

Quest for Spirituality in *Gitanjali* and *Psalms* A Comparative Study

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Tagore's *Gitanjali* is one of the masterpieces of Indian English poetry and it is a song-offering to the Deity. David's Psalm is one of the important books in the Bible and most of the psalms are song-offerings to God. This paper aims to analyze the quest for spirituality in *Gitanjali* and *Psalms*. The first part comparatively focuses upon the organization of *Gitanjali* and *Psalms*. The second part analyzes some of the songs chosen from both the collections. The third part gathers the findings and makes necessary generalization.

PART I

Structure of *Gitanjali*

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 and the second one is the realization of God. These two parts are further arranged logically. Each succeeding poem throws light on the previous one. The first seven poems sing the immensity of God. They deal with the infinite, mystic relationship of man and God and express the feeling of gratitude for the Supreme God for his immortal gifts to mortals.

The next set sings of the presence of the Almighty among the low and the humble. Poem number 14 starts singing the pangs of separation from the Great Father. The feeling of joy takes its place from poem number 37. The joy of union is boundless. Then comes the phenomenon of Maya which is seen till poem number 17.

The later part deals with the truth of Immanent Will, the realization of the Almighty. The ultimate truth of death then dominates the final part of *Gitanjali*. The poet welcomes death in

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poem number 89 and sings of its might till poem number 100. The last three poems are the offering of his own self at the feet of the all-caring, affectionate inscrutable spirit.

Structure of the *Book of Psalms*

The Book of Psalms is a collection, or rather a series of collections of the sacred poetry, designed for private devotion and for the public worship at the sanctuary. The whole collection is divided into five books to correspond to the Pentateuch of Moses. **Book I** includes Psalms 1-41, attributed to David. **Book II** comprises Psalms 42-72, authored by the Sons of Korah, Asaph, David, and Solomon. **Book III** has Psalms 73-89, composed primarily by Asaph and the Sons of Korah, with Psalm 86 by David and Psalm 89 by Ethan. **Book IV** contains Psalms 90-106 without named authors except for Psalm 90 (Moses) and Psalms 101 and 103 (David). **Book V** covers Psalms 107-150, which include Psalms 110 by David; Psalms 113-118, the Hallel sung during Passover; Psalms 120-124, the Songs of Ascents; and 138-145 composed by David.

All these collections of poems tell us how the religious poets of Israel, whom we call Psalmists, faced sorrow or joy, fear or trust, dark sinning or righteous living. Every experience that people have faced is reflected in their shining words. And furthermore, since they were Jews, they told also what they felt about Jewish life and experience. In all that happened to them, the psalmists had one great help - their wonderful and unwavering faith in a loving God who never failed them. Thus, through a thousand years, in every circumstance of life, they felt that God was with them to strengthen and fortify them, and in all the poems they wrote, they sang the praise of God.

PART II

Tagore's View of God and Spirituality

“Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.” (Tagore 2003: Poem No.:1:21)

The very opening line of *Gitanjali* reflects the inner harmony that the poet has experienced. We see the poet here starting at the peak of inspiration. In the life of every genuine

poet such a moment does occur when he experiences the endless. Tagore begins his “Song offering” with a beautiful conceit of human life. The human soul is eternal whereas his body is perishable and mortal, but God wills it so that man in reality becomes immortal. His immortality may be an illusion. The reality is that God blows his spirit into him and thus lives on ever after, though the body may die again and again. The limited bound human heart expands into limitless joy and thus poetry is created out of divine inspiration.

Man is a frail vessel, a breakable being, and he is a little being, but he is endowed with endless, everlasting life as God continues to pour His blessing on man and God’s gifts are in such bounty that it is never exhausted.

Tagore here conveys the theory of renewal of life; human life may end in emptiness, but if it is god’s pleasure, then god will impart life again into person’s life, and renew it. .

“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.” (Tagore 2003: Poem No.:7:27)

The poet here confesses his own vanity or pride and it vanishes in shame when he realizes that there is a poet more powerful than himself now before his sight. There is no way in which he can surpass the ‘master’ poet and it is only within his capacity to surrender at his feet and endeavour to become His disciple. The Supreme Being who bestows poetic inspiration upon man is a poet himself, His creation being the Universe. Here we get the idea of eternity and oneness of experience. The master poet, who is the creator of the universe, is one single entity. The music that emerges from the master poet is responsible for the creation of this Universe. “Tagore’s style was earlier ornate but it has become simple and more austere as a woman who sheds her ornaments and decorations leaving aside all her pride and vanity in her decorations, because she knows that her elaborate dresses and ornaments would spoil her union with her lover. Such is Tagore’s imagery”. (2003:148). The poet is only an instrument, like a flexible flute made of the supple reed, and it is the divine giver of inspiration who fills it with music.

Tagore's reference to the master poet's music and his own music also relates to 'musica munadana', the harmony of the elements of the spheres and of the seasons, and musica humana', the harmony between body and soul in singing respectively.

“The night is nearly spent waiting for him in vain. I fear forbid him not”. (Tagore 2003: Poem No.: XLVII:68).

The poet has spent the night waiting for God to come but He hasn't come. He fears lest God come in the morning when he had fallen asleep due to his exhaustion. The poet has used the imagery of his beloved waiting for the lover through night and the beloved's longing for her lover symbolizes the poet's intense longing for his God. The extreme anxiety and weariness she experiences and her feeling that her lover may come after she has fallen asleep and thus may not heed, aptly indicates the degree of anxiety in the poet's heart that he may miss meeting God. Here we see a close resemblance to the verses in the Bible book called Song of Solomon where the lover speaks of her lover (God). Here we see the deep influence the Bible had upon Tagore.

The idea of union, the longing for salvation is conveyed in terms of the beloved waiting for the lover to come and awaken her in the darkness of midnight.

A poet can never completely transfer his experiences into words and the relationships that he shares with the divine forces remain a mystery forever:

“I put my tales of you into lasting songs. The secret gushes out of my heart they come ask me, ‘Tell me their meanings’. I know not how to answer them. I say, ‘Ah who knows what they mean!’ They smile and go away in utter scorn there smiling and you sit there smiling.” (Tagore 2003: Poem No.:127)

The lines here depict another truth about God. We can't define Him and His love in words. We need a pure, devoted heart to understand Him. The heart of the human being can only grasp the reality behind Him. He doesn't exist in words but the poet feels Him in the core of his heart or soul.

The dominating spirit of the poem is beyond understanding and the poet himself feels irritated and shameful when he is unable to answer them. His songs sing the glory of God's abode, mystery of His ways, eternity of the path and ecstasy of the mystic union, but when people come and ask all about their meaning, he is wordless. Here the poet who has depicted the truth of mysticism beautifully.

The Psalmists and God

When the Psalms are read, we are often shocked by how very personal some of these psalms are. Most are not framed as rational prayers, but as personal pleas, the song of a heart hungry and thirsty to know God better. As we examine this theme, let's consider Psalm: 98.

Psalm 98 is devoted to complete and absolute rejoicing. The theme of rejoicing is established from the Psalm's opening words; **“Sing unto the Lord a new song for He hath done marvelous things” (Psalm 98:1)**. Here David sings with joy by counting all the mercies that God has given to him. The psalmist has specific reasons for exalting God so enthusiastically:

**³ He hath remembered His mercy
And His faithfulness towards the house of Israel;
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.**

**⁴ Shout unto the Lord, all the earth;
Break forth and sing for joy, yea, sing praises.....**

**⁷ Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof;
The world, and they that dwell therein;**

**⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
Let the mountains sing for joy together. (Psalm 98:3-4, 7-8)**

Psalm 98 is part of a series of Psalms – 93 and 95 – 100 – that extol God in terms of being a ruler. Many modern Biblical scholars characterize Psalms 47, 93, and 96 -99 as “royal enthronement Psalms,” which take the human phenomenon of the coronation of a king and project it onto God. Thus, this group of Psalms is sung when we, as it were, enthrone God as our sovereign. What is striking about Psalm 98 is how it chooses to talk about God in the context of nature. All the ends of the earth have seen the work of God. The physical world bears witness

of God. And it is the earth itself that praises God. In verse 4 the praises are offered by the totality of the earth. In verses 7 and 8, individual elements of the natural world are depicted as singing God's praises. Some of the ways these elements of the natural world are presented are familiar to us. Some of the ways they praise God differ very much from what we experience. We are certainly accustomed to referring to the sea as "roaring". That is often how the ocean sounds to us. But we probably do not experience rivers as clapping their hands or mountains as singing. Perhaps the author of Psalm 98 is taking some poetic license, expanding upon the sounds we do hear in the world of nature, including rivers as they rush along their courses and mountains when the wind blows through them. In Psalm 98 it is clear that one significant place we can begin to meet God is in the realm of creation – the realm which is, in many senses of the phrase, our natural environment.

Psalms 27: verses 13 and 14 describe the psalmist's attitude in the midst of his trial and struggle. This has been a lament, but like many laments, it ends on the upswing, a word of hope and confidence:

"¹³I am still confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the LORD

in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD;

be strong and take heart

and wait for the LORD." (Psalm: 27:13-14)

"The land of the living" means this life, rather than in the afterlife. I will see the Lord provide deliverance in my lifetime! In verse 14 he counsels both himself and others to develop both strength and perseverance. Look at the interesting kind of parallelism:

- Wait for/expect the Lord
- Be strong
- Take heart
- Wait for/expect the Lord

"Wait for the LORD" (NIV, NRSV), "wait on the LORD" (KJV) is well translated by the NJB as, "Put your hope in God." The verb 'expect' means "to wait or look for with eager expectation."

This command to "wait for the LORD" both precedes and follows the commands to be strong. It wraps them with a commitment to wait expectantly until God comes through with the answer, the help needed. It doesn't give up.

Psalm 27 doesn't seem to be forged in the heart of a crisis. Rather it looks back reflectively upon the strength of God David has experienced in the past. It is certainly a Psalm that celebrates the faith in the Lord in times of trouble.

**¹"The LORD is my light and my salvation --
whom shall I fear?**

**The LORD is the stronghold of my life --
of whom shall I be afraid?**

**²When evil men advance against me
to devour my flesh,
when my enemies and my foes attack me,
they will stumble and fall.**

**³Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then will I be confident." (Psalm: 27:1-3)**

These first few verses celebrate the utter lack of fear with which David's faith in God strengthens his heart. We can notice the imagery of God that David begins with in verse 1:

My light, My salvation, My stronghold

Since God is his light, salvation, and fortress, he walks with a certain confidence, even in trouble. He calls on God to instruct him, to lead him, since his way in life is perilous, surrounded by enemies all around.

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PART III

Emphasis on Soul

In *Gitanjali*, the poet who experiences true inspiration is an enlightened soul. He doesn't shut his doors to the outside world but refines the world through his imaginative capacity and offers the world an antidote for its maladies through his works. For both the spiritualist and the poet, deliverance lies not in renunciation of the world but in delightful (connections) bonds: **“I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight”**. (Ibid 4) This line of Tagore directly appeals to his master and conveys what a struggle it is for a poet to be able to express satisfactorily in language what he has experienced at the spiritual level.

Through Tagore's *Gitanjali* we get a glimpse of the poet's true nature and his spiritual feelings. Embodied in this work is his very soul; it will continue to give out sparks of truth to the world. This pious poet's prayer will continue, kindle in generations of poets the desire to lead a life of humility and self oblivion. The atmosphere of *Gitanjali* is characterized by the very first verse of the first poem, in which Tagore says that he worships his creator in the dust of the earth. Humility, devotion and love are the key which determines the tone of his work.

Personal Spiritual Experience – To Draw Near to God

The Book of Psalms is related to the personal experiences of our lives and the emotions with which we react to them. Psalms offer us important resources from which we can draw perspectives and insights to help us refine our understanding. It also helps us to shape our mind to walk closer with God. **Psalms 42:1-2** beautifully depicts the yearning for God **“as a deer thirsts for springs of water”**, describing the thirst for God, like Tagore in *Gitanjali* who has a thirst for God. In **Psalms 98:4** David praises God in all circumstances and sings songs out of joy **“Sing for joy, yea, sing praises.....”** Finally it expresses the longing of the psalmist to draw near to God. It is also the psalmist's place of safety and rejoicing, as the poet in *Gitanjali* longs to be and offers his own self at the feet of the all-caring, affectionate inscrutable spirit. Therefore, we can see the quest for spirituality in the *Gitanjali* and in the *Psalms*, as both poets long to offer themselves to God.

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