

An Analysis upon Creation and Mysticism in the Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore: A Case Study of Gitanjali

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Abstract – *Mysticism categorically lacks an authority and anything and everything that is related to God is put under the term mysticism. This research paper focuses Gitanjali which is classified under mystic poetry. The endeavor here is to look for the mystical elements in the poem and how it qualifies to be a mystical poetry. An analysis of words and ideas reveals that it is the love for nature and God that made Tagore enter the realm of mysticism. However, his mystical experiences are quite different from those of the experiences of enlightened saints of India. Saints' mysticism is a result of the union achieved through deep meditation, but in Tagore's case it is only love and desire for the union. As a result of this, his Gitanjali can be considered as Nature Mysticism rather than Soul or God Mysticism only which enlightened saints and poets like Kalidasa or Auribindo can achieve.*

Tagore, rising high above mere propagandist philosophizing about religious tenets and ritualism, feels the presence of the divine in every object of his creation and is inextricably tangled in it. His tryst with the divine will not take place in some transcendental world on some other plane; his is the tryst with God...takes place on this very earth and his songs of Gitanjali give expression to his ecstatic pleasure that he has already experienced.

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INTRODUCTION

Tagore was a Bengali poet, Brahma Samaj philosopher, visual artist, playwright, novelist, and composer whose works reshaped Bengali literature and music in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He became Asia's first Nobel laureate when he won the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature.

A Piral Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta, Tagore first wrote poems at the age of eight. At the age of sixteen, he published his first substantial poetry under the pseudonym Bhanushingho ("Sun Lion") and wrote his first short stories and dramas in 1877. His home schooling, life in Shilaidaha, and travels made Tagore a nonconformist and pragmatist. Tagore strongly protested against the British Raj and gave his support to the Indian Independence Movement and Mahatma Gandhi. Tagore's life was tragic—he lost virtually his entire family and was devastated to witness Bengal's decline—but his life's work endured, in the form of his poetry and the institution he founded, Visva-Bharati University.

Tagore's works included numerous novels, short stories, collection of songs, dance-drama, political and personal essays. Some prominent examples are

Gitanjali (Song Offerings), The Religion of Man. His verse, short stories, and novels, which often exhibited rhythmic lyricism, colloquial language, meditative naturalism, and philosophical contemplation, received worldwide acclaim. Tagore was also a cultural reformer who modernized Bengali art by rejecting strictures binding it to classical Indian forms. Two songs from his rabindrasangeet canon are now the national anthems of Bangladesh and India: the Amar Shonar Bangla and the Jana Gana Mana.

Tagore's literary reputation is disproportionately influenced by regard for his poetry, however, he also wrote novels, essays, short stories, travelogues, dramas, and thousands of songs. Of Tagore's prose, his short stories are perhaps most highly regarded; indeed, he is credited with originating the Bengali-language version of the genre. His works are frequently noted for their rhythmic, optimistic, and lyrical nature. Such stories mostly borrow from deceptively simple subject matter.

Rabindranath Tagore's creative output tells a lot about this Renaissance man. The variety, quality and quantity are unbelievable. As a writer, Tagore primarily worked in Bengali, but after his success with Gitanjali, he translated many of his other works into

English. He wrote over one thousand poems; eight volumes of short stories; almost two dozen plays and play-lets; eight novels; and many books and essays on philosophy, religion, education and social topics. Apart from his love for literature, his other great love was music, Bengali style. He composed more than two thousand songs, both the music and lyrics.

Two of them became the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. In 1929, he even began painting. Many of his paintings can be found in museums today, especially in India, where he is considered the greatest literary figure of India of all times. Tagore was not only a creative genius he was a great man and friend to many. Rabindranath is one of the most seminal thinkers of the modern age.

His traditional roots are in the Upanishads and this is amply testified in his works *Gitanjali*, *Religion of Man* and *Sadhana*. His poetry stems out of the deep and abiding inspiration that the Upanishads had on him. Unlike the Vedantins who had endeavoured to reach the Ultimate through Jnana (textual and scriptural knowledge) which has been the dogma of the Advaitins of the Mayavada school mainly, his approach has been from the Vaishnava view as he has himself stated of Rasa or bliss. This is not the ordinary poetic view which seeks to discover tastes (rasa) either in Nature or in Man or in technique or in expression. His notable aim was to make rasa a means to realization, bliss as a pramana towards infinite accomplishment and attainment. "This truth of realization is not in space, it can only be realized in one's own inner spirit, the infinite and eternal has to be known as One. This birthless spirit is beyond space. For it is Purushah, it is the Person" (ROM 41). The intuitive realization goes beyond the intellectual institution itself and it is the most important discovery of Rabindranath.

In the tumultuous socio-political era of the pre-war world, when the West had become a Godless state (with Nietzsche's proclamation of "Death of God"), Rabindranath Tagore offered solace through his spiritually charged artistic achievement of immense appeal and supreme significance, *Gitanjali* (1912). *Gitanjali*, a collection of song offerings by Tagore, is an excellent expression of Indian Bhakti cult—with no overt didacticism but with ultimate submission before the will of God.

Tagore prays to God to remove his weaknesses so that he may substantiate his vision of a peaceful world. His prayer is not for his own uplift and spiritual enlightenment but for his fellowmen, too, who lack spiritual courage and who cannot hold their heads high. He prays to the heavenly Father to lead his country into the "heaven of freedom" not in political terms but spiritual and humanitarian sense also. Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. (XXXV) "He (Tagore) was in line with the rishis, the great sages of India, drawing from the wisdom of the ancient past and

giving it a practical garb and meaning in the present," says Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. (Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume xvi). Thus, Tagore is a mystic, but he differs from the stereotypes in the sense that his mysticism never allows renunciation of life. Tagore vehemently denounces idol worship and mere ritualistic religious practices. Unlike other devotional poets he never seeks salvation in sedentary isolation, in the negation of the worldly affairs or in mere meditation. Tagore does not seek deliverance in breaking ties with worldly life, for he feels joy in his connectivity with His creation.

Though Rabindranath Tagore is one of the Indian pioneers writing in English who had in *Gitanjali* an opportunity to present the Indian mysticism to the West, he does not confine himself to the stereotype of a spiritual Guru. His stance, instead of ruminating about vague philosophies of self and the Other, takes into account the whole humanity; his ultimate preoccupation is with humanism. Humanism, as defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is "an outlook or system of thought concerned with human rather than divine or supernatural matters; a belief or outlook emphasizing common human needs and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems and concerned with mankind as responsible and progressive intellectual being." This is simply the sense that the term has come to acquire in the West where humanism is a kind of ideology that came in being as a reaction to the prevailing religious dominance. Tagore's humanism, on the other hand, does not seek to dissociate itself from God. It does not place the interests of the sovereign individual at the centre—as does the Western concept of secular humanism that has come to acquire universal validity. In fact, Tagore's humanism is not one thing but many. Despite his religious inclination and his firm faith in divinity, he was quite pragmatic in his outlook. Even in a period of religious revivalism, he kept himself away from any institutionalized religious affiliations. In spite of his deep rootedness in the Upanishads which expound man and the concept of self in an abstract manner, he simply concerns himself with a humanistic approach with a sustained emotional power. His commitment to social justice for humans and his abhorrence of violence as man's ultimate salvation find expression not in propagandist tones but in an artistic way. He is, above all, a poet and an artist and his religion is that of an artist who is not concerned about sin and redemption, good or evil, but about the soul's fulfillment that he gets after an illuminating experience.

BACKGROUND STUDY

Gitanjali, one of the most quoted works in Indian Literature in English has been an evergreen contribution made by Rabindranath Tagore for the Indian society. It was Tagore's personal experience with God that helped him get the inspiration to compose poetry like this. One of the biographers of Tagore, Edward J Thompson wrote:

What matters in Tagore is his personal experience of God. Of the depth and sincerity of this experience no one who has read Gitanjali can doubt. God is strangely close to his thought.

He is often more theistic than any Western theist.....God becomes more personalized for him, the Indian, in the most intimate, individual fashion.....I can only assume that he found it so in personal experience..... (Rabindranath Tagore Mystic Poet, 2011)

Historians say that the truthfulness and vigour of Tagore's father Devendranath's character and his profound faith in religion and its principles left such an ineffaceable effect on the young Rabindranath that he started acquiring spiritual inspiration by being with nature observing and understanding its vibrations, listening to what nature wants to speak and sing. Research scholar Victor says, "It is a ritual rooted since his childhood." (Rabindranath Tagore Mystic Poet, 2011)

Tagore wrote many stories, poems, one act plays and novels. Some of his works were carried by his pen name Bhanusingha, meaning 'Sunlion' (C D Merriman, 2006). He was a regular contributor to various magazines and among his works the poem Gitanjali and the one act play Chandaliika are the most famous and creditworthy. Both the works deal with spiritual experiences, the poem dealing with the personal experience of God and the play dealing with Buddhist philosophy. Gitanjali has its own specialty as it is the self-address to almighty combining various emotions, dreams and aspirations of the poet. The poem is also rich with figurative language with simile, metaphor, personification and also with sound devices like alliteration, onomatopoeia and the like. The imagery used in the poem is far-fetched in their contribution to the overall essence of the poem. Thus, in the case of Gitanjali, it is true to say that, "poetry is an imaginative awareness of experiences expressed through meaning, sound and rhythmic language choices as to evoke an emotional response" (Mark Flanagan, n.d.). Moreover, critics claim that it is an allegoric poem. An allegory is the description of something under the image of another (Sk Miru, n.d) and in Gitanjali, one can discover another meaning under its surface meaning – a deep spiritual significance (Sk Miru, n.d).

Considering the poetic qualities of Gitanjali, one can see that some of the definitions given on poetry by the major poets and critics stand in perfect match with Gitanjali. Robert Frost has said that, "a poem begins with a lump in the throat" (poetry foundation, n.d). Of course, Gitanjali is an expression of the troubles of the poet. The union he wishes with God and his feelings towards Him that developed over a period of time turned out to be a poem. The lump which is the strong desire that he has in mind made him sing the songs of praise to merge with God.

Close reading of the poems in Gitanjali would make one realize the poems may be divided into three types based on the contents or themes of the poems. Some poems depict Tagore's perception of God, some depict his worship of nature and some depict his understanding of Indian Philosophy.

MYSTICISM

Mysticism is defined as, "A brief in the existence of realities beyond perpetual or intellectual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible by subjective experience". Anything that is explained from a state of higher than the average consciousness of a human being is mystic. But here the dilemma is, till now no authority has given a proper definition on mystic poetry or what characterizes mystic poetry or which category it falls into. It is worthwhile to note here the statement, "Two central questions concerning the nature and literary history of mystical poetry remain open" (Lowry Nelson. Jr, p. 323). As a result of this any work that deals with experiences of super consciousness, union with the absolute power, any philosophical address on spirituality and the like can be considered as a work of mysticism and the writers may be referred to as mystics. A majority of the mystical experiences find their way into the genre of poetry.

Poetry is one of the most useful expressions of a mystic's inner experiences. By nature a mystic is able to access a state of consciousness that is beyond the usual awareness of human's. At a certain stage mystics and great seekers have said it is impossible to describe the consciousness they have attained (Mystical Poetry, n.d).

Thus it also shows that though they try to express their mystic experiences through poems, the strength of the poems is often too limited to grasp the full essence of the mystic experience achieved by the writers. But they try to reach people with their delicate endeavors. "However through poetry, it is possible for the mystic poets to give a glimpse of higher worlds, like a finger pointing to the moon there inspiring utterances offer a poetic description of their elevating experiences." (Mystical Poetry, n.d)

MYSTICISM IN THE WORSHIP OF NATURE

Tagore finds the presence of God in the nature around him. He addresses God by admiring the beauty of nature which is the reflection of the presence of God himself. Tagore is not a self-centered person. At the time of hardships and complaints he does not forget the blessings showered by God. Direct references are given in the poems wherein he says to God that He gifts man things unasked. Those things which man enjoys in this universe, for example, the elements of the nature

like sky, stars, wind, flowers etc. are the greatest gifts man can ever have. But still Tagore says that, "My desires are many and my cry is pitiful". He is in such a desperate mood to be with him that he says, "O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thy thunder". Here it seems that Tagore conveys to the reader that thunder and lightning shows the power and vibrations in the universe when God reveals himself to his creations. To his surprise, he receives a gift from God, a 'sword', which he finds very difficult to relate to. Later, his creative power enables him to understand that it is the pain with which he needs to cut off all his desires from the mind and body. The sword can be treated as fire in Buddhist philosophy to burn out the unwanted and unending passions. In the same poem, he uses the images of flower, spices and vase of perfumed water to symbolize materiality in life. As the poem develops, 'sword' takes greater manifestations in the poet's creative realm. He writes, "Thy sword with its curve of lightning like the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu". Thinking from the perspective of spirituality, one can understand that 'sword' is being referred to as a weapon against materiality. The sword is compared to the divine bird 'Garuda' of Lord Vishnu. Garuda is the enemy of snakes. Snake, in one of its symbolizations, represents sexuality in Hindu Philosophy and Garuda, spirituality being divine. Thus the interpretation becomes clear here. The poet continues his address to God as golden light upon the leaves, idle clouds, passing breeze, spotless and serene, maya (illusion), father etc. But what confuses one is the way in which he uses the same image to symbolize multiple ideas. For example, "Clouds made of tears and sighs and songs" symbolizes his sacrifices to attain the ultimate union. So the image 'cloud' takes two dimensions here. It seems, as any mystic, he attains the union that he is longing for, at the end of his address and this can be well refined from the lines, "unknown man plays upon his lute", "In memory I woke up and found my garden full with wonders of flowers". Tagore uses the metaphor of "little flower" to state that every man is like a flower waiting for the opportunity to attain salvation by decorating His feet, neck or head.

TAGORE'S RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN POETRY

Often when a poet is labeled as a naturalist writer, the poet's concerns are thought to be similar to the tenets of Romanticism. Poets such as Wordsworth, Whitman, and Yeats, to name only three, wrote of nature as a means of expressing symbolically the inner workings of the self—nature motifs in Romantic poets are emblems of larger realities, subjective realities. While Tagore's preoccupation with nature throughout his poems does share certain characteristics with the Romantic poets, such as the desire to express subjective realities, it is the claim here, by this author, that we should read Tagore's love of and concern with nature as part of a greater tradition of Indian literature that begins with the cosmogony of the Rig Veda. It appears that at the heart of Tagore's poetry there is a deep seated respect for the Rig Veda's creation

myths. Tagore's father, Debendranath, even inspired a Bengali translation of the Rig Veda. The Rig Veda as sacred text is only one of four main books comprising the Vedas, comprised of over a mere 1,000 or more hymns. We may think of these liturgical poems, extending back to circa 800-600 B.C.E, as reflecting the transitions and flux inherent to an oral culture. One of the primary reasons for recognizing the naturalism of the Rig Veda is to help western readers of Tagore understand that when Tagore writes of nature—of birds, trees, a singular blade of grass, a sunset, sunrise, a boat ride, a fading view of the water—while because all of these external objects belonging to the natural world may make Tagore appear much like western Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth or Yeats, Tagore's mission is actually quite different.

In Tagore, what is expressed is a thoughtful relationship of poet to sacred text, of poet to the mythical or cosmological origins of the world. It is doubtful that the same function can be found in the more secularized naturalism of the Romantic cause of western poets.

In Tagore, love of nature equates at one level to love of God; for, in recognizing the worth of the natural world, one is giving assent to the fact that there is a God who created it. For instance, Tagore writes in *Stray Birds* in stanza 311, the following, "The smell of the west earth in the rain rises like a great change of praise from the voiceless multitude of insignificant." Only a poet in love with nature could write these lines; for, the lines recall the hymns and the recitations, and the incantations of sacred text. Or consider as well, stanza 309 in *Stray Birds*, where Tagore writes, "Tonight there is a stir among the palm leaves, a swell in the sea, Full Moon, like the heart throb of the world. From what unknown sky hast thou carried in thy silence the aching secret of love?" The lines echo the concept from the creation hymns wherein the sacred text posits that no one knows how creation came to be because no one witnessed it except for the creator God itself, and who can truly know this God but to seek him? As if this were not enough, also in *Stray Birds*, we read Tagore's development of this concept as he writes, "God comes to me in the dusk of my evening with the flowers from my past kept fresh in his basket" (stanza 314).^v This is the mind of a religious poet at work, not a Romantic poet.

In *Gitanjali*, Tagore uses language that conjures remembrance of creation's gift of time. In the poem, "Endless Time," Tagore reminds us that time is not our own. The metaphysics of time does not belong to humanity solely, but rather has been entrusted to humanity by the creator God. Tagore writes, "Time is endless in thy hands, my lord./There is non to count thy minutes".

In the same poem, Tagore goes on to say, "Days and nights pass and ages bloom and fade like/flowers./Thou knowest how to wait" (lines 3-5).^{viii} The poet's point is obvious—the comparison of time to

the fragility and aching beauty of a flower is a reminder to his readers that time is just as fragile. Humanity knows time only in part—through finite perceptions of waiting, while God knows time through its whole, through eternity. Neither time nor flowers, not the hours or the days, are entirely man and woman's to have; rather, they are God's to have. We are not to waste time, though, but to recognize the succession of the creation of worlds, the movement of the transient and the finite through the stages of history and the cycles of generations—"Thy centuries follow each other perfecting a small wild flower./We have no time to lose,/and having no time we must scramble for a chance./We are too poor to be late".

As a text, Gitanjali, focuses upon how divine revelation should lead the seeker to a highly developed sense of reason. Tagore's spirituality, though it could be characterized as mystical, is not a mysticism of irrationality. Tagore's version of ecstatic worship is so thoroughly meditative that it leads toward cultivation of reason, and asserts that one of the highest lights of divine love is reaching a condition of the mind wherein reason is permitted reign. He writes in the poem, "Purity," "I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my/thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of/reason in my mind".

CONCLUSION

The emotional attachment with God that Tagore has cultivated during his time with religious scriptures and nature aroused in him many thoughts on reality, the supernatural and the spiritual element of transforming to a higher state of consciousness. These thoughts merged with the strong desire to attain union with God made the literary talent of Tagore flow out to form the great work of literature in Indian writing, Gitanjali, the only Nobel Prize winner in India. On reading this work one will be able to appreciate the in depth spiritual gravity it possess. This surprises any reader who ponders over the multiple meanings of words strung together. Moreover, a combination of the application of structuralism and deconstruction would definitely give a lot of insight into the diverse perspectives on truth, reality and the strong desire of the poet. Thus it truly goes with the statements, "poetry has the ability to surprise the reader with an 'Ah Ha!' experience – revelation, insight, further understanding of elemental truth and beauty" (poetry foundation, n.d), truly giving a mystical experience.

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