

## Devotional Mysticism: Transfiguration of Maladies into the Rhythm of Ecstasy and Safety Valve for the 'Zoe' and the 'Geo' With Reference to *Gitanjali*

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### Abstract

The excess of engrossment in worldly-materialistic-egoistic and utilitarian approaches to life distanced a human being from his true real Self, the spirit or true being. In today's time, the discourse on devotional mysticism, love for the Creator and His creation will be an answer to the crisis and rupture in modern culture due to the dearth of solidarity, morality, humility and humanity. The transcendental ideal reinforces the Unity-Consciousness that binds man, nature and God. This could safeguard the rights of Zoe and Geo from disintegration. The summumbonum of mystics will resolves discords and replaces inner tenebrosity, skepticism, vanity and mental commotion with inner luminosity, humility, tranquility and equanimity. The belief in the fact that the sublime mystic truth can neither age nor die and it will always shine on the coming generation inspired me to select this topic for research.

### Keywords

Infinite, Prayer, solidarity, tenebrosity, Unity-Consciousness, Grace, Tumultuousness.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one  
sweet harmony—and my adoration spreads wings like a glad  
bird on its flight across the sea. – *Gitanjali*, Song No. 2

Sri Aurobindo expresses his ecstatic experience when the Self is charged by spiritual illumination and mystic fervour:

Now I have borne Thy presence and Thy light,  
Eternity assumes me and I am  
A vastness of tranquillity and flame,  
My heart a deep Atlantic of delight.  
My life is a moving moment of Thy might  
Carrying Thy vision's sacred oriflamme  
Inscribed with the white glory of Thy name  
In the unborn silence of the Infinite. – *Collected Poems*, 600

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The same mystical experiences are reiterated in “*Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*”:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.– William Wordsworth

Mysticism is yearning for the communion of finite with infinite, of the human soul (Jivatma) for the Supreme soul (Paramatma) and a heartfelt seeking and seizing of the Supreme. The belief of a mystic is not based on reason, logic or demonstrated facts rather on the intimate, intuitive and imaginative awareness of the exoteric and esoteric truth, ultimate reality, divine consciousness and cosmic consciousness. The mystics explore the thread of oneness that binds God, the individual and the cosmos. Their sublime experience of God and transcendental reality is unknown to the mind of reason yet known to the eyes of faith. The mystics have very often aching and thwarted aspiration to become one with the Absolute and to concentrate on hidden truths of our being through an inward perception of the mind: “Truth was the central object of the seeking of the mystics, a spiritual or inner Truth, a truth of ourselves, a truth of things, a truth of the world and of the gods, a truth behind all we are and all that things are.” (*Hymns to the Mystic*, 11)

The mystics transcend their consciousness from a mundane level to a higher level and promote mystical self-understanding. From that point of view the whole world is a marvel; every operation of thought, speech or action is a miracle, a thing wonderful, obscure, occult and unknown. Nolini Kant Gupta writes about the ecstatic aspect of mysticism: “The mystic's knowledge and experience is not only true and real: it is delightful and blissful. It has a supremely healing virtue. It brings sovereign freedom and ease and peace not only to the mystic himself, but also to those around him, who come in contact with him.” (3)

The mystics often through the medium of poetic discourse or incantatory art reveal their most profound thought and inspiration, innermost craving and quest of God. The Supreme is visualized as a father, lover, comrade, guide, friend, king, bridegroom, a mother so on. The paths for communion and realization of ultimate reality are many. The five main ways through which the mystics have seen the higher vision are Love, Beauty, Nature, Wisdom and Devotion. Explaining the Different paths to divine or cosmic consciousness, Makarand Paranjape writes: ‘Mysticism to the religious minded people is a quest for God; to the lover, it is a quest for the beloved; to the man of action, it is search for the secret of a perfect action; to the artist, it is the quest for beauty, to the scholar it is the search for truth.’ (1) Caroline Spurgeon defines:

Mysticism is, in truth, a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy. Various mystical thinkers have contributed fresh aspects of Truth as they saw her, for they have caught glimpses of her face at different angles, transfigured by diverse emotions, so that their testimony, and in some respects their views are dissimilar to the point of contradiction. (2)

The mystics are seekers of a veiled truth behind things and not of outward knowledge. Elucidating transcendental ideals of mystics, Sri Aurobindo writes in *Hymns to the Mystic*:

The preoccupation of the Mystics was with self-knowledge and a profounder world-knowledge; they found out that in man there was a deeper self and inner being behind the surface of the outward physical man, which it was his highest business to discover and know. "Know thyself" was their great precept, just as in India to know the Self, the Atman became the great spiritual need, the highest thing for the human being. They found also a Truth, a Reality behind the outward aspects of the universe and to discover, follow, realise this Truth was their great aspiration. They discovered secrets and powers of Nature which were not those of the physical world but which could bring occult mastery over the physical world and physical things and to systematise this occult knowledge and power was also one of their strong preoccupations. (6)

Rabindranath Tagore, a devotee poet gave the vision of mystics in an age of reason through his poetics of devotion – *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. The songs of *Gitanjali* are mainly poems of devotion (bhakti) and a "mighty piece of prayer and pleading and exultation." (Iyengar, 112) It is deeply rooted in the Indian religious tradition, including both "the great imaginative-intuitive elevation of the Upanishadic approach and the enthralling sweetness and earthly sweetness and earthy simplicity of folk culture..." (*Gitanjali*, xv) In his writings, there is an understanding of affinity and the precise relations between the supreme Purusha, the Individual self and Nature. Rejecting pleasure-seeking hedonistic and worldly approaches, the soul of Tagore like ancient saints craves for divine consciousness and spiritual illumination. He believes that divine consciousness can transfigure maladies of life and the penury of the heart into spiritual ecstasy. Highlighting Tagore's contribution in the essay "Rabindranath Tagore: A Great Poet, A Great Man" NoliniKanta writes: "When pessimism, cynicism, agnosticism struck the major chord of human temperament, and grief and frustration and death and decay were taken as a matter of course to be the inevitable order of earthly life – bhasmantamidamshariram – he continued to sing the song of the Rishis that Ananda and Immortality are the breath of things, the birthright of human beings." (97)

Tagore's spiritual philosophies resonate with the saint-poets of Medieval India who protested against formalism, orthodoxy and priestly domination; insisted on the direct accessibility of God to everyone. They attacked purely external ritualistic practices; and stressed the importance of inner experience, which generally meant establishing a bond of intense personal love with the Absolute either in form (Saguna worship of God) or without form (Nirguna worship of God). The utter and unflinching devotion to the divine and surrender to His will leads to the victory of the power of love over the love of power, victory of tranquillity, serenity, harmony and beatitude over disorder, tumultuousness and desolation. The colossal faith, humble surrender and sincere prayer dispel the clouds of false vanity and baseless ego. The poet prays for a pure Will emptied of egoism and acting only by the command and as an instrumentation of the secret Master of works: "My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master / poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life / simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with / music." (12) Emphasizing the attributes of a true devotee, Sri Aurobindo says that he throws away ego and has a universal love for all creatures: "The bhakta of the Purushottama is one who has a universal heart and mind which has broken down all the narrow walls of the ego. A universal love dwells in his heart, a universal compassion flows from it like an encompassing sea. He will have friendship and pity for all beings and hate for no living thing..." (*Essays on the Gita*, 404)

A devotee mystic seeks the grace of God and bounteous blessings that could be “seized only by a purified and clear temperament.” (Nolini, 3) The basic requisite through which the tree of devotion flourishes is the purity of heart - *prayatātmanah* (*SrimadBhagavadgita* 9.26). He believes that all impurities could be overcome by the grace of the omnipotent Supreme Master. The frailty and infirmity of the consciousness will be transformed into strength by his transfiguring touch: “All can be done if the god-touch is there.” (Savitri, 3) In song No. 37, Tagore says: “He it is, the innermost one, who awakens my being with his deep hidden touches. He it is who puts his enchantment upon these eyes and joyfully plays on the chords of my heart in varied cadence of pleasure and pain.”

Praying Almighty, the devotee poet asks for strength and seeks His benign touch to overcome the trials and tribulations of life. He believes that the Prayer done with a pure heart and intentions can support, strengthen and sustain him. The sincere prayer will remove the frailty of mind and will change “an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil” (11) with peace, harmony and beatitude. He prays to God for enlightenment and freedom from fear and seeks God to dispel negativity in its various forms and stay aligned on the path of a purposeful life. In *Gitanjali*, he prays:

This is my prayer to thee, my lord—strike, strike at the root of  
penury in my heart.  
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.  
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.  
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my  
knees before insolent might.  
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.  
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy  
will with love. (21)

Tagore completely humanised and naturalised mysticism, like the lyrics of the Vaishnava devotees. More than mystical flights of the imagination the songs of *Gitanjali* often emphasise the connectedness with striving humanity. The devotional songs are Tagore's quest for divinity in humanity. Love for and service to mankind leads to the realization of divinity. A devotee disconnects union with God if he loses communion with common humanity: “Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.” (26) In the song No.11, attacking idle form of worship - sitting in a corner and counting beads and ignoring the action, he strongly says:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom  
dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with  
doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before  
thee!  
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is  
breaking stones. (13)

An echo of the same thought is perceptible in one of the lyrics (dohas) of Kabir Das. He asks the devotee to discard concentrating on the rosary beads and their count of rotation if he fails to overcome negative thoughts from his mind. With a calm mind, a devotee will be able to guide himself towards tranquillity and serenity and can experience the oneness between the individual self and the cosmic self:

Eons have passed whirling rosary, restless remains the mind  
Give up the beads of rosary and rotate the beads of mind  
माला फेरत जुग भया फिरा न मन का फेर।  
कर का मनका डार दे मन का मनका फेर।।

Swami Vivekananda through his spiritual discourse and praxis asks to worship the living God that lives in all – rich and poor, wise and ignorant and mighty and weak. He says that God is present in every Jiva; there is no other God besides that and one who serves Jiva, serves God indeed. In the poem “The Living God,” he says:

He who is at once the high and low,  
The sinner and the saint,  
Both God and worm,  
Him worship — visible, knowable, real, omnipresent,  
Break all other idols!

.....

Ye fools! who neglect the living God,  
And His infinite reflections with which the world is full.

Like Swami Vivekananda, Tagore knows he can find infinite in finite and finite in the infinite. It is through this understanding of unit- consciousness-one is in everything and everything is in one, that the mystic could grow the power of acceptance of contradictions and differences with sameness. The great verses from Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* enlightens about this Unity-Consciousness:

The Supreme’s gaze looked out through human eyes  
And saw all things and creatures as itself  
And knew all thought and word as its own voice.  
There unity is too close for search and clasp  
And love is a yearning of the One for the One,  
And beauty is a sweet difference of the Same  
And oneness is the soul of multitude.  
There all the truths unite in a single Truth,  
And all ideas rejoin Reality. (31)

A common and central aim of Devotional mysticism is to manifest communion from the macrocosm of divine relations to the microcosm of human relations. A mystic’s communion with the Supreme - presides over the workings of all aspects of life, strengthens mutual harmony and consolidates his relationship with all creatures – the ‘Zoe’ and the ‘Geo.’ This understanding of Divine Love can prove a solution to the crisis of the modern men who materially are ascendant but spiritually stagnate. With the cognizance of this sublime truth that one who loves all being without distinction indeed worship best his God, will put to an end hostility of men against another men. Jeff Levin writes importance of the divine love that could be a panacea for today’s disintegrating scenario:

Divine love is critically important for humankind. If we are to survive as a species, perhaps even as a living planet, then an ethic of mutual respect and love must guide our actions and those of our leaders and institutions. This respect and love must extend to all humans—to all sentient beings, some would say—and must replace the predominant ethic that defines social relations, local and global, in terms of concepts such as power, control, competition, possession, and

dominance. Souls infused with divine love see life as a journey into greater service, not as a game in which some of us must win and others must lose. (*Divine Love*, 15)

Tagore's devotional mysticism emphasises the benevolent Almighty's grace and compassion. His heart is suffused with gratitude. He sings in praise of God for the bounteous gifts that Lord bestowed on him: "Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. / Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill." (10) In the song No.14, appreciating God's generosity, he says: "Day by day thou art making me worthy of the simple, great / gifts that thou gavest to me unasked—this sky and the light, / this body and the life and the mind—saving me from perils of / overmuch desire." (14) In his longing to have communion with his His Master, the poet wants to listen to his music that reverberates through every phenomenon of the world. He is enthralled and captivated "in the endless meshes," (10) of God's music: "The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of / thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy / music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on." (10)

Purity of thought, action and feelings is an integral component in the life of a devotee. Purity prepares the soul for love, and love confirms the soul in purity. The communion for which the mystic's soul craves can be attained when he keeps himself free from all kinds of egoism, mutual dislike, jealousy, rivalry, suspicion, fault-finding and all sorts of uncleanness. Praying to God addressing Him as the "Life of my life" Tagore promises to keep himself away from all impurities. He knows that purification is an essential means toward self-perfection:

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts,  
knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of  
reason in my mind.  
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. (11)

Tagore opines that there is an eternal love and adoration in a uniting nearness with Supreme - *aksharam brahma paramam* (SrimadBhagavadgita 8.3). The longing to have communion and oneness with a Supreme Immutable when remains dissatisfied his heart suffers from the pangs of separation. The restlessness caused due to the stings of separation snatches the serenity and peace of mind: "Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite." (11) Every phenomenon of this world is created by God. Earth, Sky and other creation of God suffer from the pangs of separation and cries for unification:

It is the pang of separation that spreads throughout the world  
and gives birth to shapes innumerable in the infinite sky.  
It is this sorrow of separation that gazes in silence all nights  
from star to star and becomes lyric among rustling leaves in  
rainy darkness of July. (41)

The essential element in his mysticism is personal enthusiasm. His humble devotional contemplation seeks the company of god: "Oh my only friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream." (17) The craving for intimate, emotive and intense union with Supreme Being is expressed at many places. In song 38, desperately the soul of the devotee poet longs for union: "That I want thee, only thee—let my heart repeat without / end. All desires that distract me, day and

night, are false and empty to the core.” (21) The same feeling of love and devotion reverberates in *Soorsagar* when the poet Surdas says:

Where else might my heart find joy?  
A bird that lives on a ship might fly off but land back on that very ship.  
Leaving the Glory of the Lotus-eyed ShriKrishn why run after any other God?  
Why, if you are thirsty, would you foolishly leave the purest Ganga and resort to a well.  
When a bee has sucked the sweet nectar from a Lotus flower why would it eat of the bitter guard?  
Surdas now sings ‘O, my Lord! Why reject the Wish-giving Cow of Plenty and then milk a goat?

Mystical self-understanding leads to inner awakening and transformation of illusion into illumination: “...all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and / all my desires ripen into fruits of love.” (38) The realization of Immanent God—mayatatamidamsarvamjagadavyakta-murtina (SrimadBhagavadgita 9.4), sarvāñibhūtāni mat-sthānītyupadhāraya (SrimadBhagavadgita 9.6), Tagore says removes ignorance and doubts: “When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, / grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the / one in the play of many.” (34) This sublime understanding helps to accept all vagaries and contradictory dualities with welcoming understanding. Due to love for the Divine, all pain and suffering as well as their opposites, joy and happiness and ecstasy become acceptable phenomena. As writes, William Blake in his “Auguries of Innocence”:

Joy and woe are woven fine,  
A clothing for the soul divine.  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.

Gitanjali is a form of prayerful mysticism consisting of humble devotional contemplation. This meditation leads to this realization that all-pervading and omnipresent God is behind every happening: “Days come and ages pass, and it is ever he who moves my heart in many a name, in many a guise, in many a rapture of joy and of sorrow.” (37)

To surrender to the Will of the Almighty is the greatest form of worship. A believer completely gives up his own will and subjects his thoughts, ideas, and deeds to the will and teachings of a higher power: “Leave all thy burdens on his hands who can bear all, and never look behind in regret. (12) Lord Krishna says to Arjuna that true devotion and surrender will absolve him from all sins, and liberate him from material existence: “sarva-dharmānparityajyamāmekamśharaṇamvraja / ahamtvāmsarva-pāpebhyomokṣhayiṣhyāmimāśhuchah. (SrimadBhagavadgita 18.66)

The 103 songs of Gitanjaliresonatewith the eternal, ancient, divine andmystic truths of the Spirit that neither age can wither nor custom decay. The devotional mysticism and spiritual illumination that pulsates in every song of Gitanjali leads the man from rapture to rapture, frees him from all worries and replaces scepticism, vanity, and mental commotion with humility, tranquillity, solidarity and equanimity. To conclude the paper I will quote the sublime lines from Gitanjali:

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy  
and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

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