

Stylistic Analysis of Tagore's Song Offerings in *Gitanjali*

Sukanya Saha

Asst. Professor, Dept. of EFL, SRM University, Kattankulathur Campus, Tamilnadu, India.

Email: sukanya182002@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Gitanjali is a collection of 103 English poems by Rabindranath Tagore. Originally written in Bengali, *Gitanjali* means "prayer offering of song". *Gitanjali* is a very inviting and engaging text in many ways. It is Tagore's ponderings over the relationship between humans and the Divine. The core of these songs is the divinity-devotee relationship and each poem in a unique way communicates how God is the center of the poet's inspiration. The poet's goal is to unite with the Lord, for the Lord has given him the gift of life and all that he has. He would sing in his glory and keep himself pure for the Lord. The present paper analyses certain prominent linguistic features in these songs and explains their significance. The author uses the tools of stylistic analysis to interpret and understand the specific linguistic choices Tagore made to narrate the conversation between the lord and the devotee and express his unfathomable devotion to God.

Keywords: Tagore, *Gitanjali*, song offerings, stylistic analysis, sentence structure

Introduction

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' (as Tagore called them) is a collection of 103 English poems. Tagore himself translated them into English and they were first published in 1912.

The universal appeal of Tagore's "song offerings" in *Gitanjali* lies in the ease and simplicity with which he has captured his emotions of pain after personal loss, and his profound devotion to God. What moves the reader most, is the style and diction of these prose lyrics. What makes these poems most appealing is their profoundness which is expressed with simplicity and optimism. These verses seep through reader's consciousness and leave an indelible imprint. Francis Xavier Clooney, in his essay entitled, *In 'Gitanjali,' I found wisdom, lost it, and found it again*, writes, "...Yet it was in reading *Gitanjali*, beginning that night in September 1973, that the possibilities of a Catholic realization of Hindu wisdom moved from possibility to actuality"¹. W.B. Yeats wrote, "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the tops of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me."²

Tagore visualizes God as a father or lover. This humanization of the divine becomes the focal point of his songs. In these songs, God exists amongst the simple, poor, and humble. The core of *Gitanjali* is depiction of the spiritual voyage of the poet towards God.

Discussion

The stylistic analysis of literature justifies and explains the author's choice of specific words and structures to express certain emotion(s). Stylistic analysis is done for exploring plausible meanings in the text. The patterns and structures are identified, and analyzed to appreciate the author's purpose behind using them. It helps in understanding and interpreting the text through text's language, rather than relying on extraneous details. Stylistic analysis often brings out new interpretations, challenging the existing ones for the same text. Tagore's songs are full of parallel and archaic structures, active sentences, dependent clauses, free verse etc. Each has a specific meaning and purpose. A careful probe into them unravels Tagore's mastery over the skill of conveying something profound in an unpretentious manner. Following is an analytical description of certain prominent linguistics features in these songs.

1. Personal Pronouns

Tagore's prose poems are in form of his tête-à-têtes to God. The most frequently used pronouns in these songs are 'thou', 'thy', 'I', 'me' and 'my', indicating that he has a lot to convey and he does not want any intervention of or from an outsider. The proximity of 'you' and 'I' in these structures emphatically supports the argument. There is an ardent wish to stay closer to his master, to experience the ecstatic pleasures which the divine presence emanates. (bolds mine).

THOU hast made me endless, such is **thy** pleasure. (1)

... I look to thy face, and tears come to **my** eyes. (2)

I **ASK** for a moment's indulgence to sit by **thy** side. (5)

HE came and sat by my side but I woke not. What a cursed sleep it was, O miserable **me!** (26)

These are essentially personal messages to God expressed candidly and reflect one's own wish to attain that bliss of divine company being oblivious of anything else. The personal pronouns aim at establishing a kind of individual association to the divine being. The impact of this emotion is such that it gets increasingly difficult to dissociate one's own thought process from that of Tagore. The reader's consciousness unites with that of Tagore's and one cannot put down these songs once picked. Probably, this was the reason which made Yeats write:

...as the generations pass, travelers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth.³

Another interpretation for these abundant personal pronouns could be that the poet's persona has emerged as the mouthpiece of all mortals whom God blesses with its life-giving energy. Thus, 'I' is all beings whom not only 'He' creates but also nurtures:

Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all forever

2. Active Voice

Tagore mainly uses active sentences (S+V+O) in these songs. In accordance with the previous argument, the personal pronouns, 'thou', or 'He' are the subjects of these active structures having

strong verbs, made, command etc. The interpretation of these structures could be that he establishes the supremacy of God through these structures. The poet enforces his belief that God is the creator, the main actor in this universe and God's power moves all beings and elements here, instills energy into everything and enlivens the mortal existences. Tagore attributes God's sovereignty with immensity and exhorts mortals to entrust their own beings to his command:

It is thou who drawest the veil of night upon the tired eyes of the day to
renew its sight... (25)

He makes the dust rise from the earth with his swagger; he adds his
loud voice to every word that I utter. (30)

The finite verbs have direct object 'me', which is the expression of poet's overwhelming gratitude for God who blessed his songs with eternal powers. It indicates that the poet as an ardent devotee who receives and bears all that God has entrusted upon him. The poet rejoices himself being at the receiving end, surrendering to His prowess. He is an empty vessel which can generate nothing on its own and looks up to almighty for his sustenance. He is a passivity which God engulfs completely:

THOU hast made me endless... (1)

WHEN thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would
break with pride... (2)

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with
fresh life... (2)

The poet, at the same time aspires to retain a tiny bit of his being to sing the glory of his master. In song 34 of *Gitanjali* he reiterates his plea to God for retaining a little of his being before surrendering everything. Repetitions of these passive structures (bolds mine) are very emphatic in expressing the poet's urges. It is noticeable that these sentences beginning with the causative verb 'let', are in form of plea to the almighty and Tagore ensures that through using capital letters. Every outburst of emotion acquires a very natural shape without any attempt at deliberate adulation in these songs.

LET only that little be left of me whereby I may name thee my all.

Let only that little be left of my will whereby I may feel thee on every side, and come to thee in everything, and offer to thee my love every moment.

Let only that little be left of me whereby I may never hide thee.

Let only that little of my fetters be left whereby I am bound with thy will, and thy purpose is carried out in my life – and that is the fetter of thy love. (34)

3. Parallel Structures

Parallelism is also referred as parallel structure or parallel construction. It is a composite of one or more sentences of similar phrases or clauses that have the same grammatical structure. Quirk and Greenbaum write, "If two or more sentences have identical or very similar structure, this parallelism connects the sentences, the connection being further reinforced by lexical

equivalences and implications of semantic relationship”⁴. Parallelism in sentences aids the poet in expressing perpetual emotions:

...**I shall ever try to keep** my body pure...

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts...

I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart ... (4)

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. **I know** that only as a singer I come before thy presence. (2)

...**saving me from perils of** overmuch desire. /... **saving me from perils of** weak, uncertain desire. (14)

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. (36)

I THOUGHT **that** my voyage had come to its end at the last limit of my power, – **that** the path before me was closed, **that** provisions were exhausted and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity. (37)

The parallel structures in song 4 express the poet’s assurance to stay pious and devout. These also reflect the poet’s cry of repentance for which he seeks God’s forgiveness for sins he committed and promises for not repeating his mistakes again. It appears as if he has turned into a child who pleads to his mother for compassion. In song 2, he expresses his discerning of God’s commands for him. He promises to devote his life in singing which would please his master. In song 14 he wholeheartedly thanks God for safeguarding him from perils of uncontrollable worldly desires which lead to decadence of soul. The series of ‘that’ clauses in song 37 once again put forth the poet’s realization that his life is destined towards the ultimate, i.e. surrendering to the will of God. Each occurrence of parallel structures in these songs has a deeper connotation and wider implications. The meaning of these structures can be inferred from different angles and perspectives, but it all revolves round the central idea of the poet’s unfathomable reverence for that supreme power.

4. The Relative Clauses

Relative clauses start with the relative pronouns like who, that, which, whose, where, or when. Their function is to define or identify the noun that precedes them. The series of relative clauses in these songs verbalize poet’s thoughts as consecutive utterances. He does not start another sentence with a new structure and message. There is an obvious uniformity in thought which these clauses successfully project. Tagore introduces his sentences through relative pronouns like ‘where’ and ‘when’ making his ideas fluent and effortless. The sentences beginning with the pronoun, ‘where’ aid in visualizing an ideal world amidst the present chaos and sentences with initial ‘when’ raise hope of finding solace in despair.

WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high; /**Where** knowledge is free; /**Where** the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; /**Where** words come out from the depth of truth; /**Where** tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; /**Where** the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; /**Where** the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action... (35)

WHEN the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy. /**When** grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song. /**When** tumultuous work raises its din on all sides shutting me out from beyond, come to me, my lord of silence, with thy peace and rest. /**When** my beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door, my king, and come with the ceremony of a king. /**When** desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thy thunder. (39)

The purpose behind such structural arrangement could be to poetize the series of associative thoughts. There seems a deliberate attempt on poet's part to unite his thoughts with overt connections as he begins each sentence with the same relative clause. Despite the superficial appearance of free verse, these utterances retain the charm and simplicity of prose.

The persona of song 35 longs to be transported to an idealistic world where there are no worldly digressions of fear, confinement, captivity, ignorance, untruth, and the mind and soul is free to be led by divinity. In song 39, poet urges for God's advent or divine intervention whenever there is crisis in the form of hopelessness, dearth of peace and rest, and delusion or dust of desires. Both the relative pronouns, 'when' and 'where' strike like hammer strokes in consciousness as the emphatic message succeeds. As prayers and pleadings have repetitive tone, so have these sentences. Such repetitive structures resonate the message contained in them. The recitation of these lines becomes immensely impactful due to emphatic introductory relative pronouns.

5. Archaic syntax

Tagore opts for archaism in the syntax and lexis of his songs. This accounts for their melodious tenor and singsong way of articulation. The poet finds his connection to God to be more intense when he sings God's glory in most natural and primitive manner. Following points and examples in these section explain the kinds of structure Tagore adopts for expressing the voice of his mind and soul.

- i. 'Thou' is the subjective/nominative, 'thee' is the objective, and 'thy' is the possessive/genitive as replacements of I/me/my (bolds mine).

THOU hast made me endless, such is **thy** pleasure. (1)

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call **thee** friend who art my lord. (2)

- ii. Verbs ending in "t", "-est" are second person singular and are addressed mainly to God in these songs. In a very few instances they refer to fellow human beings.

This little flute of a reed thou **hast** carried over hills and dales... (1)

WHEN thou **commandest** me to sing... (2)

I know thou **takest** pleasure in my singing. (2)

I KNOW not how thou **singest**, my master! (3)

Pride can never approach to where thou **walkest** ...

My heart can never find its way to where thou **keepest** ... (10)

...even as thou **hast wrapt** the earth with the coverlet of sleep... (24)

It is noticeable that Tagore uses verbs with such archaic endings only for God which can be taken as his way of paying respect to his master. There is an interesting association with his mother tongue Bengali here. Verbs with inflection, 'ben' are used to pay respect to elders in Bengali. Tagore coins his own inflection, 'est' to talk to his master. For himself as devotee, he uses regular verbs and personal pronouns without any trace of archaism in structure. He dexterously distinguishes his own stature with that of his master and maintains this throughout, giving a very strong message about the distinction between the worldly and the level divine.

- iii. Archaic word order in sentences is noticeable as Tagore places negative marker after the verb. The negative marker, 'not' cannot be placed anywhere in a sentence, though it is the most common negative marker. 'Not' cannot be used before or after a finite verb. The auxiliary verb 'do' in the correct tense should be used in front of 'not', followed by the main verb. Tagore eliminates the auxiliary verb 'do', perhaps to lower the harshness of negative tone. The proper grammatical structure, 'Subject +Do+ Not + Main Verb' would have conveyed arrogance and allegations on the poet's part. For example, compare the following sentences with the modified grammatical sentences given in italics:

I doubt not they are right in their blame. (17)

v/s

I do not doubt they are right in their blame.

...my mind was straying, and **I knew it not**. (20)

v/s

... my mind was straying and I did not know it.

I knew not then that it was so near... (20)

v/s

I did not know then that it was so near.

HE came and sat by my side but **I woke not**. (26)

v/s

HE came and sat by my side but I did not wake.

It is clearly noticeable that grammatically correct structures appear curt and lacking in mellifluousness which is expected in a prayer. It is indeed an art through which a master craftsman like Tagore conveys even the harshest of feelings with ease and melody.

6. Fore grounding of clausal elements

This is the most commonly used linguistic feature in these songs. Tagore often begins his sentences with adverb phrase to highlight an idea.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself... (2)

Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite...(5)

Day by day thou art making me worthy of the simple, great gifts that thou gavest to me Unasked... (14)

EARLY in the day it was whispered that we should sail in a boat... **In that shoreless ocean**, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies... (42)

WHEN it was day they came into my house and said, ... (33)

Adverb phrase in clauses answer 'when', 'how' and 'when'. Tagore foregrounds this piece of information in the sentence and makes it prominent with a clear purpose. For example, in the lines cited above, he highlights how he enjoys singing in praise of God, when his soul grows restless or when and where he hears his master's voice asking him to follow. Tagore often begins his sentences with prepositional phrases with the same purpose (bolds mine):

ON the day when the lotus bloomed, alas, my mind was straying, and I knew it not. (20)

By what dim shore of the ink-black river, **by what far edge** of the frowning forest, **through what mazy depth** of gloom art thou threading thy course to come to me, my friend? (23)

From the traveller, whose sack of provisions is empty before the voyage is ended, ... (24)

IN the night of weariness let me give myself up to sleep without struggle... (25)

BY all means they try to hold me secure who love me in this world. (32)

From dawn till dusk I sit here before my door, and I know that of a sudden the happy moment will arrive when I shall see. (44)

AT this time of my parting, wish me good luck, my friends! (94)

Sometimes the languid tone of the poet becomes strikingly demanding:

ON the day when death will knock at thy door what wilt thou offer to him? (90)

The inherent nature lover in Tagore comes to fore when he fronts the nature's beauty in his structures or when he paints pictures with adjectives to qualify natural phenomena. He coins his own modifiers and they appear as essential characteristic of the modified. For example, his

adjectives for the haunting gloom of rainy nights, the fragrance filled atmosphere of bright April days, or a dried river which wears a desolate look, paint a colorful picture. (bolds and italics mine):

IN the *deep* shadows of the *rainy* July, with secret steps, thou walkest, ...
(22)

In the *fragrant* days of *sunny* April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes... **In the *rainy* gloom of *July* nights on the *thundering* chariot of clouds** he comes, comes, ever comes. (45)

ON the slope of the *desolate* river among *tall* grasses I asked her, "Maiden, where do you go shading your lamp with your mantle? (64)

7. Subordination and Coordination

Tagore often presents his thoughts in the form of series of dependent clauses which begin with 'that'. These piled up that-clauses convey immediacy of thoughts in poet's mind. Such sentences are products of a free flow of association, unmindful of a formal pattern. For example, the lines cited below can be rewritten after eliminating repeated 'that':

I knew not then that it was so near, that it was mine, and that this perfect sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart. (20)

I knew not then that it was so near, it was mine, and this perfect sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart.

It is evident here that the structurally modified line loses the beauty of natural thought. The prosaic manner of representation of emotion spoils its nascent charm. In another such line, Tagore begins his sentence with dependent 'that' clause bringing the most powerful emotion to the fore (bold mine):

THAT I want thee, only thee – let my heart repeat without end. (38)

The following lines are from the same song. While in the first stanza Tagore joins the sentence strings with the coordinating conjunction, 'and', in the second, he leaves out that too, and strings the independent clauses together with semicolons. Tagore did not want breaks in between his flow of thoughts, hence he kept joining his ideas without any full stops between the sentences:

THE morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs; **and** the flowers were all merry by the roadside; **and** the wealth of gold was scattered through the rift of the clouds... We sang no glad songs nor played; we went not to the village for barter; we spoke not a word nor smiled; we lingered not on the way... (48)

8. Adjectival Modifiers

As noted earlier, Tagore's modifiers have a unique quality of word painting. They are intrinsic part of the context of intense dedication and reverence. The modifier and the modified fit into the larger structure intrinsically and bring alive the emotions of their creator (bolds mine):

At the **immortal touch** of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy...
(2)

Thy **infinite gifts** come to me only on these very small hands of mine. (2)

I KNOW not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in **silent amazement**. (3)

...knowing that thy **living touch** is upon all my limbs (4)

...and to sing dedication of life in this **silent and overflowing leisure**. (5)

...if it keep one shut off from the **healthful dust** of the earth... (8)

The **livelong day** has passed in spreading his seat on the floor... (13)

...saving me from perils of **overmuch desire**. (14)

There is no new lexical coinage. These noun phrases acquire a new meaning as they voice the uncritical devotion of the poet. These collocations come from the heart of an ardent devotee and become increasingly telling in his song offerings as these express God's magical powers. The adjectives, immortal, infinite, amazement, living, overflowing, healthful, overmuch glorify that supreme power, the creator and protector of all. All these adjectives belong to one semantic domain. Hence, their occurrence in different songs of *Gitanjali* binds all the songs in a single string.

Another noteworthy feature in this context is use of superlative adjectives. Superlatives denote the topmost levels beyond the scope for any further comparison. Song 10 from the collection has the adjectives 'poorest', 'lowliest', and 'lost' being repeated four times (bold mine):

HERE is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the **poorest**, and **lowliest**, and **lost**. / When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the **poorest**, and **lowliest**, and **lost**. /Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the **poorest**, and **lowliest**, and **lost**. /My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless /among the **poorest**, the **lowliest**, and the **lost**.

These adjectives very effectively convey God's preferred abode. He likes to dwell not just amongst simply poor or lowly people, but amongst those who suffer the extremities in poverty and lowliness and are often lost and ignored in the mainstream of the society. Through superlatives Tagore puts across his message about God's preferred humblest companions.

9. Alliteration

Alliteration is the incidence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of closely occurring words. Tagore's song offerings are abundant with alliterative words. This contributes in making the song more poetic and adds rhythm to the song. Alliteration makes the songs easy to read and takes readers attention to a particular part of the text (underlining mine):

I ASK for a moment's indulgence to sit by thy side.

Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respice... (5)

I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust. (6)

... loses all pleasure in his play ... (8)

There are times when I languidly linger... (14)

I may go in and see thy face and offer thee my silent salutation? (16)

...I started up from my dream and felt a sweet trace of a strange fragrance in the south wind. (20)

The spring has done its flowering and taken leave. And now with the burden of faded futile flowers I wait and linger.

...upon the bank in the shady lane the yellow leaves flutter and fall. (21)

HAVE you not heard his silent, steps? (45)

It is noticeable that Tagore shows propensity for softer sounds like /s/, /f/ and /l/ compared to cacophonous /d/, /g/, /k/, /t/ etc.

10. Repetition

Song 45 of the collection needs special mention for its unique pattern of repetitions (bolds mine):

...He **comes, comes, ever comes.**

Every moment and **every** age, **every** day and **every** night he **comes, comes, ever comes.**

Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed, "He **comes, comes, ever comes.**"

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he **comes, comes, ever comes.**

In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he **comes, comes, ever comes...**

The beauty of these lines lie in the simplicity of expression. Through repetitions Tagore enhances the song's sonorous quality as he reiterates about God's advent at all points of time irrespective of the season, day, or night.

11. Personification

Personification is an artistic depiction of an abstract quality or idea as a person. In the following lines, Tagore alienates his physical being from his song and conveys that he offers his song to the master in its purest form not adorned by any worldly desires of the physical self.

MY song has put off her adornments. /She has no pride of dress and decoration. (7)

Conclusion

Stylistic Analysis, thus, generate several such interpretations of the lines from Tagore's song offerings. Tagore's writing style is simple and strikes a chord in reader's heart, rather than

attempting to awaken the logic and reasoning of mind. These songs are packed with a potential to engage one's mind forever, since the message contained in them works on different levels of consciousness. Written as prayers offered to God, they have compelling message for the humanity as well. God, for Tagore is his beloved and friend, and that is the most unique characteristics of his songs. His manner of singing God's praises, willingness to selfless surrender and exhortations to fellow human beings for shunning worldly desires, are themes of these songs. His language is neither complex, nor rife with allusions and marred with figurative or metaphorical use of words or expressions. The simplicity of old English and minimal linguistic variations contribute towards their wide readership. There are total 103 free verses of varying lengths. Each song has a different message to convey and adopts a different style of presentation but Tagore binds them all with one invisible thread, i.e. selfless devotion to divine power who creates and protects all beings.

Notes

1. Cloony, Francis Xavier. In '*Gitanjali*,' I found wisdom, lost it, and found it again Retrieved on April 19, 2017 from <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/gitanjali-i-found-wisdom-lost-it-and-found-it-again>
2. Gitanjali – Song Offerings Spiritual Poems of Rabindranath Tagore An e-book presentation by The Spiritual Bee (p.10)
3. Ibid, 11.
4. Quirk Randolph and Sidney Greenbaum. A University Grammar of English. New Delhi: Pearson Education Pvt. Ltd.,2003. 172

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