

Nature as a Medium of Mysticism in Tagore's *Poems*

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Abstract

Just a year after the death of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a collection of his verses in English, titled as *Poems* was published by Visvabharti. Most of the poems in this collection were translated/composed in English by Tagore himself. Hence this collection seems important from two perspectives—one the time of publication, and second the first-hand translation/composition. Unfortunately, this collection didn't get much attention from critics, though it is this book that proves Tagore as a true mystic poet, as the obscure poet and as the poet with strong oriental roots. This collection stands witness to Tagore's transformation of from Romantic spirit into a Mystic. The verses in the *Poems* may appear vexed or difficult to a general reader but they are poet's deep communication with the supreme energy. In these mystic poems, most of which are in free verse, poet has used nature as his tool to portray different messages. The theme is single, i.e., a humble prayer to God yet the poems are different in context to the use of nature. The objective of this paper is to solely analyze the presence of nature in the mystic poems present in the *Poems*. The paper establishes that nature was the only tool for Tagore's mysticism.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Mysticism, Tagore's poetry, Nature, Romanticism, Tagore.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's attraction towards nature is very well known to the world. He strongly advocated that human life must organically evolve with nature to understand the value of peace and harmony. Tagore's essay "A Poet's School", stresses on the empathetic interconnectedness of human world with the surrounding for a complete understanding of coexistence. While Tagore's short stories, plays and novels project the socio-psychological concerns of human existence; his poetry largely reflects his longing for concordance existence of human beings. Tagore's poetry has been purposefully analyzed for mysticism, formalism, ecstasy and philosophy. But, his poetry has been seldom analyzed for representation of nature. Tagore has been highly praised for reflecting the dynamicity of social concerns, human culture and psychological contours, but it is presence of nature in his poetry that demands critical attention. A deep study

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of poems, where there are special references to nature and its bounty reveal that Tagore is no less than any romantic poet who admires nature in its various aspects—beauty, life, death, a source of eternal fascination and withering.

Nature for Tagore is a rich store of images, similes and metaphors which he abundantly uses nature to portray different images and situations. Rivers, mountains, sea, trees, flowers, colours, stars, sky, etc., just not fascinate him rather appeal him to connect the readers to various aspects of human life. He is a poet of nature in addition to a poet of philosophy. While using nature, Tagore appears to be more realistic and comprehensive than any other poet; for, at times he admires it and other moments he projects the harsh, unpleasant and ugly moods through nature. Tagore differs from western nature-poets as his poetry reflects his gradual evolvment with nature. Ezra Pound initially remarked this in the *Fortnightly* in March 1913:

There is in him the stillness of nature. The poems do not seem to have been produced by storm or by ignition, but seem to show the normal habit of his mind. He is at one with nature, and finds no contradiction. And this is in sharp contrast with the Western mode, where man must be shown attempting to master nature if we are to have 'great drama'. It is in contrast to the Hellenic representation of man the sport of the gods, and both in the grip of destiny.

Tagore has left behind a huge corpus containing 2,230 songs, many novels and short stories. His celebrated collection of poems, *Geetanjali* comprises 157 mystic poems mostly addressed to God. Majority of the poems in *Geetanjali* are inarguably spiritual poems. There are other important works too. One such important work, which has been less evaluated for its literary merit so far, is his collection of poetry titled *Poems* which was first published in 1942. This anthology contains 130 poems focusing on vivid themes. *Poems* is exceptionally critical for poet's admirers because its blurb notes that the poems are "all translated by the poet himself" (6). And, secondly the poems included in it, present a variety of moods and themes. It is these poems that we find Tagore yearning for "eternal search for the ultimate destination from here to eternity" (Mukherjee, p. 1). Most of the works of Tagore are second-hand translation, but in this collection all the poems, but fourteen, are first-hand translations of poet himself. So Foster's charge that the charms "vanished in translation," (qtd. in Sen, "Tagore and His India") proves lesser significant here as the poet must have maintained the emotional appeal and artistic glean of the poems in translating the poems himself.

The valuable ideas of Tagore on poetry, diction and poetic aspirations are also reflected in the "Introductory" of this anthology. The "Introductory" is in the form of a poem in free verse that longs for four pages. The "Introductory" should be studied parallel to Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballad*. Akin Wordsworth, Tagore too upholds 'spontaneity' as a prime characteristic of poetry. While Wordsworth notes—"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", Tagore's way of praising the same comprises of elegant imagery:

"Imagine a song suddenly flashing up like A flying fish
From the silent depth of time." (*Poetry*, p. 7)

Offering the poems to the readers, Tagore calls the 'book' as the 'cage crowded with birds'. The word 'birds' in this line has been used as metaphor signifying the vividness of themes, and the word 'book' is a cage for it does not allow the poems to move freely in poet's mind or nature to gain further dimensions. A finalized printed book/collection of poems is thus far from natural growth for this poet. Tagore may sound awkward in this context but that is how folk literature and oral traditions have grown in the past. The folk literature emerged out of the mind of artist with no claim on authorial authority and copyright claims and endured number of transmissions and refinements to become popular. The sources of Tagore's poems have been the nature and its odd-even colours. He clearly shares wherefrom his poetry emerges in the following lines of the "Introductory":

The blue space, the infinity around constellations,
Through which flocked my verses, is left outside. (7)

It's clear from these lines that apart from the human society Tagore derives poetic inspiration from nature's bounteousness.

Tagore cries over the numbness that has been brought to the poetry by technology. He upholds the natural association the poetry has enjoyed with human beings in olden times. According to him, "When the spirit of printing press was not there", the poetry was "alive with the natural accompaniment of the irrelevant" and the stanzas were not ranged into perfect packets of alphabets, / to be silently swallowed". Tagore dreams of the age when poetry developed in the lap of nature and enjoyed liberty. His squall for being born in a hopeless age in which emotions are tainted by selfish motives and technology implies to his thirst for peace embedded in natural beauty.

I sigh and wish that I had lived
in the golden age of Kalidasa,
That you were,-but what is the use of
wild and idle wishing?

I am hopelessly born in the age of the
busy printing press- a belated Kalidasa.... (9)

In poem 2 of the *Poems*, Tagore expresses his mystic ideas beautifully with the help of different aspects of nature. He feels the presence of Godly love around him and develops nostalgia-like feelings. He says the news about the presence of his love (God) comes to him through 'spring flowers' and through the 'fragrant field in murmurs of April'. Such rapturous feelings spur in his heart "green leaves of desire". The desire has a characteristic of unceasing growth, that is why poet uses 'green leaves' to affiliate with desire. The two media through which the poet realizes the haptic message of his Love—'sky' and 'air' surface towards the end. The poet feels the 'gaze' and 'kisses' of his Love but the denouncing inquiry over of the existence of eyes and lips signifies the poet's question over the necessity of physical existence. Nature here emerges as the carrier of Godly love.

The poem 3 of the collection portrays the oxymoronic dimensions of human life, viz.—loss and gain, joy and sadness. Tagore uses nature to explain the

inevitable of human life. To say that one sorrow leads to some happiness, he uses following imagery of twilight:

The sun goes down to his rest

There is gloom in the forest and glamour in the sky.

With downcast look and lingering steps

The evening star comes in the wake of departing day

Herein, the poet talks to the reader as a seer to communicate that a ray of hope is associated with every sadness. In the entire poem the dark sky and twilight echoes mysticism. The references to nature make the poem rather more comprehensible for a common reader.

Happiness is the ultimate aim of human life and all human ventures and in Tagore(s) happiness is never too tedious to be achieved. He defines happy mind as one who:

He hankers for nothing in the world

Who is in possession of himself;

The sweet air of spring is for him,

The flowers, the bird songs; (17)

While the thirst for achievements has been described by futile 'circling of desert', and the desire for physical love is compared to 'mist' that results in internal darkness.

The lessons of self-realization have been well caricatured in poem number five which reminds the reader of Blake's poem—Poison Tree. In Tagore's poem, the pains endured for 'false hopes' are pricking 'thorns' which makes him "know that they are not flowers" (18). The poem 7 talks about the state of women in the world. The poet hails the contribution of women in making this world. This comprises of a variety of imageries plucked by the poet from the nature's storehouse. These imageries help the readers to decode the poet's emotions.

You were lapped by the sea of life whose

Ripples are the leaves' flutter, bees' flight,

grasshoppers' dance and

tremor of moths' wings. (22)

The poet's distressful mood is reflected in poem 17 which is full of doleful words—'Alas', 'forsaken', 'homeless', 'sobs', 'sighs', 'hopeless', 'growl', and 'shoreless'. To express such pitiable human conditions too, Tagore takes rescue in nature. The tension lying behind the poem is expressed thorough natural imageries, for example: "The shrieks of the wind die away in sobs and sighs" (34). But, Tagore is not always a sad mystic. He is jubilant too at times; especially when he is affectionate with nature's pleasant turns. And to describe such jubilancy he finds the myriad plumes of peacock dancing in the rain falling from the clear sky to best describe his ecstasy. His description of happiness is well described in poem twenty which opens with these lines:

My heart, like a peacock on a rainy day,
spreads its plumes tinged with rapturous colours of thoughts,
and in its ecstasy seeks some vision in the sky,
with a longing for one whom it does not know.
My heart dances.

In poem 50 a similar mood of poet comes through the lines where he celebrates the adornment of nature with the changes in season:

The sun shines, the rain pours down in the showers
the leaves glisten in the bamboo grove,
the smell of newly tilled earth fills the air.

.....

The spirit of poet dances in swaying cadence. (73)

In poem twenty-one the poet is mesmerized over the nature's soft healing touch—"At night the fingers of the stars touch my dreams"(39). And finds—"There is love in each speck of earth and joy in the spread of sky" (39).

'Sea,' 'Night' and 'Star' occur recurrently in the poems of Tagore appearing in this collection of poems. Tagore refers to these three elements of nature in varied sense. 'Sea' is sometimes worldly humdrum affairs yet in some references it is symbolic to vastness. 'Star' is sometimes symbol of twinkling hope and sometimes lowliness. All in all, they stand witness to various moods of poet, mostly sadness. But, Tagore is very much optimistic too. In the following lines of poem 53 he asserts with full confidence:

I know that the flower one day shall blossom crowning my thorns.
I know my sorrow shall spread its red rose-leaves opening its heart to the sun.
The breeze of the south for which the sky kept watch for weary
days and nights shall suddenly make my heart quiver. (78)

The Section Two of this collection contains some important poems most of which are reflections of poet's self. Nature and its beauty surface in these poems again but in descriptive manner. A glimpse of noon can be seen in following lines:

The noon had eyes like the mad,
red thirst raged in the sky.
I opened the basket and found
the flower dead. (111)

In this part we find that the poet praises God's Plenty as "Thou art a glimmer of gold..." (118), and himself to be "a meadow flower" aspiring to be "in the chain of thy neck" (120). The section two ends with poem number 87 in which the poet carves appealing imageries to communicate 'disconsolate' situation and request mankind to "bring out... lamps" so as to "offer symphony of praise to eternal light" (125).

Talking about the Tagore's connectivity with nature and mystic ideas Bharti Mukherjee notes:

At the beginning of his literary career Tagore is a romantic and to some extent a mystic poet. He is a worshipper of beauty. So anything that is beautiful in nature, the young poet feels vibration of his own self in it.

Tagore is no doubt a mystic poet but his mysticism thrives on nature. His mysticism is an outcome of his firm faith in the natural principles of unity, peace and harmony. Nature for him is message of GOD and is also a medium for him to communicate with God. He does not denounce the world in the name of mysticism. He never complains of the futility of the nature rather embraces its beauty to derive his poetic principles. Though Tagore too endured enough pains but he doesn't embrace escapism. He accepts nature as evitable 'maya'. He is realistic in a sense that maya is inevitable ingredient to realize the supreme bliss. Thus renunciation of the world is not a separation from this material maya. The delights of the external world are not negated but are accepted by him as essential for self realization and aperception of eternal bliss. Such a harmony between internal (purified and honest emotions) and external (nature) leads to Tagore's mysticism.

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