

## Submission to the Divine: Symbolism in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*

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### Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore is among the greatest Indian nationalist and reformatory writers who supported the education of the masses with an emphasis on the divine in his poetry. As history would know it, Tagore is the first Indian writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. The present paper attempts to probe the symbols used by Tagore in his collection of "song offerings" – *Gitanjali*. The study brings out how the usage of specific symbols and words result in the invoking of the divine and the spiritual in the reader.

**Keywords:** symbolism, imagery, spiritual poetry, Indian poetry, nature

### Introduction

A symbol is a mark, sign, or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas, or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. Literature is immersed with a lot of symbols, the most prominent ones are the scarlet letter 'A' in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* symbolising adultery, angelic nature and ableness, the dagger in *Macbeth* denoting the bloodshed that happens throughout the play, and many more.

Rabindranath Tagore's poetry is highly spiritual and abstract in nature, and so it is quite practical and effective to use concrete symbols to drive home to the readers his intended meaning and metaphysical ideas. This essay probes the usage of symbols in the first five songs of *Gitanjali*. Srivastava substantiates Tagore's poetry as follows:

The greatness of Tagore as an Indo-Anglican poet is no doubt to be found in the subtle yet simple thoughts of a mystic rather than melody of words, and an inner music born out of the harmony between the ideas and the balanced cadences of vers libre can be easily discovered by one who can listen to the music of words along with his appreciations of the sense. (55)

Tagore experiences the wonder and the presence of God in nature around him (Ranjan 573) – a typical feature of the English Romantic poetry of Wordsworth. "Tagore's images are informative, they give deeper shades of meanings connoting to the poet's philosophical, mental, and aesthetic constituents," writes Nair (2).

### **“Vessel,” “Flute,” and Humility**

The first song is about the immortality of life. Tagore feels so thankful to God for giving him his life and renewing it each day. This grace and kindness of God makes him blissful. He uses two symbols to describe his condition which is controlled by God. The symbols are vessel and flute. Humbleness of the poet is evident as he accepts the fact that he is weak and God is strong, as he says he is a “frail vessel” in the hands of God. Humility is evident throughout this song as he uses the adjective “little” and “small” whenever he denotes himself. Tagore calls himself as a little flute in the greater hands of God, who is indeed the source of all the great things that are manifested through Tagore. The central idea in the first song is that of eternal life that God gifts on humans. This idea is brought forth through the symbols of God filling the vessel over and over again, breathing eternal melodies through the people, and the most powerful idea of “pouring” of “infinite gifts” in the poet’s hands with the sublime evident in the lines “and still there is room to fill.”

Tagore’s poetry is rooted in the ideas of the *Rig Veda*. Exploring the mystical elements in Tagore’s poetry, Hayes observes:

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. (484)

### **“Music,” “Bird,” and Happiness**

The poet feels like it is his duty to sing praises to God. Singing for God makes him happy. He expresses this happiness through two symbols – those of music and bird. The sadness in the poet’s heart melts and forms a sweet harmony when he sings filled with God. His admiration for God is symbolized in the spreading of wings of a bird. Again, he symbolizes his song as a bird’s wing that reaches out and touches God. According to Nagar, “bird” in Tagore’s poetry, symbolizes “the longing for freedom and transcendence, as well as the soul’s innate desire to soar beyond earthly constraints” (284).

### **“Breath,” “Stream,” “Light,” and the Captivating Nature of the Divine**

The poet shifts focus from his song to that of God’s song in song three of *Gitanjali*. God’s voice and presence are depicted as a light that illuminates the whole world. God’s music is again expressed through the symbols of “life breath,” and “holy stream.” The evil things that obstruct men from being in oneness with God is presented through the symbol of “stony obstacles.” Evil things are thus symbolized as stones. The poet longs that his song should join in harmony with that of God. The poet also uses the symbol of mesh to describe the nature of God’s song. God is so captivating that the poet feels like he is imprisoned by God.

Bhowmick and Das study the symbol of light in Tagore's poetry. They observe that Tagore's understanding of human existence and spirituality arises from his awareness of ancient Indian texts. They also connect the use of light as a metaphor and image in the poetry of Milton and the philosophical writings of Nietzsche critiquing: "Even beyond Enlightenment, Tagore's use of the metaphor of light and darkness may be read to explore the intricacies of colonialism and imperialism, challenging Eurocentrism and highlighting power dynamics." They also integrate quantum mechanics into the discourse unveiling captivating resemblances between Tagore's light metaphor and contemporary scientific exploration (532).

### **The "Living Touch" and the Presence of God**

The fourth song symbolizes God's presence as a "living touch" upon the poet's limbs. The concrete "touch" by the physical hand is effectively used to describe the spiritual presence of God. Further, the wisdom that God has imparted in the poet is described as "light of reason." Again, the concrete and visible "light" is complemented with the abstract "reason" that is the wisdom and discerning capacity of humans. The poet dedicates the central part of his life to God as he says that he will preserve God's love in a flower, and love God like a flower. The flower is a symbol of love for and of God. The poet keeps God as the centre of his life and he uses the symbol of "inmost shrine" in his heart to describe the position that God holds in his heart. This is very relevant in the Indian context because to witness God one must take long journeys and wait in queues to see the idols in the inmost part of the shrines. The poet thus presents himself as a pilgrim on a pilgrimage seeking God and having God as the priority in his life.

### **The Tiresome Human and the Wondrous Divine**

Prioritizing God and keeping aside all worldly endeavours is the message of the fifth song. To describe the tiresome struggles and duties of the world the poet uses a symbol – "shoreless sea of toil." Toiling in various forms – physical labour, intellectual jobs like academics and information technology – all make men feel like they are lost amid a stormy sea. Tagore adds to this, by a further intensification using the term "shoreless." Furthermore, Tagore beautifies God's presence using the symbols of the bright summer, and bees murmuring in the garden. The poet just wants to sit in leisure in God's presence and sing songs of praises to God. Such is the love that he has for his creator and protector. His gratefulness and humility are evident in the songs he sings. All these are vividly and concretely taken to the readers' minds through a wise and lucid choice of symbols.

The commentaries on Tagore's poetry stand proof to their timelessness. Mitra writes in *The Times of India*,

The entire cosmos is changing every moment. But in this process of unending change the mind extends to what has been changeless. The senses have limitations but the capacity to go beyond experience exists in us. As Tagore says, within the limited spheres of what we have known, we are able to perceive the unknown. The biggest wonder of all discoveries is that within the

domestic exists the universal, within confinements lives the limitless and within illusion remains the truth.

The symbolism employed in *Gitanjali* express the power of words to evoke spiritual images into the human consciousness and lift the physical to the supernatural plane of existence, to a state of mysticism. Songs in *Gitanjali* are witnesses to the fact that one can experience the divine through the lexical arrangement of words that concretise the unseen forces of nature.

### Conclusion

In *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore interlaces spiritual longing with vivid symbolism, creating poetry that transcends the personal to touch the universal. Through recurring symbols such as the “vessel,” “flute,” “music,” “bird,” and “light,” Tagore explores the intricate relationship between the human soul and the divine. These symbols not only convey his profound sense of devotion and humility, but also echo the universal quest for meaning and transcendence. As Tagore himself expresses, “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life,” he reminds readers of the perpetual renewal inherent in spiritual surrender.

W. B. Yeats’ statement from the preface to *Gitanjali* is noteworthy as he says,

We write long books where no page perhaps has any quality to make writing a pleasure, being confident in some general design, just as we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics—all dull things in the doing—while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity. (Tagore 10)

The deep-rootedness of Indian spirituality in the writings of Tagore and the transcendence of the ordinary and the physical into the abstract and the metaphysical are laudable features of Tagore’s poetry. His numbers echo deep and resonates in his timeless lines: “Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. / Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill” (Tagore 12).

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