

MYSTICISM IN TAGORE'S 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.

Keywords: Mysticism, Mystic, Karma, Tagore, Kalidasa, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Upanisheds, Indian spirituality.

The Essay

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 Chandalika 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” (*Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d.*). 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” (*p.24*). 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” (*p.38*). 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’ (*p.49, 50*), 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” (*p.50*). 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 (p.54). 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" (p.61) 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" (p.65), "In memory I woke up and found my garden full with wonders of flowers" (p.70). Tagore uses the metaphor of "little flower" (p.20) to state that every man is like a flower waiting for the opportunity to attain salvation by decorating His feet, neck or head.

Mysticism in the Perception of God

Tagore's perception of God takes multiple forms as the poem develops. Tagore addresses God as master poet. "I know not how thou singest, my master!.....The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on." (p.18). While addressing God as master poet he expresses his desire to dissolve in His music, an indirect way of expressing his desired union with God. He admires God's song by stating the plight of his captive heart in the endless meshes of His music. Tagore while addressing God tries to keep the readers reminded about this sacrifice he has done to merge with God. He says that God is the ultimate truth and to reach that ultimate truth "he shall ever try to keep all untruths out from his thoughts" (p.18). He sacrificed all his pleasures by treating them as evil and endeavored to take spiritual practices by praying that "thy power gives me strength to act" (p.18). In the poem 10, Tagore mentions to the reader in the form of address to God, that he knows God is with poor people who have pure minds and he mentions that to be with those poor people requires the blessing of the Lord and pride is one of the obstacles that stops him from being with the poor. The lines "I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet" (p.24) – depict the depression the poet has which he is trying to reveal to God. He says that though he is in continuous search of God, expecting God at all times, "the lamp has not been lit" (p.24) – the mind has not achieved its

full strength to achieve the transformation. Tagore expresses his love for God by saying that he lives on this earth just to sing His song. For him life on this earth is like "an invitation to a festival" (p.25) which only blessed ones can attain. He waits to see God. He has sacrificed everything for the final surrender on the belief that his love for God will help him reach his goal.

Later, he addresses God as his best friend who can understand his failures and weakness but grants with all love what he wishes expressed through his prayers. Love of God is the most valuable for Tagore. He states to God and indirectly makes readers understand that, even if we do not pray to or love God, He still waits for us to do that – "If I call not thee in my prayers, if I keep not thee in my heart, thy love for me still waits for my love" (p.34). That is why this love is most precious in this universe. Tagore expresses his wishes to God throughout the text. He wants to be with God, love God every moment, and to be bound to God to carry out his purpose. Poem 34 clearly depicts the prayer addressed to God. He uses the words "strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart" (p.35) to suggest the idea that let all his wishes be taken away; put an end to his desires. He wishes for strength to lead an earthly life by sacrificing all material attractions and to surrender himself to Him.

Tagore's burning desire to reach God sounds throughout the work, particularly in poem 38, where he repeatedly says, "I want thee, only thee" (p.39). Tagore successfully used imagery and symbols in order to strengthen the bond he has with his Lord. He refers to God as his 'lover' (p.39) and he as the 'bride' who is again compared to a 'beggar' and the 'dowry' he wants to give God is his 'poverty' – stricken life. As a beggar he begs for his love and union and in return, he wilfully leads a poverty-stricken life indirectly referring here to his distancing himself from the material pleasures of the world.

Mystical References from Indian Philosophy

Extracting the philosophical connotations in this poetry shows the spiritual gravity of the poet. Tagore, in fact, starts the poem with a great note on human life:

"Frail vessel thou emptiest again and again,
And fillest it ever with fresh life.....
.....still there is room to fill." (p.17)

He brings out the idea that there is presence of God in everybody and human body longs for fresh and new life experiences. The more a man tries to know about Him, the more is left

unknown. This is the mystical presence of God. Spirituality can be attained only when man abstains from all fleeting material pleasures. This is being pointed out through the lines, “My song has put off her adornments.....ornaments would mar our union.....” (p.20). The effect is also strengthened by the use of the onomatopoeic word ‘jingling’ (p.20). Direct reference to the ‘robes of princes and jewels’(p.21) has been made to make a layman understand the element of physical pleasures in life and how it takes man away from the world of reality. The theme of physical love can be deduced from this poem. ‘Light’ is a very powerful symbol in any philosophy. Tagore writes, “Light, Oh where is the light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire” (p.31). The desires in mind should be burnt out and the fire or light is the same light of realization as fire represents knowledge and desires represents ignorance. Thus with knowledge ignorance is burnt out. That is why it is like a voyage from birth to death, a voyage of hardship.

The same word also finds its repeated significance in the lines, “My house is all dark and lonesome – lend me your light” (p.59). Man is always busy with building his own empire of problems and that great empire is an obstacle to reach the reality. This dark shadow is nothing other than our deeds or karma. The philosophy of karma says that man is always followed by his deeds. The same idea is expressed by Swami Vivekananda in his essay ‘The Secret of Work’, “Good and evil both have their consequences. Good action will entail upon us good effects; bad action bad” (*Karma Yoga*, p. 26) . This philosophy is expounded by Tagore through his lines, “I came out alone.....But who is that follows me?.....He is my own little self.....but I am ashamed to come to thy door in his company” (p.33), pointing out that Tagore is ashamed to reach God with all his bad karmas. This is again linked to the symbol of ‘prisoner’ (p.33) where man is getting chained himself in his treasure house of spirituality, unable to recognize it. He goes deep into the philosophical aspect of nature that he wonders for the reason for the existence of colour in nature, music, honey, sweetness in fruits, lights etc.

Virginity is the ideology that puts a thorn on the path of spirituality. Virginity here takes the meaning of pure mind or an unattached mind. The theme spiritual love is the essence here. Tagore claims that he has kept his soul a virgin, “she remained in her loneliness waiting for thy recognition” (p.55), a clear depiction of male-female love. Soul is treated as female and God the perfect male. This finds its link in the Prakriti-purusha concept in the Hindu

philosophy. The same concept is also expounded in his one act play Chandalika in which the union of Prakriti and purusha is represented by suggesting that when innate nature (Prakriti) purifies itself from earthly desires, the supreme power (purusha) accepts the cherished union. Tagore then proceeds to talk about the philosophy of rebirth, a concept that finds a major place in many religions. It is said in the Bhagavat Gita that when the soul leaves the body, it takes another body to pursue to its karma. It passes from one body to another until it reaches the desired salvation. The poet begins out this philosophy through the lines, “Days come and age pass, and it is ever he who moves my heart in many a name, in many a rapture of joy and of sorrow” (p.64). Sorrow is not an enemy of human kind; rather is a twin born brother. The poet in his philosophical endeavors tries to find reason for this element of sorrow. In the poem, he writes, “It seems that somewhere there is a break in the chain of light and one of the stars has been lost” (p.67). The poet talks about creation here and the ‘lost star’ symbolizes the human being. Human being moved away from the expectations of the creation and the universe lost its actual form. This makes an indirect reference to the story of Adam and Eve in the Holy Bible. The poet realizes that of all the creations that was the best star. He says that humans are just “perfectly a small wild flower” (p.70), that looks up to the horizon wishing for the union and some attain it and some have to take birth again.

Mystical Experiences of Realization

Poem 23 takes a pleading and questioning tone. The poet does not sleep and keeps his door open just to see the path towards salvation. Here the door is being metaphorically used to suggest the mind which is under constant meditation to reach God.

Constant prayer and address to God made Tagore philosophical in life and that ultimately made him understand the path towards truth. But the realization of truth in the poem takes the idea of ‘death’. Tagore realizes that God is omnipresent, but he is unable to recognize him because of his ignorance. The ignorance finds its place in the poem through the word ‘sleep’. It is when death comes at door, Tagore realizes that God’s servant has come to invite him for the desired union. Tagore writes, “The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom. After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her Lord alone in the solitude of night” (p.75). During this preparation time Tagore says that he understood where God

actually is. God is with the poor tillers and path makers. God is actually a spiritual beggar who begs complete surrender of human beings to merge with him. He sits alone at the end of the stony path and in desperate hope our poet goes and searches for him in all corners of his room when he is in body itself.

These lines are most noteworthy when referring to realization. "Here I give back the keys of my door – and I give up all claims to my house." (p.76). Here body is symbolized by 'door' and the keys to the door are the 'panchabhootas' (five elements). It is said that five elements join together to form a body and once the soul leaves it, the body separates to re-join the respective elements, indirectly referring to the cremation of dead bodies practiced in Hindu culture and age-old civilizations. His philosophical understanding makes him express the realization as, "I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus am I blessed – let this be my parting word" (p.78). 'Hidden honey' symbolizes salvation and 'lotus' symbolizes God from whom he attained. Eventually he sees Him who is formless, again referring to Hindu concept of God, that God is formless and it manifests itself in many forms for different reasons, ultimately joins to form the supreme power that is "Sivam, Santham and Advaitam – Perfection, Peace and Non-duality. God is both personal and super personal. He is immanent and transcendent." (G. Nirmala, 2012) He repeats in the poem that humans symbolized as warriors march out of their master's hall and after many experiences they march back. This anaphora makes the point that we come from the same source and go back to the same source. Ultimately, he realizes that, "our daily worship of God is not really the process of gradual acquisition of him, but the daily process of surrendering ourselves, removing all obstacles to union and extending our consciousness of him in devotion and service in goodness and in love" (*The Realisation of the Infinite, n.d.*)

The Category of Mysticism

Thus, the whole collection of poems appears to be allegorical and possess mystical depth. But the search is where this category of mysticism falls into. For a comparison, other renowned mystic writers in India who can be considered are Kalidasa and Aurobindo. Aurobindo depicts in his writings, "the self-divided present life and its link towards divine life that contributes to a touch of mysticism" (*Amravati, 2011*). His writings are known for the apt use of symbols and all his writings are reflections of his intuitive

experiences. A strong revival of Vedas and Upanishads can be seen in the writings of Aurobindo. Works of the great writer Kalidasa also depict reflections from the intuitive experience that are very spiritual. "Readers attain an experience that is beyond all thought and speech and even vision and audition." (*Varadachari, n.d*) From the earthly stories he takes us to the divine level of interpretation.

A critical composition of these mystical writers' influences would reveal the fact that the element of mysticism in Aurobindo and Kalidasa is derived from the enlightenment that they attained through their spiritual practices. So those writings are from the intellect of transformed self, souls which have attained the so-called 'supramental transformation' whereas Tagore got inspiration from his love for nature or God. In the case of Tagore, it is the love for nature, devoted family, a father who is very familiar with Hindu philosophy that influenced him to delve deep into religion and spirituality. But no scripture mentions whether he attained enlightenment or not. It can be interpreted that he is indirectly trying to attain it through his poems. It is said that, "Tagore, though a mystic had never severed from the realities of life in the world. He struck harmony between the two worlds, the empirical and transcendental. On the other hand, Aurobindo had left his revolutionary life and devoted completely to yogic life" (*Raghupathi, 2012*).

However, the interpretation of the word 'mysticism' has gone through many transformations. One of the research papers says that, "in the contemporary usage, the term is often used loosely to refer to a range of phenomena and beliefs including the paranormal, occultism, magic, spiritualism and Eastern or new age philosophies, as well as to the sublime experiences of saints and spiritual geniuses" (*Daniels, 2005*). From this analysis difference between religious experience and mystical experience can be interpreted. Tagore puts forward to the reader his love for God and what he understood about that Absolute through his experiences in earthly life. 'Experience' here stands for his time with his father, holy Hindu scriptures and companionship with nature. In the case of Aurobindo and Kalidasa, the great writers and saints, it is the knowledge gained from enlightenment achieved through spiritual practices that finds place in their writings. That is the reason why even the simple ordinary sentences have deep spiritual or mystical connotations in their writings. Therefore, the research goes along with what Happold (*Daniels, 2005*) said about three kinds of

mystical experiences: Nature mysticism, Soul mysticism and God mysticism. As per the above analysis Tagore chiefly falls into Nature mysticism, i.e. mysticism of love and nature. Therefore, it is stated that, “mystical knowledge, however, is based on the individual’s direct experience rather than upon adopting systems of belief, attitude or conduct that derive from established teaching, theory or dogma” (Daniels, 2003).

Conclusion

Robert Frost defined poetry as, “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words” (*poetry foundation, n.d*). 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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