

## Symbolism in Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali



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### ABSTRACT

Research Paper- English

*Rabindrath Tagore certainly is one of the greatest poets of the world. His achievement as a poet rests mainly on his English Gitanjali. Gitanjali is a proof of Tagore's towering genius and marvellous artistic powers. Tagore's Gitanjali shows apart from many other things, a fine use of apt symbolism which is a blend of mysticism and music, religion and poetry. The list of the symbols used by Tagore for explaining the meaning of the objects, mostly of sublime complexion, is inexhaustible. There do occur and recur the symbolic thoughts in Gitanjali. They have been conceived with poetic delicacy. They are very apt and their significance is meaningfully acute. This paper analyses the major images and symbols used by Tagore in Gitanjali.*

**Key words:** artistic, symbol, mysticism, sublime, poetic delicacy

### Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, musician, painter, educationist, social reformer, philosopher and prophet all rolled into one.

Gitanjali is a proof of Tagore's towering genius and marvellous artistic powers. Gitanjali is a collection of hundred and three poems. Simplicity and sublimity characterises the prose style of Tagore in Gitanjali. Gitanjali thrives on Hindu mysticism and presents a complex of thoughts. In order to accomplish the mystical attitude Rabindranath has employed well-chosen symbols. Tagore's Gitanjali shows, apart from many other things, a fine use of apt symbolism which is a unique blend of mysticism and music, religion and poetry. It is a collection of 103 poems translated by Tagore from his various poetical works in Bengali.

### Objective:

The objective of this paper is to show how Tagore has used vivid symbols to convey his thoughts and feelings in *Gitanjali*.

Tagore's symbols are not only artistic but also religious. In his use of ritualistic symbol, we find reference to both the *vedic* and *puranic* rites. In addition to the religious symbols, Tagore has used nature symbols with a metaphysical content on an extensive scale.

The major images and symbols deftly used by Tagore in *Gitanjali* are as follows:

Tagore very symbolically speaks of human body which has been explained by the use of word frail vessel.

*"The frail vessel thou emptiest again and again and fillest it ever with fresh life"*

(*Gitanjali*, Song I)

It suggests the empty and destitute life of a man. Through this symbol the poet means to suggest that life without the grace of God is as worthless as a pitcher without water.

The symbol of vessel again appears in the song LXXIV where the poet is 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."* (*Gitanjali*, Song LXXIV)

Here, the poet is eager to fill the empty pitcher with virtuous activities.

Again, in the Song XC, the symbol of vessel appears. The poet is always afraid that one day when terrible Death knocks at his door, he will be able to welcome the guest with the full vessel. The poet

says:

*"Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life- I will never let him go with empty hands."*  
(Gitanjali, Song XC)

The other powerful image which derives our attention is the symbol of flute. Man's life has been compared to a flute. The music that flows on the lips and breathe through the flute is nothing but God's grace and love. It is God who provides this perennial source of music to the poor flute.

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

The symbol of flute reminds us of Lord Krishna who used to shower the rain of melodies on the bank of the river, Yamuna.

The symbol of lyre in Gitanjali is so beautifully woven into the fabrics of the book that it always comes back and forth like that of Shakespeare. The symbol of harp or lute occurs in the following lines:

a) *At every footfall of yours, will not the harp of the road break out in sweet music of pain?*  
(Song LV)

b) *There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute.*  
(Song LXXIV)

c) *I shall tune it to the notes of forever, when it has sobbed out its last utterance, lay down my silent harp at the feet of the silent.*  
(Song C)

Flower, as a symbol has been used by the poet at different places. In the Song VI, it symbolises transitory nature of man's life. Our life is as beautiful as a flower, but at the same time, it is short lived. So, the poet feels that the flower of life must be timely plucked in the service of God lest it should 'droop and drop in the dust.' The word 'garland' symbolises the chosen things of the divine. The faint colour of the flower and its faint smell tell us of the ordinaries of man. The word 'pluck' tell us of the idea of death. These symbols are delicate.

*"Pluck this little flower and takes it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust."  
It may not find a place in thy garland....."* (Song VI)

In one of the Songs, the poet laments the fact that God has not yet condescended to recognise the flower dedicated in his honour by the poet.

*"My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded.* (Song XX)

In one of the songs, the poet observes -

*"I wait here weary hours spreading my offerings for thee, while passersby come and take my flowers, one by one, and my basket is nearly empty."* (Song XLI)

Here, the basket of flowers suggests the body of human being which possesses so many virtuous things. The man wants to offer these gifts to God. But unfortunately these flowers are snatched by the passersby. The word passersby suggest those evil elements which prevented the good elements from merging to the infinite.

Again, in one of the songs,

*"The flower sweetens the air with its perfume yet its last service is to offer itself to thee."*  
(Song LXXV)

Here, the flowers suggest the creative and positive deeds of human being ever curious to abide by the dictation of the soul.

In Gitanjali, Tagore has used the symbol of silent step. It symbolises the silent unheard and the gentle voice of conscience - a voice that always guides and prevents the mind from committing sinful acts. But unfortunately people seldom pay any heed to the silent knocks of God or conscience. The poet says he is so much absorbed in the mortal pleasure or the worldliness that he is unable to listen to the

wise suggestions of the soul.

*"I heard not thy steps as thou camest" ( SongLIV)*

The poet feels -

*"In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest silent as nights, eluding all watches." (SongXXII)*

Though God's steps are silent and secret and also very rare for a common man, yet for a great devotee, they are always heard as visible. Those who have a strong belief in God, always think that God's gentle steps are capable of creating joy and happiness.

*"In sorrow after sorrow, it is his steps that press upon my heart and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine." (Song, XLV)*

So, only a man of great devotion who has nothing to do with the evils of the world can feel the silent steps of the soul.

In Gitanjali, the symbol of journey interprets all human beings on this mortal earth are the pilgrims or the travellers who are continuously taking their voyages to the eternal home for God, their permanent home. During the course of his sacred travelling, the traveller is bound to face several trials, cares and anxieties. But a true and devoted traveller never minds the obstacles and hurdles of the path.

*"Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests, let all my life take its voyages to its eternal home: in one solution to thee." (Song,CIII)*

Again, in one of the songs, the poet uses an extended symbol of journey. He observes that the journey is very long and the way of it is also very long and tiresome. The traveller is bound to go to the inner most shrines, the abode of God. At the end of the journey, the traveller finds eternal peace and happiness and all his frustration and tiredness gone away.

*"The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long..... And one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end." (Song, XII)*

The use of Door is one of the powerful symbols of Gitanjali. The poet asks the devotees to open the gate of his own souls which is the abode of God. God is not found in the lifeless statues and temples, but his abode is in the inner chamber of the immortal soul. The door used in the poem is highly suggestive. It suggests not the general door of a house but the invisible door of spirit i.e. revelation of self. Here are some lines containing the symbol of door in the book.

- i) *Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? (Song, XI)*
- ii) *I have no sleep tonight. Ever and again I open my door and look out on the darkness, my friend! (Song, XXIII)*
- iii) *Let me sleep undisturbed even if my Lord comes of a sudden to my door. (Song, XLVII)*

Most of the images of Tagore are richly influenced by our great epics, scriptures, Vedas and Upanishad. We find in Gitanjali nature fresh symbols, the symbol of common life, both hard and soft symbols and the symbols that carry weight of the mystical experiences which otherwise can't be described. It is proper to conclude that the fragrance of poetry in Gitanjali springs from the rich varieties of symbols.

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### **R E F E R E N C E**

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