

Depiction of Imagery in Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the rich and varied imagery in Tagore's *Gitanjali*, a literary classic which explores God realisation through prayer and service to mankind. In *Gitanjali* every verse appears as a prayer and imploration to the Divine. The short verses are mostly hymns which speaks volumes about faith, devotion to God, prayer, dedication and serving God through service to humanity. The paper focuses on narrating the imagery and how the poet uses nature and human beings in its very essence and simplest forms to convey the ideals of divinity. Tagore employs simple images such as reed, flute, clouds, and sky to depict mankind and divinity.

Keywords: Emancipation, Realisation, Imagery, Divinity, Verses.

Full Paper

Rabindranath Tagore the acclaimed versatile poet of India and the recipient of Nobel Prize in Literature is well known for his verses and versatile style. *Gitanjali*, one of his finest verses in literature has created a universal appeal for Tagore beyond the frontiers of time and space. Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* originally written in Bengali and translated by the author himself is a song offering to the Almighty, a collection of simple sublime verses in lucid style which is harmoniously strung together as a garland. In the variety of imagery, felicity of phrase and unrivalled expression, Tagore's verses remain unique.

Poetry according to Tagore was a vehicle or medium to reach the Ultimate. It is a means to reach the Almighty and a means to express his sense of devotion or 'bhakti' through love for mankind and detachment from material pursuits. Tagore felt that the aim of poetry should be to 'emancipate man's soul from materialism, to establish a perfect harmony between Him (God) and the Ultimate Reality.' (139)

Tagore held the premise that poetry cannot be real unless it has a philosophy to convey, hope to cherish and some ideals to fulfil. Poetry ought to reveal some higher truth, lofty ideals and a message of universal truth and eternal bliss. Tagore's poetry dealt with the themes of love, peace, and brotherhood to inspire mankind and to elevate and inspire humanity to an ideal and profoundly blissful eternal life.

Tagore's verses create an ethereal impact by transforming body, mind and soul to a meditative state of realizing the noble pursuit of human existence. Often one feels that Tagore's poetry is thrice born. It is a 'Triveni' or a culmination of the Bengali, the Vaishnava saints like Chandidas and Vidyapati and the great English Romantic and mystic poets like Blake and Wordsworth. 'He touched nothing he did not adorn, reveal nothing which he did not experience, he expressed nothing which he did not realize in Truth.' (6) Tagore's verses are both verses of innocence and experience, both human and divine. Some of the notable imagery in *Gitanjali* are nature, sensory, symbolic, emotional, and cultural. Yet in all the hymns, one finds that the central theme of *Gitanjali* is the realisation of God through constant prayer, dedication and

surrender to God and humanity. Tagore's skilful use of imagery in *Gitanjali* contributes to the profound and transcendent nature of his poetry, inviting readers to explore themes of spirituality, love, and the human experience in a deeply introspective and reflective manner.

Detailing on the varied imagery in *Gitanjali*, Prof. Iyengar comments on 'the imagery, the conceits, the basic experience, the longing, the trial, the promise, the realisation- all the quaintly unique flavour and taste.' (139) Tagore's imagery is functional and elemental, as it is drawn mostly from nature. Prof. Iyengar further states that Tagore's poems 'are the recordings of the poet's experience of flowers, clouds and all the wealth of springs, all the glory of the earth.'

Tagore's imagery is used for illustrative, decorative, evocative, and emotive purposes. Imagery is skilfully interwoven to the verses and through Tagore's loft verses the imagery attains clarity and concreteness. Metaphors and similes run riot in the beautiful verses of poetry. Many of Tagore's images are symbolic as they express the themes and the ideals of the poet himself. The images are recurrent and central. The images or the lively word pictures, suitable to the situation reveal the poet's minute observation of nature, man and matters and the vividness of his imagination. The images concerning human life are lifelike in character and spirit because they are drawn from day-to-day life. In Tagore's poetry one finds direct images through picturesque and concrete fancies, dreams, visions and figurative images by means of metaphors, similes, symbols, personification and mythical or legendary images. Tagore also employs reciprocal images where the tenors and vehicles reciprocate. In discussing imagery, it is useful to distinguish between the tenor and the vehicle (substance of the message and the comparison used to convey that message) For instance, in *Gitanjali*, both poet and God appear to be as singers, and both are related to each other with a deep music imagery:

"This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales and hast breathed through its melodies eternally new." (I)

"I know not how thou singest, my master
I ever listen in silent amazement

The light of thy music illuminates the world."

Moreover, Tagore's images are informative, they give deeper shades of meanings connoting to the poet's philosophical, mental, and aesthetic constituents. The scope of Tagore's imagery is however limited, as scientific world and spheres of matter are untouched. He gives a variety of sensuous images- auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and visual. There is a predominance of auditory and olfactory images in Tagore's verses. Through his verses, Tagore draws realistic depictions of orchards, landscapes, birds, animals, seasons and great elemental powers such as sun, moon, oceans, seas and clouds.

Tagore's imagery is expressive of his search for truth, at times it is sensuous as well as emotional. Tagore embodies an attempt to relate the finite with the infinite, the human personality with the mythical Krishna through the images of light, darkness, cloud, pitcher, flute, palace, and the king. Tagore uses images common to classical Indian poetry to symbolise his yearning to unite with God and his joy at an imminent union. So, the mud-stained traveller, the parched earth in summer, the bride waiting in the empty house for the return of the lord, the first monsoon shower, the flowers, the rivers, and the conch shells are images which gain a deep mystical depth in these poems.

In verse I, Tagore compares the human body with a 'vessel'. In verse V, he says that his 'work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil.' In the XII verse, he speaks of a journey and the "question and the cry oh, where? melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of assurance 'I am.'" In the XIII verse one finds an imagery of rain, where 'clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens' and

'I know not how I am to pass these long rainy hours.' In the XIV verse Tagore optimistically assures of a new dawn when "the morning will surely come... and the voice pour down in the golden streams breaking through the sky.' The narrator's beloved walks 'in the deep shadows of the rainy July' (XIII) and the poet asks, 'by what dim shore of the ink black river...thou threading thy course come to me.' (XIII). The picturesque imagery of the 'sky overcast with clouds and the rain ceaseless' (XXVII) is a brilliant and suggestive image of a rainy day. In the XXXV verse, the poet implores to the Almighty to lead him to the right path and to instil the stream of reason in him. A similar strain of thought is seen in the XXXIX verse where he prays 'When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.' In verse XL, we find a union of cloud, storm, shower, rain, lightning, and heat. Tagore creates the picturesque image of cloud formation and the fall of rain and yet on the other side it is the realisation of Ghanshyam and Krishna through all its physical and linguistic attributes. Verse LX and XXXXII is filled with a preponderance of oceanic images.

"On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless overhead, and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless world, the children meet with shouts and dances."

All these words belong to the register of sea life; thus, a whole panorama of the oceanic life is spread before the readers. To Tagore, God can also be represented through these everyday images representing the forces of nature. Tagore states "I am like a remnant of a cloud of autumn / uselessly roaming in the sky." This imagery depicts the transient and aimless nature of human existence, like the fleeting presence of a cloud in autumn. 'In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds He comes, comes, ever comes.' (XLV). In XLIV, the poet presents a picturesque imagery of a coy maiden who waits on the slope of the desolate river and states:

"I have come to the river to float my lamp on the stream,
when the daylight wanes in the west."

In verse LXVII Tagore strikes a perfect imagery on nature where 'the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds' comes through 'trackless paths carrying coal draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.' In verse LXXV, Tagore states that 'the river has its everyday work to do and hastens through fields and hamlets, yet its incessant stream winds through the washing of thy feet.' In verse LXXXIII there is a reference to a 'chain of pearls' and 'tears of sorrow' and in verse LXXXIV there is a reference to 'rainy darkness of July.' In verse LXXXVIII the poet refers to the 'holy stream of oblivion' and in XCIV, there is a symbolic reference to the voyage of life where 'the day was when I did not keep myself in readiness for thee.' This emotional imagery conveys the sense of longing and devotion, reflecting the speaker's deep emotional attachment to the divine. Towards the close of *Gitanjali*, the poet writes:

"I dive down the depth of the ocean of foams, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of foamless."

Rabindranath Tagore's bonding to nature images and oceanic images maybe strongly attributed to his close affinity to his motherland West Bengal- the land of rivers and seas. He might be impressed and mesmerised by the beauty of the oceanic life -by the beauty of seas and rivers.. The occasional flooding, deluge, damage and the ensuing destruction might have pained him. To make a typology, his images can be classified according to the four elements- earth, water, air and fire. To cite examples from *Gitanjali*, one finds Tagore who states, "He who is in the fire, and He who is here in the heart, and He who has entered into the radiant ether—He is my Lord, the all knowing" - This imagery of the earth emphasizes the grounded and foundational presence of the divine, linking it to the stability and nurturing qualities of the

earth. "My heart, the bird of the wilderness, has found its sky in your eyes" - This water-related imagery reflects the fluidity and depth of emotion, symbolizing the profound connection and reflection found within the divine gaze. "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" - This airy imagery signifies a sense of liberation and expansiveness, suggesting the openness and freedom of the mind in its pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. "Burn up the moments of life with the fire of love" - This imagery of fire symbolizes passion, transformation, and purification, conveying the intense and transformative power of love in the spiritual journey. Through the use of these elemental imageries, Tagore creates a rich and symbolic tapestry that enhances the spiritual and emotional depth of the poems in "Gitanjali," allowing readers to connect with the universal themes of nature, spirituality, and the human experience.

In verse LIV, Tagore presents before his readers a beautiful and picturesque imagery of a maiden who feels gratified when she is asked to provide water to the thirsty travellers. She seems to be quite cordial and hospitable echoing the Sanskrit maxim 'Athiddhi devo bhava.' She feels a rapture of joy and ecstasy when she provides water to the thirty travellers who are tired and worn out. The poet also narrates on how the leaves rustle overhead, the cuckoo sings from the unseen dark and the perfume from the babla flowers come from the bent of the road. The rustling of the leaves implies to the pervasiveness of the thrill, the unseen cuckoo in the dark suggests mystery and there is a touch of unconventionality in the reference to the babla flowers which shows the uniqueness of the girl's emotions, when the traveller goes away, the sense of languor which overpowers the girl is thus ended. In verse LXVII Tagore employs common place imagery to describe the advent of dawn and the descent of evening in Indian villages, where girls take a morning stroll in the courtyards to cull flowers to offer for their routine worship to their favourite deities and later draw water from the tanks and wells to fill their pitchers.

The image of the flower is also a recurrent image. In *Gitanjali*, the image is used in at least ten to twelve occasions on various capacities- either as an object, metaphor or as a symbol. Thus, one finds that one finds a predominance of nature images in Tagore's *Gitanjali*. The metaphors of Indian seasons are poetically and impressively used by the poet to express his yearning for God. Images from human life and activities are also seen in abundance. The recurrent note in *Gitanjali* is of the longing wait in anticipation and the unexpected happiness and thrill of expectation and arrival.

"He comes, comes ever comes. And when He comes worlds leaping into a dance of ecstasy."

Yet another image that is found quite repeatedly seen is which deals with life and death as bride and bridegroom. The basic image of life in *Gitanjali* is that of a pilgrimage. The poet picturises himself as a weary way farer who has to avoid many distractions and overcome many temptations on the way.

Prof. Budhadev Bose remarks

"You will find not an interplay of contrasts, no lightning strokes of discord- no sick roses, no pearls made of dead eyes, no garlic and sapphires in the mud, no going tormented seas. In building his sunny pleasure dome, he can dispense with the caves of ice and the prophecies of war. He is all felicity, all melodiousness and beauty ensnared by flowers. He will make you swoon with delight, but he never lacerates. And then, too, you may miss in him the twang of the contemporary idiom. The world he takes you through has the atmosphere of either agricultural society or of India's classical epoch: the flute, the lotus, the rich grain, the banyan, the cowherd boy, the foot winding path through the plains, the earthen lamp, the palace, the chariot, the king- all of these and they like his poems are so full that you can read a thousand lines without realising the fact that the poet has lived a good part of his life in modern cities." (40)

Gitanjali till date remains as one of the renowned and immortal classics of all times, which captivates the hearts of even the most casual readers by its lofty thought, haunting melody and captivating melody.

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