

Tracing Symbolism in Tagore's Gitanjali

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Abstract

Simplicity, mysticism, and romanticism are some of the attributes which gleam in Tagore's poetry. These attributes are expressed by him with the help of rich natural imagery and symbolism. Gitanjali, for which he has also received the Nobel prize in literature in 1913, is replete with natural imagery and symbolism which transpire in rare versatility of form and undertones and, thus, stand a witness for the poet's unparalleled dexterity. His symbols allude to the Indian mythology, scriptures, and traditions. The most peculiar feature of his writing remains the interweaving of external sceneries with the internal feelings and thoughts. Also, occasional personifying of the natural motifs expresses his belief in the Vedantic conception of the oneness prevailing between man and nature. For Tagore, nothing was trivial or insignificant. That is why, in his poetry, even the simplest of nuances of everyday life was dealt with the utmost significance and eternity was rendered to the most temporary of things. Although, he writes in quite a simple manner, he never fails to create a lasting impression on the hearts of the readers as the quite brilliantly captures the hidden truth which remains latent in the most ordinary and trifling experiences of daily life. This piece focuses on the use of symbols by Tagore particularly in Gitanjali.

Keywords: Mysticism, romanticism, symbolism, Indian mythology, imagery, Vedantic conception.

The most vital part of Tagore's poetry is the symbolism, which makes all his works rich, elegant and expressive. He is more than able to express even the most inexpressible sensation very conveniently. That is why, his poetry carries the fragrance of a fresh flower. It is rich and profound too as it contains thoughts which are perfectly woven into the fabric of images and symbols, rhythm and music, His Gitanjali, for instance stands as an incomparable specimen of symbolism, mysticism, music, religion and poetry all rolled into one. The book is able to create a universe of beauty expressing God's infinite love and the deep compassion carried by humanity for all things beautiful. Although, there is a huge impression of the rich symbolism and profound thoughts of the Vedas and the Upanishads yet there is a fresh gust of contemporary sensibility. K.R.S. Iyengar has rightly observed:

The current coin of India's devotional poetry is melted and minted anew by Rabindra Nath, but the pure gold shines as brightly as ever, even though the inscription on the coin is in English. (110)

Gitanjali is replete with images which contain the aroma of age-old Indian tradition. This tradition is nothing but a brilliant use of rich imagery, particularly nature's imagery. Tagore stands more closer to the romantic poets as compare to the Metaphysical poets in this respect. Unlike, the metaphysical poets who used complex and remote images, his images are simple and easy to understand. He is able to fuse his sensory perceptions, his thoughts and emotions into an organic expression. As observed, by H. Coombes:

In a good writer's hands, the image, fresh and vivid is at its fullest used to intensify, to clarify, to enrich, a successful image helps to make us feel the writer's grasp of the object or situation he is dealing with, gives his grasp of it with precision, vividness, force, economy; and to make such an

impact on us, its content, the stuff of which it is made, cannot be unduly fantastic and remote from our experience, but must be such that it can be immediately felt by us as belonging in one way or another to the fabric of our own lives. (54)

The book, Gitanjali, is seen to be opening with trivial image of a frail 'Vessel', which stands suggestive to the empty and destitute life of a man. This empty vessel longs for the rain of a grace, sympathy and love of the omnipotent God so as to overflow with new and fresh life:

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. (1)

The image of vessel can also be seen in the song no. LXXIV where the poet seems to very curious to fill the pitcher of his life with the stream of love and devotion:

The day is no more, the shadow is upon the earth. It is time that I go to the stream to fill my pitcher.

In song no. XC also, there is a mention of the full vessel of the long-cherished good life:

Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life – I will never let him go with empty hands.

The word 'guest', here, has been used for 'Death'.

Another powerful image is that of a flute to which man's life has been compared. The poet seems to suggest that the music that flows on the lips and breathes through the flute is actually nothing but the almighty's grace and love. What Tagore seems to be suggesting is that it is God who provides a perennial source of music to the poor flute:

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new. (Song 1)

The image of flute resembles the famous lines in Ode to the West Wind by P.B. Shelly:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

What if my leaves are falling like its own! (297)

The most significant feature of Gitanjali is the image of music. The poet does not only refer to the earthly or the heard melodies but also to the music of the soul. The music of the soul is something which resonates only when it comes into contact with the God, who is the permanent source of the eternal music. Tagore believes that one can have glimpse of the inner self (which is nothing else but God) only through the melodious music of the soul:

I know thou takes pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before the presence. I tough by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach. (Song ||)

Where Tagore takes the help of music, Keats relies on 'viewless wings of poesy':

Away away far I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards

But on the viewless wings of Poesy

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards. (249)

Another image which Gitanjali is abundant with is the image of flower. In song VI, it is used to symbolise the transitory nature of man's life. No doubt the human life is as beautiful as a flower. However, it is short-lived too just like a flower. And hence, Tagore opines that the flower of life must be timely plucked in the service of God before it drops in the dust:

Though its color be not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and pluck it while there is time.

The next image in Gitanjali is that of a dress or ornament. Tagore is of the notion that obstacles are great hinderances in the path of man's relationship with God:

Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown they whispers. (Song VII)

The image of door/gate is a recurrent image in Gitanjali. In a fashion similar to Kabir, Tagore urges the devotee to open the gate of his own soul which is the abode of God. The door is highly suggestive as it is not a general door of an ordinary house but the invisible door of spirit.

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut. (Song XI)

The yet another noteworthy image is that of a fire. The poet is of the notion that deep within all of us there is a fire of desire which is the cause of all mortal ills:

Light, Oh where is the light:

Kindle it with the burning fire of desire. (Song XX VII)

The images of dust, darkness and shroud lend a unique texture to the poem. They not only symbolise the mundane and materialistic attainments but also suggest the fret and fever, miseries, and weariness of human life:

The shroud that covers me is a shroud of dust and death; I hate it yet hug it in love. (Song XXVIII)

Similarly, song XXIX beautifully uses the word 'dust' which suggests the impurities of life: I am ever busy building this wall all around: and this wall goes up into the sky day by day I lose sight of my tree being in its dark shadow. I take pride in this great wall, and I plaster it with dust and sand.

The book is also replete with the images of silent steps. It is suggestive of the unheard and gentle voice of conscience – a voice that always guide and prevents the mind from committing unlikely acts:

I heard not thy steps as thou camest (Song LIX).

Another striking image is that of a beautiful woman which is a bit related to the image of the gentle steps. The poet philosophies:

She who ever had remained in the depth of my being, in the twilight of gleams and glimpses, she who never opened her veils in the morning light, will be my last gift to thee, my God, folded in my final song. (Song LXVI)

The poet has imagined the, spirit, of a man as a beautiful lady in the aforesaid lines.

The book, Gitanjali, gets concluded with the image of journey:

Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests, let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee. (Song CIN)

As per Dr. Narsingh Srivastava, there is a fine blending of thought and feeling in Tagore's poetry:

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)

Thus, one finds an apt use of images and symbols in Gitanjali, which Tagore has brilliantly used to convey his thoughts and feelings.

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