

## Utilization of Archetypal Symbolism in Tagore's *Gitanjali*

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### Abstract

*Rabindranath Tagore played a leading role in Indian cultural renaissance and came to be recognized as one of the architects of modern India. The publication of Gitanjali was the most significant event in Tagore's writing career, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Gitanjali is a great mystical work and its mysticism always endures. Tagore expresses his firm convictions about God, and the human soul, and about the ultimate goal of human soul. Tagore heard mythological stories and fairy tales from his great-aunt Shubhankari and servant Shyam in his childhood and boyhood. It helped his songs to intersperse with symbolic, emotional and metaphysical overtones. Archetypal symbols are a term used to describe universal symbols that evoke deep and sometimes unconscious response in a reader. In his early poetry Tagore emphasized spiritual realism and international humanism. It is in his Naivedya he clearly marks out these two characteristics. As he progressed in mystical thought especially during the Gitanjali period, Tagore came to fully realize the importance of the symbolic use of language in religious poetry. This analysis has been made here to show how the symbols and imagery have been used here recurrently to illuminate the poetic qualities of myth. These songs also show that Tagore has used myth as the expression of unconscious, feelings and instincts without focusing the light from different angles nobody can get the taste of the inner beauty of the poems of Tagore.*

**Keywords:** Archetypal, Myth, Symbols

### INTRODUCTION

Tagore is the founder of Vishwa Bharathi University at Shantiniketan. He is primarily a poet of man, who ardently believes in the progress of humanity, which can take place where

there is peace and liveliness among the nations of the world. Simplicity, and spontaneity, brilliant imagery and striking originality are distinguishing marks of his poetry. He had great ideas on the entire question which are related to human life and death. He is a man of prodigious literary and artistic accomplishment. He played a leading role in Indian cultural renaissance and came to be recognized as one of the architects of modern India. The earliest influences that shaped Tagore's poetic sensibility were the artistic environment of his home, the beauty of nature, and the saintly character of his father.

*Gitanjali* is a collection of poems by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. The original Bengali collection had 157 poems, which was published in 1910. The English *Gitanjali* or 'Song Offerings' is a collection of 103 English poems. Tagore himself translated them into English and they were first published in 1912. The publication of *Gitanjali* was the most significant event in Tagore's writing career, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. In *Gitanjali*, the poems are organized in accordance with artistic aesthetics. The book is divided into two major parts. The first one is the quest for the God and the second one is the realization of God. *Gitanjali* was his inner search for peace and a reaffirmation of his faith. Its central theme was the realization of the divine through self-purification and service to humanity. It is completely interspersed with songs and symbolic with subtle emotional and metaphysical overtones. Tagore, often and almost always in *Gitanjali* speaks in terms of image and symbols, similes and metaphors that reveals his use of archetypal symbols over the songs. He relies more on sensibility than on sense, more on suggestiveness than on precision and meaning.

Archetypal symbols are a term used to describe universal symbols that evoke deep and sometimes unconscious response in a reader. Characters, images and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and basic human experiences, regardless of when or where they live are considered archetypal. Common literary archetypes include: Stories of quests, initiations, outcasts, descents to the underworld, and ascents to heaven. Under the influence of the symbolist Movement, all modern writers, like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden identify symbols and images used as a guide expression of unconscious feelings and instincts. But it was Sigmund Freud, who first showed the new path for scientific studies and how to adapt myth in poetry. He developed certain theories regarding the personal unconscious. For Freud myth is a special form and instincts in a narrative form in order to reveal their operation and function in the

human psyche. After Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, a disciple of Freud who founded the analytical school of psychology and developed a radical new theory of the unconscious, expanded Freud's theories and opined that beneath the personal unconscious there is always a collective unconscious shared in the psychic inheritance of all members of the human family. Jung is also of the opinion that from ancient times myths have been there in world literature and these myths are the creations of the collective unconscious. According to him, 'myth forming' structural elements are always present in the unconscious psyche. He calls these elements as 'motifs', 'primordial images', or 'archetypes'.

Archetype has always a universal appeal. It has two aspects – a shape and a creative energy. The present form is determined by the past history and the creative energy is used to determine the future. Behind archetype there is always an original imagination. The critics of myth have made a list of the archetypal theme-motif-image. Some of them are birth, adolescence, love, guilty consciousness, exoneration, logic for fighting against a dream, a dispute between an image and a thing, and the like. These categories have been made for the purpose of literary criticism but each of them is responsible for defining the very nature of the material and in this respect they are related to one another. The surprising images play an inseparable part of the total expression of the whole work. An image having its own value in a particular situation of a work, may also add strength and complexity to the total situation recalling other key thoughts and feelings and attitudes. An image should not be a fanciful one, because such an image destroys the reality of an object or a situation.

Rabindranath Tagore heard mythological stories and fairy tales from his great-aunt Shubhankari and servant Shyam in his childhood and boyhood. Tagore's mother Sarada and his great-aunt Shubhankari hailed from Jessore District, now in Bangladesh. For that reason many of their servants also came from the then East Bengal. Tagore's boyhood had mostly been influenced by those servants. Amongst those servants, Shyam influenced Tagore the most in his boyhood days. Tagore's plays are plays of symbols than of characters and incidents. Most of the characters are shadowy featureless. They are important only in so far as they stand for an idea or a feeling. They symbolically express a philosophy. The images employed by Tagore not only appeal to our eye, ear and heart they also touch the soul. On the other hand, a symbol expresses

two levels of meaning. Primarily symbolic words refer to something which suggests a different range of reference beyond itself. Secondly a symbol works through association of suggestion.

Before discussing the mystical images and symbols in the individual poems of *Gitanjali*, it is proper to consider what Tagore thought about the significance of poetic imagery. Certainly, he was not a committed theorist and a conscious practitioner of the poetic art, though he always professed that he was first and foremost a poet. In his early poetry Tagore emphasized spiritual realism and international humanism. It is in his *Naivedya* he clearly marks out these two characteristics. As he progressed in mystical thought especially during the *Gitanjali* period, Tagore came to fully realize the importance of the symbolic use of language in religious poetry. It seems, as in the case of Coleridge, for Tagore a symbol or an image was characterized by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible.

Life, truth and love are universal images symbolizing God. In poem No. 4 of *Gitanjali* the poet addresses the Divine as 'Life of my life' and promises Him that he will ever try to keep his body pure, "knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs". Mystics often consider their body as the temple of God and they insist upon keeping it pure. Truth is also an attribute of God and the poet knowing himself to be God's temple, promises Him to keep all untruths out from his thought, "knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind"(IV,3). Tagore's affirmation in *Sadhana* is quite revealing. He writes, "To live in perfect goodness is to realize one's life in the infinite. God is love and as He has his seat in the innermost shrine of the poet's heart, the latter will try to drive all evils away from his heart and keep his love in flower.

Flower is an ever-recurring symbol in *Gitanjali*. 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. 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 sacrifice 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.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it finds that Tagore’s *Gitanjali* is a mystical and archetypal. . His uses of symbolic language have also shows his adaptation of myth in the light of Sigmund Freud. Through this analysis we have observed here that like Freud Tagore also has used a special form of symbolic language to express the unconscious feelings and instincts in a narrative form in order to reveal their operation and function in the human psyche. In our discussion it is observed here that the symbols and images he has used in the poems are easily accessible to everyone. Anyone can easily understand the thematic and stylistic expression of those symbols. These archetypal symbols show that it is not a sign of pain but an abundance of cheerfulness. It is this humanism that makes *Gitanjali* unique. Indeed symbolism is over-filled in *Gitanjali*. Symbolism is a great feature in *Gitanjali* which makes it unique in all Indo-Anglican literature.

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