



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Romantic Associations of Being and Unity: A Comparative Aesthetic  
Analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali***

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**DOI**

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021\(5-II\)1.25](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021(5-II)1.25)

**PAPER INFO**

**ABSTRACT**

**Received:**

July 18, 2021

**Accepted:**

October 05, 2021

**Online:**

October 09, 2021

**Keywords:**

Aestheticism,

Being,

Persona's Self,

Poetry

Romanticism

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Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) aesthetics involves a complexity for they apparently belong to none of the prominent ages of English poetry and yet curiously manifest various characteristics from most of these. This research aims to affirm that the predominant aesthetic ideal in Tagore's poetry seems to echo the Romantic age (1800-1850) in English poetry. This research is an important study in asserting that Tagore, though a poet living in the Victorian age of English Poetry, seems to prefer to assimilate the ideals of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and John Keats (1795-1821) in his poetic aesthetics. This qualitative study examines Tagore's aesthetics in *Gitanjali* to seek the unique trajectory of his aesthetics in the context of the English poetry of his time till the modern age. This paper uses Martin Heidegger's concept of Da-sein to elucidate the romantic relationship found between the persona's self and his Being in the selected poems from *Gitanjali*.

**Introduction**

The etymology of the word *Gitanjali* goes back to two Bengali words, "Geet" and "Anjali" meaning song and singing respectively. The word "anjali" however, connotes a supplicating song offered as praise or offering to a higher consciousness. *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* is therefore a volume about spiritual love and metaphysical experiences of the persona. The exultant joy that the persona reveals in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* springs out of an aspiration to a unique unity. This unity, in Tagore's view, is inherent in our Being and is metaphysical in nature, simultaneously becoming an ideal for beauty and truth. In short, this unity is a spiritual harmony achieved by

the poet's imagination when he communicates with nature in seclusion and forges empathetic feelings for fellow human beings.

These aesthetics of the imagination's unity with the reality of Tagore have distinct resonances with William Wordsworth's concept of pantheism and John Keats' Romantic ideals of Truth and Beauty. In his essay titled: "The Poet's Religion", Tagore discusses both Wordsworth and Keats while elaborating upon the relationship between nature, truth, beauty and his proposed ideal of unity. He says that the relationship that human beings have with the universe is understood and has meaning only when we allow ourselves to experience things in their totality. Tagore maintains that "the truth" is not a quantifiable entity, rather it resides neither in the "substance" nor in the "number" of things but in "their relatedness, which neither can be counted, nor measured, nor abstracted" (Religion 6). Tagore states that the human imagination finds a harmonious truth in nature when it observes itself as a part of the universe. Tagore extends this idea of the harmonious truth that he finds in nature to Wordsworth's pantheistic ideals. Tagore quotes Wordsworth's, "The World is Too Much With Us", twice in this essay. He cites the first three lines of the sonnet and critiques Wordsworth's philosophy saying that the joy his persona finds in nature is not because he has become "familiar" to the nature/ reality around him but because he has finally learned to see himself as an "aspect" that reality/nature (Religion 7) includes. According to Tagore, artistic unity is not a matter of becoming familiar with the universe but becoming one with the universe as one's self too constitutes the unity that the poet forms while contemplating the universe. Tagore further elaborates this idea of unity when he analyses the last six lines of the said poem, "The World is Too Much With Us" and amalgamates his idea of poetic unity to Wordsworth's concept of a poet's imagination. Tagore agrees with Wordsworth in realizing the pull of nature on the poet's imagination, however, the idea of imagination in Tagore encompasses the metaphysical as well as the physical. He writes: "The child in us finds glimpses of his eternal playmate from behind the veil of things" (Religion 9). Tagore broadens Wordsworth's definition to say that the child delights in nature because he is the "playmate" of "the Reality" and as such he can see beyond the physical world into the metaphysical reality since for him the Real comprises of both the human and the universe's existence. Tagore therefore believes that the poet's religion is the religion of every unified human being who finds himself at peace with the universe. As Tagore unites the imaginative unity that the poet finds in his poems with the unity that a mythic might seek in nature in order to understand his own self. Self-actualization is thus irrevocably connected to the artistic perception in Tagore. Tagore discusses John Keats with a special emphasis upon the lines from "Endymion" (Book I lines 8-13) to arrive at the conclusion that: "Poetry and the arts cherish in them the profound faith of man in the unity of his being with all existence" (Religion 14). Writing about Keats, he says that this unity which Tagore talks about emerges in his poems in "struggling gleams" of consciousness as the poet is unable to maintain the unity that he arrives at towards the end of the poem. Tagore through his idea of the unity resolves the conflict between beauty and truth that Keats enacts in these iconic lines from 8 to 13 in Book I of "Endymion" where the poet declares truth and beauty as interchangeable to one

and other (Religion 16). Tagore refines and advances Keats argument to reach the conclusion: "Beauty is no phantasy, it has the everlasting meaning of reality" (Religion 16). Tagore redefines beauty as a holistic perception of reality and since truth is an accurate perception of the real as well both beauty and truth are unified in the poet's art. Tagore hereby resolves one the most essential critical binaries along which criticism on Keats is divided as most critics deem that both entities as an antithesis to each other and as such demonstrate a confusion or conflict in the Keats' craft. Tagore's unifying of truth and beauty by declaring them both real and a part of reality offers a unique insight into Keats' poetry and it also normalizes the interchangeable use of truth and beauty in *Gitanjali*. This furthering of Keatsian concept of beauty and truth by establishing a relationship between beauty and reality is one of the unique aspects of Tagore's poetic vision as presented in this essay, "The Poet's Religion".

W.B Yeats was enthralled by Tagore's verse despite the fact that he did not know Bengali and had read only *Gitanjali's* English translation. While writing the first introduction to the book, Yeats negatively comments on the poetry of his time in comparison to Tagore and says that European verse "since the Renaissance" has "ceased to hold" the "attention" of the modern reader (Yeats). According to Yeats this sapless quality of the modern English verse since the Renaissance was due to a lack of soul which he found in abundance in *Gitanjali* as he lavishly praises the volume in these words: "These lyrics [...] display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life" (Yeats). This praise of the volume coming from Yeats is all the more remarkable because Yeats poetics was firmly grounded into tangible reality. Yeats wrote "Easter 1916" (1921) in the background of Irish skirmishes with British forces when they tried to seize control of government offices in Ireland in 1913. However, the lyrical pathos that Yeats appreciated in Tagore is glimpsed in a few of his later poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928).

### Literature Review

Rabindranath Tagore was located at the cusp of two worlds: East and West. The fact that his Bengali poetry and its English translation had aesthetic and intellectual appeal for both East and West makes Tagore a unique aesthete in his ability to reach the universally cognizant ideals of beauty and truth in his verse. The Nobel committee gave 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature to Tagore for writing "profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse" which due to his command of the English language he has made "a part of the literature of the West" (Nobelprize.org). The very emphasis upon the freshness, sensitivity, beauty, and skill of his poetry makes clear not only his linguistic abilities but also his universal thematic tendencies in poetry that appealed to both his eastern and western readers

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Tagore himself explains his aesthetic training received by a communion with nature when he recollects his early youth spent in the perfect obscurity and seclusion of a small Bengali village located at the foot of the Himalayas: "... in that solitude I seem to have drunk in the open space" (*Gitanjali* 292). These communions with nature that the poet exulted in since his youth revealed

“secrets of nature” to him that were to later profoundly inform his verse (Gitanjali 292). Tagore continues about the aesthetics of his upbringing by declaring the very spirit of the East and India inclusive and nature Tagore also says about the Eastern appeal of his work: “The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity. This ideal of unity never rejects anything, any race or any culture. It comprehends all...things with sympathy and love” (Gitanjali 299). This idea of wholeness achieved via subsuming various entities and identities found in nature is what makes Tagore a unique aesthete. As in his this ability to reconcile differences with empathic love his verse had a universal appeal for both his western and eastern readers.

Tagore’s career coincided with nineteenth and twentieth century modern and avant-garde artists who doubted both authorship and meaning in literature. In the face of such skepticism, his verse preserves and reaffirms meaning in poetic art without being naive or absurd because his verse is simultaneously able to incorporate subjective as well as the objective observations. Stunkel discusses Tagore’s ability to simultaneously show the nineteenth century Romanticism’s preoccupation with subjective self- expression and twentieth century’s skeptical objective orientation (252). Stunkel says: “Subjectivity meant for him the use of adornments expressive of personal taste. Objectivity in art meant, “expressing the subject [i.e., the object] itself” (252). This observation of Skuntel that Tagore is a believer in an ethical objectivity that ultimately proceeds to form a harmonious relationship with nature is very much in sync to Kant’s idea of universal aesthetic. Just like his moral universe Kant’s aestheticism’s cardinal quality is universal applicability and appeal as he says that when a person finds delight “in an object” while that object is “with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men” (50). This concept of the standardization of the aesthetic ideals is uniquely modern and Tagore was one of the pioneers of this ethical aesthetics, which simultaneously argued for equality and individuality.

Tagore’s creative ideal was founded on the principle of unity. In his essay, “Creative Ideal” he talks about “essential elements” of a painting as given in an old Sanskrit text. The first principle of a picture for Tagore is “separateness of forms” (31). He argues that it is essential for forms to be separate, many and different yet they must not remain “obstinately” separate for in that event there will be a “fearful loneliness of multitude” in which no harmony or relationship will be possible (31). The second aesthetic principle of a picture as defined by Tagore from Sanskrit text is “proportion” which refers to “the principle of mutual accommodation” (32). Tagore further elaborates on these two principles to include his own concept of personality. He says that “In the creation of art” the “energy of an emotional ideal is necessary” because the mere use of “meter”, “cadence”, “rhyme” would have “no appeal to us” as in that case poetry “would only be a construction” (33). Tagore concludes that poetry must be the “outer body of an inner idea it assumes a personality” (33). Tagore here argues that the soul or the spirit that makes poetry appealing is directly proportional to veracity of the persona / poet’s experiences of the universal phenomena of the truth and beauty. This metaphysical ideal for poetry is fully born out in *Gitanjali* by the poet.

In another essay, "An Eastern University" Tagore advocates the necessity of aesthetic life of man while giving his idea about an Eastern education system. He writes, "We almost completely ignore the aesthetic life of man, leaving it uncultivated, allowing weeds to grow there" (198). Tagore thought that arts were there to weed out the uncivilized garden of education. Arts to him had the sole occupation of beautifying the organic life of man by being "like the outbreak of spring flowers" and by being "spontaneous overflow" of the "deeper nature" of the human beings and the "spiritual magnificence" of the nature (198). This drive for the spontaneous overflow reflects back upon Wordsworth's idea of the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings but Tagore here broadens Wordsworth's definition to integrate aesthetics into the formal education.

Tagore vouched for an inherent and instinctive relationship of the human being with the One as he says: "It costs me nothing to feel that I am; it is no burden to me. And yet if the mental, physical, chemical, and other innumerable facts concerning all branches of knowledge which have united in myself could be broken up, they would prove endless" (Introduction vi). Here Tagore celebrates the inherent ability of man to perceive its self without being led by the categories into which our knowledge of the world is classified. This tendency of the human being for Tagore illustrates that our formal education is not synonymous with knowledge and that our being relies more upon our feelings than our information about ourselves. This essential rift between the epistemology and ontology is explored by Martin Heidegger says about Being of the man: "De-sein is a being that simply does not occur among other beings. Rather it is *ontically* distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned about its very being" (my italics<sup>10</sup>). Tagore's ruminations about the Self coincide with Heidegger's idea of Being as to him the human being is different from other beings only in his ability to experience a unified existence without and apart from the universe and nature in which it lives. The Being of man for Heidegger is ontically not epistemologically different from all other animate or inanimate forms of existence. It may be surmised that Heidegger maintains that a plant or a mineral ore can be known in its entirety by knowing all the biological and chemical information regarding that plant or mineral ore. However, the same cannot and is not true for a human being. Mere biographical, biological information does not constitute the Being, the is-ness or existence of the human being. Heidegger has termed this emotional and spiritual being of the man "da-sein". Heidegger elucidates the difference between a human being and other beings via the following examples. Heidegger says a pencil exists because it writes and performs a function, so the existence of the pencil will therefore be synonymous with its function. On the other hand, a human being is capable of devising its own purposes and exists while pondering his own existence. Heidegger's existential phenomenology in the aftermath of world war two, however, is devoid of the spirituality and serenity one finds in the persona of Tagore. The perplexity in being unable to define and pin point the source of the human existence is celebrated by Tagore in contrast to Heidegger. Tagore believes this exploration of the Being of the human being to be the purpose and end of poetry. Indeed for him poetry is the only

such ontic plane of experience where knowledge and feelings of the human being are united.

The unity that Tagore seeks in his verse brings harmony to him/ his persona, despite the disparate experiences of life, which are often grave and painful. In one of his poems, he says:

“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.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts  
Into one sweet harmony- and my adoration

Spreads wings like a giant bird on its flight across the sea” (Gitanjali 5)

In these verses from the second poem of the volume, Tagore is cleared of the charge of naivety, as his verse is not unaware of the inharmonious forces at work in the human nature such as death, sorrow, pain etc. The persona, while feeling these disharmonious emotions, is capable of acquiring harmony through singing. Singing is an act of salvation and freedom as is indicated by the subsequent simile of “Bird” taking a flight over the “sea”. The “sea” is an apt symbol to indicate the various moods of a human being’s destiny, as the seawater can be both turbulent and calm. At the same time, the bird soaring over the sea symbolizes a detached and higher Being that is capable of observing the sea from above and enjoying an exhilarating feeling of freedom during the flight. The unity that the persona seeks with the One in the poem is liberating in nature. As merely looking at the “face” of the one who bids the persona to sing, is to be united with the One through the song that seems to dissolve all pain and sorrow into an exultation of being in One’s presence. From this second poem in the volume the unifying motifs of “singing” and “flying” organically enact the ontic conflict between the angst and grief that the persona feels from the tribulations of life and the inner longing of a human being to find “harmony” and peace. The joy and freedom denoted by the activities of singing and flying respectively, beautifully balances the scales for the persona and the reader of the poem by establishing that human life has equal parts of both grief and joy and chaos and harmony. The poem also oscillates from a position of grief and imprisonment to joy and liberty. This arc or the movement from the agony of human existence to its ecstasy in the poem urges the reader to find the unity that the persona/ poet has found in the poem.

This unity that the poet seeks with the truth, reality and beauty is not always accessible. Some of the verse in the volume is written in this anguish of not being able to reach this harmonious unity of Being. As the persona in the poem 27 from the volume says:

“There is the lamp but never a flicker of flame

-is such thy fate, my heart! Ah, death were

better by far for thee” (Gitanjali 55)

The loss of light in the above lines laments a failed attempt at enlightenment sought by the persona. The increasing anguish of the persona is indicated in the intensity of his desire to give up his existence / Being when he fails to achieve his desired existence / Being. This idea of the persona being a lamp without a flame echoes Heidegger’s idea of a non human being whose Being depends upon his function. The Being of the Da-sein or the human being is very different from a lamp which may be defined in terms of its function. vocabulary for light in the poem. The poem presents two binaries of light and death via the extended metaphor of the unlighted lamp. It is significant that the antonym of light for the poet is ‘death’ instead of darkness. This discrepancy in the poem where the persona alternates the chains of signification of light and dark with life and death is remarkable as in the very instance of comparing a human being’s Being to an unlighted lamp the persona differentiates his Being from a lamp. An unlighted lamp in Heidegger’s phenomenology has already ceased to exist as it functions no more. The fact that the unlighted lamp of the Da-sein laments its unlighted state and longs for death or annihilation manifests the Being and existence of the human subject past its purpose or function in life. The presence of light is a “burning fire of desire” and an absence of it extends the metaphor for desire to death “never a flicker of the lamp” solidifying the idea of Dasein in Tagore’s verse. The metaphysical enlightenment sought in the above lines is imperative to the Being or the existence of the persona and this Being resides in the persona’s ability to desire and experience truth like the heat from a fire. The moment this experience ceases for the persona, his existence is also lost. Heidegger says about Da-sein: “Not only does an analysis of being belong to Da-sein, but this understanding also develops or decays according to the actual manner of being of Da-sein” (14). Just as in the above poem, the Being of the persona resides in his burning fire of desire that may burn and flicker according to the persona’s awareness of his very being or existence.

In Tagore, the persona experiences a mystical and completely subjective relationship with Muse that it seeks in nature. Wordsworth’s “still and sad music of humanity” generalizes his persona’s feelings for all human subjects whereas Tagore’s persona preserves his isolation from other human beings due to the mystical nature of his experiences. In poem 50 from *Gitanjali*:

“And I wondered who was this King of all kings!

My hopes rose high and methought

My evil days were at an end,

And I stood waiting for alms to be given unasked

And for wealth scattered on all sides in the dust." (Gitanjali 118).

After describing this vision in which a king has descended on a chariot, the persona expresses his surety that now all his "evil days" were at an end and he will be given wealth "unasked". By evil days, the persona presumably meant poverty stricken days. The vision from the poem continues:

" I felt

that the luck of my life had come at last.

Then of sudden thou didst hold out thy right hand

and say "What hast thou to give to me?" (Gitanjali 119).

The persona is aghast at this "kingly jest" of the King when he demands alms from him who is himself beggared. The persona "slowly took out" the "least little grain of corn" and gave it to "thee" (Gitanjali 120). However the persona at the end of the day recognized the significance of the kings asking for alms as he says:

"I emptied my bag on the floor to find a least

Little grain of gold among the poor heap.

I bitterly wept and wished that I had had

The heart to give thee my all" (Gitanjali 121)

The poem finishes on a note very similar to the one expressed in Wordsworth's metaphor, "the still and sad music of humanity" for the persona in the poem was a sufferer and thought he had found a deliverer who would rescue him from his trials and tribulations without realizing that he himself was the sole agent of change. The bitter weeping of the persona in the poem is upon the epiphany that the state of receiving grace is synonymous with the practice of giving grace to others. The persona realizes to his great grief that the King had come to give him and not take from him however it was his own greed that had made him poor. Human beings for Tagore's persona are the architects of their own sadness. Interestingly the poet does not seek to encompass all humanity in the bitter realization of his persona. Tagore's verse remains resolutely subjective as his persona communicates with nature and with the One in isolation.

If Heidegger's concept of *Da-sein* were to be applied to Wordsworth's above quoted verse his persona represents a Being which resides in the natural world but is not in possession of its existence as the existence of the persona in the poems solely depends upon the nature from which it seeks inspiration. Unlike Wordsworth's persona Tagore's persona is an intact Being as though it seeks unity with nature it exists independent of it.



In "Ode to a Grecian Urn" an ekphrasis by John Keats, the persona analyses the permanent nature of the passion etched on the urn for eternity since the lovers portrayed on the urn would never unite and consummate their passion:

"Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express" (Poetry foundation)

They will however remain immortalized by the "sylvan historian" or the urn on which they have been depicted. The ode enacts a paradox of art that although it immortalizes life it does so by freezing or preserving a single moment of it. This limitation of art renders the "pastoral" depicted on the urn "cold" as the poem concludes on the lines:

"Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!" (poetry foundation)

In Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale", the poet talks about another art form, the song. Like "Ode to a Grecian Urn", that enacted the paradoxical permanent yet lifeless nature of art (painting), this ode also has its aesthetic effects in the tension between two binaries: dream and reality. This time the poet uses the living symbol of the nightingale whose song affects the persona like an opiate as he feels as if he has taken hemlock due to the numb feeling he feels upon hearing the magical song. The song of the nightingale induces in the persona an acceptance for all the hitherto bitter realities-even death. The enchantment invoked by the song for the persona is echoic of Tagore's verse as in *Gitanjali* bird songs are a symbol of spiritual and mystical liberation. In the poem 48 of *Gitanjali*, Tagore speaks of a similar abandonment of the persona to the bird song:

"The morning sea of silence broke into ripples

of bird songs; and the flowers were all merry

by the roadside;..." (Gitanjali 107).

The poet portrays a difference in the human and the natural world. The nature begins the day with bird songs while the human world is purposefully presented as weary. The persona or the Da-sein in Keats is dependent on these binaries that cause the tension and lyricism in his odes. The persona is not a unified being, unlike Tagore, in whose poem the persona is a unified being seeking his purpose in uniting with nature and fulfilling that purpose without any misgivings or doubts.

Yeats poetry has a yearning for the kind of mystic union the persona finds in Tagore's poetry but the practical concerns of his poetry firmly grounded in Irish politics as evidenced in poems like, "Easter 1916", prevented him from unifying himself with the spirit of nature. Tagore's ideal of seeking unity with the mystical spirit of nature or the world around him makes his persona a unified being.

### **Conclusion**

The aesthetics of Tagore despite having similarities with romantic and modern poets like William Wordsworth, John Keats and William Butler Yeats are idiosyncratic in terms of the unique unity that they seek and find in the mystical powers within and of nature. An analysis of Tagore's poetry in comparison to other modern, post-modern and contemporary poets like T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott and Ezra Pound would doubtless have had furthered the current research's understanding of his aesthetics. However, given the limitations of this research the study confined itself to compare only those poets to Tagore whom he himself identifies as his poetic inspirations (Wordsworth and Keats) and a poet who expressly declares himself inspired from Tagore's verse (Yeats). Tagore's verse after analysis appears more individualistic than Wordsworth, more unifying than Keats and more immersed in its visions than Yeats. Tagore's verse also presents a remarkably wholly ontic understanding of Being. Despite having pronounced resonances with Heidegger, Tagore's ontology does not follow the rationale of the rational and perceptible that Da-sein adheres to.

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