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The Thematic Warping and Woofing of God and Nature in the Tapestry of Tagore's *Gitanjali*

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Abstract

Tagore is a man of versatile genius—a painter, a dramatist, a short story writer, a teacher and primarily a poet—Tagore is primarily a poet. He himself explains “I am a poet and nothing else” (Tagore). He is a poet par excellence. He believes that art is the illumination of feelings. For Tagore, art was not for art's sake. He strongly opined that, poetry elevates us to a higher world and interprets to us the lessons of nature and the mysteries of God. According to Tagore, the object of poetry is to elevate man's soul from the worldly pursuits and to strike a harmonious chord and perfect communion between man, his immediate surroundings and the ultimate reality. He felt that there should be unity between the individual and the universe. Tagore felt that the purpose of poetry is to ennoble mankind and emancipate man's soul from materialism which militates against the essential goodness of man. Poetry should aim at striking a harmonious balance between man and his relatedness to the universe. Tagore believed that, to achieve creative unity between man and the universe, what is required is emotion. He felt that emotions are essential for the creative writings especially poetry. Defining poetry, Tagore writes in ‘What is Art?’

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Our emotions are the gastric juices which transform this world of appearances into the more intimate world of sentiments. On the other hand, this outer world has its own juices, having their various qualities which excite our emotional activities. This is called in our Sanskrit rhetoric ‘rasa’, which signifies outer juices having their response in the inner juices of our emotions. And a poem, according to it, is a sentence or sentences containing juices, which stimulates the juices of emotion. It brings to us ideas, vitalized by feeling ready to be made into the life – stuff of our nature. (Tagore)

For him, art is an emotional expression of and a response to the reality. It is a harmonious realization of oneness with God and Nature. This train of thought permeates the entire warp and woof of *Gitanjali*. In his works, we find a unique blend of romanticism and



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mysticism. The portrayal of the mighty world of the “eye and ear” brings out Tagore’s essential mysticism blended with romanticism. He sees an inseparable unity between the creator and the created. He feels that there is a kind of oneness which permeates the entire universe. His romanticism is evident in his celebration of nature, humanity and God. A relationship within God and nature and man being a quintessential part of the universe permeates almost all of the Tagore’s works. A feeling of awe and wonder at the vagaries of nature and magnanimity of God is seen in *Gitanjali*.

Admitting the intrinsic value of nature Tagore explores the kinship of man and nature. He believed that the kinship of man and nature and their unity was felt by the ancient seers of India. Tagore avers in *Sadhana*, the ancient Indian seers “felt in serene depth of their mind that the same energy which vibrates and passes into endless forms of the world, manifests itself in our inner being as consciousness and there is no break in unity” (Tagore, 21). Being an *Upanishadic* seer cum poet, Tagore acknowledged the interconnectedness between man and nature. Tagore views that alienation from the nature brings miseries and melancholy in man’s life. Destruction of nature is the destruction of the man himself. If one is affected, the other cannot remain at peace. It is the relatedness of man with nature that makes him complete. Tagore views, “when we become merely man, not man in the universe”, it ripples chaotic problems. Man’s attitude of alienating and isolating himself from nature withholds him from an inner harmony of nature. Nature for man should not be an end to serve the purpose of utility. Nature, with her diversified forms and beauty, is not only a “physical phenomena to be turned to use and left aside”, instead the varied forms of nature are “necessary... in the attainment of the ideal of perfection as every note is necessary to the completeness of the symphony” (Ibid.). Taking the intrinsic value of nature to yet another level, Tagore added an aesthetic value to the realms of nature. He believed that nature should at all cost be preserved, because it with all its glorious beauty induces in us a sense of aesthetic appreciation. The mighty world moves us and transports us to another higher world where man becomes one with nature and indulges in the aesthetic enjoyment. The spaciousness and tranquility of nature symbolize freedom.

Tagore deliberately chose to leave his paintings untitled as they were an expression of freedom, having open end allowing the viewer to make his own interpretation. Tagore strongly believed that his paintings were an expression of freedom, which could not be confined within the scope of words. The abundant ecological resources played a great role in shaping the aesthetic sensibility of Tagore. His love for nature is evident at Shanti Niketan where classes were held outdoors under the trees as he believed “that nature is the greatest of all teacher” and that “the children should be surrounded with the things of nature which have their own educational values” (Ibid. 13). Tagore was greatly perturbed at the modern man’s failure to respect nature. It pained him to observe that the charms of the earth and the sky, the moon and the stars, the sun and the sunrise, the trees and the hills, the birds and the flowers which greatly fired his poetic imagination, failed to make their presence felt in the heart of modern man.



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Tagore admits “I had a deep sense, almost from infancy, of the beauty of nature, and intimate feeling of companionship with the trees” (Ibid.).

Being a coveted nature poet, the environmental degeneration pained him a lot. He was undoubtedly an environmental pioneer for the preservation of nature. Tagore’s time was the time of scientific advancement. He witnessed the impacts of industrial revolution, deforestation and other nature destroying activities. His spiritual affinity with nature and the sight of the spilt oil at sea on his way to Japan in 1916 impacted him hugely and he, even decades before the environmental movement in the West, started sensitizing man towards nature. The rain, spring or summer filled Tagore’s heart with ecstasy and this exuberance of nature made him, break into hymns which he sings in *Gitanjali*.

The vagaries of nature caused flutter in his heart and hence his heart rejoiced in thanking the Almighty for this surplus of nature. In his hymns, nature comes alive to us. The hymns in *Gitanjali* are an example of his aesthetic and emotional treatment of nature. *Gitanjali* portrays Tagore as one “whose soul seems at once to vibrate in full harmony with the orchestra of melodies and echoes reflected from the sound of rushing waters, from the songs of birds, from rustling of leaves” (Ibid.). *Gitanjali* which literally means an offering of songs, is a meditation on nature and its creator. Expressing the unflinching and undwindling universal acclaim which Tagore received for *Gitanjali*, W.B. Yeats in his introduction to *Gitanjali* writes,

Rabindranath Tagore, like Chancer’s forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defense. These verses will not be in little well-printed books upon ladies’ tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life begins, but as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men roaring upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find in murmuring them, this love of God magic gulf wherein their own bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outwards to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand, and it has filled itself with the circumstances of their lives. (Yeats).

Gitanjali thus represents the inner journey of the finite to the infinite. The songs in *Gitanjali* offer a whole gamut of human emotions like dejection, devotion, gratitude and love. Tagore’s songs in *Gitanjali* are offerings to the almighty as he himself says, “I have nothing else to offer. I am just as poor as a bird, or as rich as a bird. I can sing a song every morning fresh and new in gratefulness. It is my prayer” (Tagore). Tagore had his own personal way with religion. He was not religious in the traditional or orthodox sense of the term. He himself confesses,

I never read the scriptures, in fact I avoid them, because I have my own experience of the divine, and I don’t want other’s words to be mixed with my original authentic experience.



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I want to offer God exactly what my heart beats. Others may have known certainly, others have known, but their knowledge cannot be my knowledge. Only my experience can satisfy them, can fulfill my search and give me trust in existence. I don't want to be a believer. (Ibid.)

Though an in and out saint, Tagore vehemently denounces sainthood bestowed on him by admirers. He himself says, "I have only one desire- to be remembered as a singer of songs, as a dancer, as a poet, who has offered all his potential, to all his flowers of being, to the unknown divinity of existence. I don't want to be worshipped, I consider it a humiliation... ugly, inhuman, and removed from the world completely. Every man contains God, every cloud, every tree, every ocean is full of Godliness so who is to worship them?" In his preface, Swami Adiswarnanand, rightly says, "Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture and nationality. In his writings the poet and the mystic takes us on a spiritual quest and gives us a glimpse of the infinite in the midst of the finite, unity at the heart of all diversity and the divine in all beings and the things of the universe" (Tagore). Tagore found God to be omnipresent in each and every part of nature around him. Addressing God, he admires the beauty of nature and says that, it is the reflection or the presence of God himself in the world of nature.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to evaluate and analyse the themes which are independent yet interconnected to each other. *Gitanjali* is a garland of hundred and three songs of gratitude to the Almighty. In the words of Dr. Radha Krishnan, "The poems of *Gitanjali* are offerings of the finite to the infinite" (Krishnan). T. S. Eliot rightly puts, it is great poetry which, "expresses in perfect language permanent human impulses" and thus brings strange consolation and gratitude to the human heart. In such works of art, poetry becomes a meditation, an incantation, and finally a revelation that flashes open the inherent and the ultimate reality. The poem is a conversation of man with his creator, the almighty where he pays his obeisance and sense of gratitude towards his creator. *Gitanjali* which was an immediate sensational hit in the West, brings forth an appreciation from Abbe Bremond, who claims, that pure poetry aspires to a condition and prayer "such poetry is half a prayer from the below and half a whisper from the above: the prayer evoking the response, or the whisper provoking the prayer, and always prayer and whisper chiming into a beautiful song. *Gitanjali* is full of such poetry..." (Eliot).

The songs in *Gitanjali* serve to guide man along the labyrinthine ways of the world in order to reach to the threshold of reality after complete surrender to the Almighty. Tagore believed that the mighty world was animated by an invisible spirit. Tagore envisioned that one undivided changeless life remains in every life, (Tagore). The songs or hymns in *Gitanjali* reveal Tagore's never quenching thirst for the divine love and blessings. He sings in the Song XL, "Let the cloud of grace bend low from above like the tearful look of the mother on the day of the father's wrath" (Tagore). Tagore here seeks God as a child seeks its mother on the day which the father scolds him. Tagore views that the human soul always yearns for identification



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with the almighty but the worldly attachments hinder its journey towards the heavenly abode where it blends with its creator. He says “Obstinate are the trammels, but my heart aches when I try to break them. Freedom is all I want, but to hope for it I feel ashamed. I am certain that priceless wealth is in thee, and that thou art my best friend, but I have not the heart to sweep away the tinsel that fills my room” (Ibid.). M.K. Naik holds that “these songs, firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian saint poetry, yet reveal a highly personal quest for the divine, characterized by a great variety of moods and approaches” (Naik). Paying his obeisance to God, Tagore surrenders to the idea of things happening according to the will of the God and that the soul is eternal and immortal. Acknowledging the magnanimity and grace of God, he says “thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life” (Tagore). Tagore echoes the concept of transmigration of soul as expounded in the holy *Gita* (as a man casting off worn-out garments taketh new ones, so the dweller in the body, casting off worn-out bodies, entereth into others that are new). The poetin Song I says that he is indebted to God who treats him like a “little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and breathed through its melodies eternally new” (Ibid.). God keeps on instilling fresh and new life into us because he is benevolent and divine. Tagore is all the more humbled at the divine love which God has bestowed on him. He feels that he sings because God wills him to do so. Divine inspiration puffs up his heart with joy and pride, as he affirms in Song II that, “when thou commandest me to sing, it seems that my heart would break with pride: and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes” (Ibid.). While singing the praise of God, all the discordant, ugly, evil and wicked forces which surround the human souls, transforms into the harmony of melody and elevates one’s soul and transports one to another realm. He says “All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony – and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird...” (Ibid.). The divine inspiration resulting in the beautiful song ennobles and elevates the soul. For Tagore, God is the master musician, his divine music permeates the entire creation. He regrets that man is too much engrossed in the worldly pursuits to enjoy the divine music which illuminates the whole universe. He says in Song III, “the light of thy music illumines the world... My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggle for a voice... Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master (Ibid.). He wishes and yearns to be trapped in the rapturous joy of the divine song. In another hymn, Tagore sings a song desiring a union with the almighty. He just desires to sit beside his lord. To quote from Song V, “I ask for a moment’s indulgence to sit by thy side. The works that I have in hand I will finish afterwards. Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite, and my work becomes an endless toil...” (Ibid.). The poet feels miserable and desolate without meditating on God. His work becomes a constant never-ending drudgery. In Song VII, Tagore says that his vanity evaporates into nothingness in the benign presence of God. He desires only to sit at his feet and become as simple and straight as a flute through which God creates the divine holy music. He says “My poet’s vanity dies in

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shame before thy sight, O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music” (Ibid.). Only with divine blessings and inspiration could he dream of becoming a poet.

Tagore viewed that the world of nature is a reflection of God. God and nature for him was one in all. Talking of Tagore’s admiration for nature, S. B. Mukherji comments:

A vision steeped in wonders, mystery and boundless joy fuses the human body and spirit and nature into a harmony. An exalting rapture breathes into a vision of timeless unison—physical as well as spiritual— with nature’s form and phenomena, into the primitive bond of creative unity with the universe, into the sense of oneness with lights and waves, with flowers and fragrance, with the starry spheres. They blend and merge into a paean of joy and wonder, into an affirmation welling from inner spiritual apprehension” (Mukherji 21).

Tagore propagates the message that, if a man leads a life of primal simplicity and is in constant communion with nature, then he will never be out of tune. He will elevate himself spiritually and morally. Tagore very beautifully writes in the Song XLVIII, “We want a place where the beauty of nature and human soul meet in union”. There should be harmony between the spirit of nature and the soul of man. Nature communicates with man only when man surrenders to nature and believes in her. Nature, in Tagore, is not only a background but a living being which harmonises the heart, soul and minds of man. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore beautifully describes the beauty of the world of nature, “the morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs, and the flowers were all merry by the road side and the wealth of gold was scattered through the rifts of the clouds while we busily went on our way and paid no heed” (Ibid.). Here, Tagore describes man’s apathy to the beauty of nature. Nature is the throne of God from where he permeates all things in it. To quote him from the Song III: “The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on” (Ibid.). Edward Thompson writes, “no poet that ever lived has had a more constant and intimate touch with natural beauty. He can use, at his best, the same images and pictures, the oldest ones in the world, a score of times in as many lines, and each time with freshness and charm. His wealth here is inexhaustible... (Thompson). Tagore viewed that nature and man and God blend harmoniously with each other. Man can live at peace with himself only if he identifies himself completely with the world of nature, from where he rises. He says, He says in another song of *Gitanjali*, “I am like a remnant of a cloud of autumn uselessly roaming in the sky. O Sun my Sun ever glorious!. Thy touch has not yet melted my vapour, making me one with thy light, and thus I count months and years separated from thee” (Ibid.). W. B. Yeats rightly views in the introduction to the collection, “the poems have stirred my blood as nothing for years...” (Yeats).

Tagore sings and celebrates the mystical beauty of nature. The beautiful world of the flora and the fauna – the mountains, rivers, birds, clouds, trees etc.– all are covered in a mystical and celestial light. All his poems are beautiful examples of “speaking pictures”. This



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inexhaustible creative fecundity of Tagore's literary genius fetched him the most coveted literary award. Tagore was alive to the fact that trees had a living spirit in them, he said, "turn a tree into a log and it will burn for you, but it will never bear living flowers or fruit" (Tagore). God permeated the realms of nature. In Tagore, the elements of nature symbolize the soul's thirst for reunion with It's lord. The flower imagery which is a recurrent occurrence in Tagore, symbolizes man's longing for God. To quote from the Song VI, "Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not!... It may not find a place in thy garland, but honour it with a touch of pain from thy hand and pluck it... while there is time" (Ibid.). The stars symbolize freedom and the mystery of life. They also symbolize immortality, "yet stars will watch all night." Birds symbolize freedom and aspirations, "...and my adoration spreads wings like a great bird on its flight across the sea." Tagore's use of nature imagery for the soul's yearning for complete identification with God is seen in, "in one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet. Like a rain-cloud of July hung low with its burden of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee. Like a flock of home sick 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" (Ibid.). Nature, in Tagore is not merely a background but one where both the feelings and thoughts harmonize beautifully. Almost each lyric of *Gitanjali* is beautifully enwrapped in the theme of God and nature blending into each other and finally becoming one. The immanence of God in nature is the central theme of *Gitanjali*. Tagore is the lyre through which echoes God's glory and man's ultimate unification with the divine soul.

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