*, Picador, 2006.

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Song Offerings", Translated by Joe Wirtter, Writers Workshop, 1998.

W. B. Yeats. *Gitanjali*. Dover Publications, 2000.

Answers

Check Your Progress: 2

1.(a)	2.(a)	3.(d)	4.(a)	5.(a)	6.(c)	7.(c)	8.(a)	9.(c)	10.(b)	11.(b)
12.(a)	13.(a)	14.(d)	15.(a)							