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Images in Tagore's *Gitanjali*

T. Latha, M.A. M.Phil., SLET., Ph.D. Scholar



Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a significant contributor to Indian Literature in English. He exposed himself responsibly to the twin Worlds of the English Romantic poets and Indian devotional poetry. His work *Gitanjali* won for him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The

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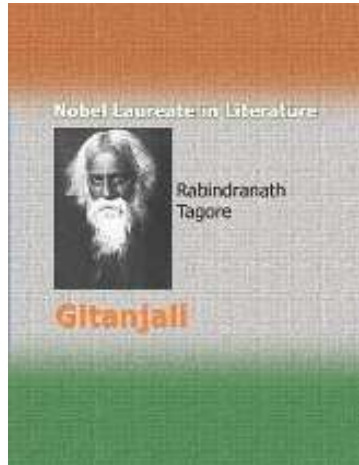
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Images in Tagore's *Gitanjali*

songs in *Gitanjali* are the poet's meditations on God, Man and Nature. In order to express his ideas effectively, Tagore uses images in his works.

Images in Tagore's *Gitanjali*



Images are not a mere ornament. Images are essential to the meanings of a work of art. An image 'is a picture made out of words' and that 'a poem may itself be an image composed from a multiplicity of images' (C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Images*, pp. 17-18).

Tagore's *Gitanjali* is endowed with richness of diction and imagery. And it is highly expressive and original. The common objects of nature like flowers, rivers, clouds, the sky, the stars, the boatmen, the beggars, travelers on the road, and shepherds find place in his works.

Edward Thompson comments on the art of Tagore:

Rarely was fine poetry one thinks, made out of less variety, rain, and cloud, wind and rising river, boatmen, lamps, temples and gongs, flutes and vines, birds flying home at dusk,... It is astonishing what range the poet gets out of these few things. They are far too naturally and purely used here to be called properties, as they justifiably might be in much of his works. (217)

Elemental Images

Leitmotif (a motif or theme associated throughout a music drama with a particular person, situation, or idea) images employed by Tagore is mostly the elemental images – the images of water, fire, earth, air and light, and other objects such as trees, flowers and rivers.

Images of Light and Darkness, Fire and Cloud abound in Tagore's *Gitanjali*. In their mingling of light and darkness, the stars symbolize the rhythm of life, the very mystery of life. They shine (which is Life), and then are hidden behind the cloud (which is death). The stars are constantly moving towards each other and this movement is an expression of their love. It symbolizes the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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urge of the individual to become one with the infinite. Night is mysteriously beautiful. Its darkness symbolizes the mystery of the unknown. Its message is the message of God. (The king of the dark chamber). One who understands Him, comes into light. Tagore's search of the immortal and his identification of God with the source of illumination, is brought out in this poem:

Light , oh, Where is the Light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!

There is the lamp but never a flicker of a flame,-is such thy fate, my heart? Ah, death were better by far for thee!

Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy Lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night.

The Sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless.

I know not what this is that stirs in me,- I know not its meaning.

A moment's flash of lightning drags down a deeper gloom on my sight and my heart gropes for the path to where the music of the night calls me.

Light, oh, Where is the light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire.

It thunders and the wind rushes screaming through the void. The night is black as a black stone. Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy Life. (*Gitanjali* –XXVII).

In this lyric, clouds, darkness, rain, thunder all symbolize the dangers and difficulties which lie in the path of spiritualism. But, they are overcome by a sincere devotee to see his way clearly and surely through all the darkness of ignorance that besets his path. This poem implies that worldly, sensuous desires must be burnt and the lamp of divine love has to be lighted.

The water - fire imagery as symbols of thirst and gratification, is employed in many poems of Tagore. The passions of love are referred to as fire, and water is spoken of as one that quenches desire and thirst. Song LIV of *Gitanjali* refers to God as a thirsty traveler waiting for a draught of water.

I heard not thy steps as thou camest. Thine eyes were sad when they fell on me; thy voice was tired as thou spoked low- 'Ay, I am a thirsty traveller'. I started up from my day-dreams and poured water from my jar on thy joined palms. (*Gitanjali* – LIV)

The poet-beloved's offering of water to the divine traveler symbolizes an act of love, charity, and devotion, and as a result, divine bliss flows into the human heart .

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Image of Boat and Sea

Tagore employs boat image in the religious sense, as Soul sojourns to reach Godhead. Crossing the ocean is considered as overcoming or transcending the material and worldly pleasures of Life. Tagore refers to the transcending of worldly pleasures in his song XLII:

**Early in the day it was whispered that we should sail in a boat, only thou, and I,
and never a soul in the world would know of this our pilgrimage to no country and to no
end.**

**In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free
as waves, free from all bondage of words. (*Gitanjali* XLII)**

Tagore wants to be free from the bondage of this world, but his divine lover who alone can grant him this freedom does not come. His soul yearns for Him to come and take the boat of his life across the dark ocean of eternity, where alone rest is possible for the human soul. Here, the sea image symbolizes the great unknown, the Heaven of rest for which man longs.

The Sea and its related images

The sea and its related images, is employed by Tagore to raise eternal questions and provide with relevant answers. Tagore says,

**I have come to the brink of eternity from which nothing can vanish - no hope, no
happiness, no vision of a face seen through tears.**

**Oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean, plunge it into the deepest fullness. Let me for once
feel that lost sweet touch in the allness of the Universe. (*Gitanjali*- LXXXVII)**

The poet narrator prays to God to immerse him in the vast ocean of eternity, so that he may once again enjoy the sweet touch of his beloved and see her beautiful face. Here, the sea image is suggestive of his yearnings.

Flower Image

Flower image is common in love poetry. It is a recurring image in Tagore's works. The flower in all its beauty symbolizes the fulfillment of the human longing for the unknown and the far off. It also symbolizes love and the power of love; that is why the bridegroom is welcomed with a garland of flowers, and flowers are offered to God. Tagore compares his love with a flower in song IV:

**I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing
that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart. (*Gitanjali* – IV).**

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In this song the image of flower symbolizes the beauty and sweetness of love. Tagore also uses the flower image in order to stress the philosophy of life. He expresses this idea thus:

**Pluck this little flower and take it. Delay not? I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust..
...Though its colour be not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and
Pluck it while there is time.** (Gitanjali – VI)

Here, in the above song, Tagore compares his Life and soul to a flower. He offers it to God and prays to Him to accept his humble offering. Like a flower, his life is short and very soon it will fade away, and drop into dust like the petals of a faded flower. Therefore, He should accept his offering before it is too late. In this song, the flower image symbolizes the shortness of human life and also the offering of love and devotion of a true devotee.

The image of flower with its thorn is presented by Tagore in song LV:

**Languor is upon your heart and the slumber is still on your eyes. Has not the word come to
you that the flower is reigning in splendor among thorns? Wake;
Oh, awaken! Let not the time pass in vain!** (*Gitanjali- LV*)

The flower grows beautifully in an environment of thorns and it suggests the victory of joy over pain, the victory of life and beauty over ugliness.

Image of Bird

Tagore compares his joy with that of the glad flight of a happy bird. He identifies his own joyous mood with the happy mood of nature. We find the gleeful tone in the voice of Tagore “**and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sky.**” (*Gitanjali ----II*) In this song, Tagore presents the idea that the mystic bliss results when one devotes one’s talents to the worship of God. In such moments the human soul rises high to become one with God, its maker. The poet conveys his truth through a telling and vivid image. The human soul is likened to a bird flying across the sea of eternity to reach the divine.

Image of Music

Image of music dominates love poems. Tagore has made use of concrete images of everyday experience, drawn from the world to communicate abstract concepts. For instance, the opening stanza of *Gitanjali* begins with, “**This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new. . . .**” (*Gitanjali -- I*). Here, the poet compares himself to a flute made of reeds and God to a flute player. God, the Musician, plays upon a flute, the poet, and he [God] plays upon it everywhere over the hills as well as in valleys. And he always plays new and fresh melodies. This brings out the poet’s faith that God is present everywhere in nature.

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Captive Image

The captive image employed by Tagore depicts the wretched conditions of the lovers. Tagore writes,

“Prisoner, tell me who was it that bound you?”

‘It was my master,’ said the prisoner.

I thought I could outdo everybody in the world in wealth and power and I amassed in my own treasure-house the money due to my king. When sleep overcame me I lay upon the bed that was for my Lord, and on waking up I found I was a Prisoner in my own treasure-house.”

‘Prisoner, tell me, who was it that wrought this unbreakable chain?

It was I, said the Prisoner,’ who forged this chain very carefully. I thought my invincible power would hold the world captive leaving me in a freedom undisturbed. Thus night and day I worked at the chain with huge fires and cruel hard strokes. When at last the work was done and the links were complete and unbreakable, I found that it held me in its grip.
(*Gitanjali* – XXXI)

The rich amass worldly wealth and through their worldly possessions, they hope to acquire power over others. But, they themselves become prisoners of their own greed and vanity. Their ego, their pride, holds their souls in bondage. Spiritual freedom is denied to them. These bonds must be broken before spiritual salvation can be possible.

Image of Journey

Journey motif reaches its culmination point when Tagore refers to Death as the end of the journey. He refers to his last journey thus:

I have got my leave. Bid me farewell, my brothers! I bow to you all and take my departure. Here I give back the keys of my door- and I give up all claims to my house. I only ask for the last kind words from you. We were neighbours for long, but I received more than I could give. Now the day has dawned and the lamp that lit my dark corner is out. A summons has come and I am ready for my journey. (*Gitanjali* -XC III)

Here, the poet is about to embark on his last journey and he bids farewell to his fellowmen. Now, at the time of final farewell, he prays to them for their good wishes. The journey image suggests the fact that the call of death has come to him from the great unknown and he will now start on his last journey.

Conclusion

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From the above, it is revealed that Tagore depends upon traditional images which are made available to him by classical Indian Literature. These images enable Tagore to communicate the abstract truth and spiritual ideas to his readers.

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