



# The Universe of Dreams: An Aesthetic Exploration of the Wholeness of *Gitanjali*

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**Abstract.** Rabindranath Tagore's glorification of God and his straightforward approach to life in *Gitanjali* reveal his holistic aesthetic thought. His aesthetics of wholeness is strongly colored by Eastern culture and the philosophical concept of life, and differs markedly from the Western pursuit of totality in the same period. However, the emphasis on wholeness in literature and art at the aesthetic level in both East and West cannot escape from the universal problems of modern human society behind it.

**Keywords:** *Gitanjali* · Tagore · wholeness · holistic · aesthetic

## 1 Introduction

*Gitanjali* is a famous collection of poems by the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, and an important work that won him the Nobel Prize for Literature on behalf of the East. The poems have received great recognition in the Western discourse and have been a profound shock to the Western literary world, as well as a "literary miracle" in the world culture. Rabindranath Tagore's thoughts and perceptions about life and the world are revealed throughout the collection, revealing a high degree of idealization and harmonious wholeness. Unlike the totality sought by Western society in the 20th century to escape fragmentation and alienation, his non-systematic integrity is deeply rooted in the cultural context of the East and Tagore's philosophy of life. Although this integrated integrity shows an Eastern path to escape from the dilemma of rationality in the face of the modernity of the times, it also conceals a universal contradiction that is difficult to resolve with social reality.

## 2 Pan-God and Pan-Love

Mysticism is one of the major labels of *Gitanjali*, largely related to the religious overtones of the collection's divine themes and the spirituality of Eastern culture, in addition to the ambiguity of the objects of emotional expression and song and praise in the poems. Tagore said that he himself was not sure what kind of God in *Gitanjali* is. The divine theme of the poem is pantheistic, and the pantheistic theme is directly linked to the

human and natural aspects of the poem, which together form a vast and indescribable whole within the poem. The objects celebrated in *Gitanjali* are indescribable because the whole is indescribable, and pantheism and pan-love together form the basic structure and main content of the poet's aesthetics of wholeness at the level of his creative philosophy.

Tagore's pan-love around the pan-god in *Gitanjali* is an expression of homogeneity, a homogeneity that is reflected in the collection of poems mainly in the homogeneity of the inner roots of the same category between human beings and the homogeneity of the small and the large in content between human beings and the god (pan-god). The homogeneity expressed by Tagore may perhaps be said to stem from his personal social class attributes, i.e., a humanism with class characteristics. But in terms of the emphasis on spirituality and divinity in the themes of the poem, the homogeneity in *Gitanjali* represents an idealized transcendence: beyond the intervals and differences of human hearts and beyond the limitations of human beings on both spiritual and material levels.

In the context of classical Chinese aesthetics, this transcendence can be described as "the unity of the object and the self" rather than "the forgetfulness of the object and the self". In the transcendence between human beings, the distinction between "you" and "I" is penetrated, and "I" becomes a new expression and image of "you". The expression and image come from the re-recognition of the same essence, so that "I" and "me" have a relative dynamic distinction and an absolute eternal identity. To achieve transcendence between man and God is, on the one hand, to find the unity of natural attributes between man and things, thus realizing man's return to the totality of nature, and on the other hand, to recognize and dialogue between man and God in both spiritual and real dimensions, thus realizing the soul's harmonious coexistence outside the self.

The reason why the transcendence of man and God can be expressed in the classical Chinese aesthetics of "the object and the self" lies in the portrayal of God in Tagore's poetry. The poems refer to God in a variety of ways, including "you," "king of kings," "friend," "master," [1] and so on. Such expressions reveal the character of a personal God; but Tagore's closeness to natural objects is not a naturalistic portrayal, but a perception and tracing of divine signs, as he writes in his poem: "Every moment, every age, every day and every night, he is always coming, coming, coming, and coming." Any natural object in the poem has the shadow of divinity, and any event in time has the breath of divinity. The God in the theme of *Gitanjali* is more like the object of pan-natural theism, where God can be seen in nature, but is outside of natural matter under the character of a personal God, with its own diverse forms. God is not a "thing", but at some moments is only seen as a "thing". The "thing" and the "I" are inherently "one" and are therefore sufficient to achieve "unity". The "same" is the confirmation of homogeneity, and "unity" is the result of homogeneity, i.e., the unity of the whole.

Pan-God and Pan-Love make the wholeness of *Gitanjali* organic, and the transcendence in the poem is transformed through this complete universe-the imaginary universe-into the aesthetic feeling that the recipient of the poem obtains in the ideal universe of Tagore's spirituality and divinity: the freedom to achieve transcendence in a new kind of connection.

### 3 The Universe as a Dream

In *The Poetics of Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard argues, “The dreamer is in a world, of which he cannot doubt. A cosmic image alone can endow him with the unity of the dream, the unity of the world” [2]. The dream that Bachelard speaks of is the unthinking intuitive imagination of an image, which runs counter to pragmatism. The Bachelard’s dream essentially points to a kind of purposeless freedom on the spiritual plane.

As far as the pantheon of God in *Gitanjali* is concerned, although Tagore’s totality is based on pantheism and pan-love, there is no clear object. Even in the case of the appearance of a personal God, each dialogue and each image of God is very different, and the numerous so-called ineffable “objects” ultimately lead to an objectification that is difficult to prove—that is, there is no concrete object. But “metaphor is not enough for the poet; he must have an image.” The poet needs indeterminate objects to appear constantly in his poetry in order to ensure the proper flow of lyricism. The master of the poem is not so much surrounded by objects as he is chasing them in their completeness. As the poem flows and encounters whatever God is encountered, heartfelt love and praise is expressed for that God; the master of the poem makes no choice.

What is encountered is what is sought, in terms of the content of the poem, presenting a freedom from reason and suggesting a certain calling; in terms of the poet’s creation, it is an intuitive grasp at the level of imagination; at the level of the recipient, it is the room for fantasy allowed to exist through the unstructured form of poetry. The three subjects of the poem: the master, the poet, and the recipient of the poem, are together in the same whole, i.e., a universe with a high degree of freedom yet a high degree of integrity. Among them, the master of the poem becomes an independent literary being in the text under the poet’s creation, with a holistic call to subjectivity for the poet and the recipient of the poem. In this call, the subject and the whole occupy the same position, without superiority or inferiority, and it achieves the perfection of the whole and also has a concern for the subject. The subject in Tagore’s writing does not have the sentiment of “sending mayflies to heaven and earth, a tiny drop in the ocean”, but often writes about small things to know the bigger one: “Let me make my life simple and upright, like a reed flute, filled with your music”, he Based on the small individual to expand intuitively, and then realize the harmony and purity of the subject and the whole in the whole universe.

According to Basra’s view on dreams in poetry, Tagore’s *Gitanjali* is the realization of “opening his heart to the world and the world to him”. From the point of view of the aesthetics of reception, this result also applies to the recipients of the poems. *Gitanjali*, as a literary work, allows the subject to feel, in different stages of literary activity, that “You have made me endless, and it is Your pleasure to do so. This fragile earthenware cup, which you empty again and again and keep filling with new life,” is a spiritual feeling and a hint of divinity that can only be obtained by entering the dream universe with natural rhythm, free from the bondage of reason and the mundane. In the universe delineated by Tagore’s intuition and subsequent imagination, what is most easily felt is a sense of fullness and happiness. The poet and the receiver together become dreamers of a given moment, and the dreamers attain cosmic health.

## 4 Similarity of Integrity

It is an indisputable fact of literary history that *Gitanjali*, rooted in the Eastern philosophy of life, brought light to the search for an ideal world at the beginning of the twentieth century. The holistic aesthetic idea of *Gitanjali* is constructive and dreamlike, as Tagore paints a spiritual world that gives happiness, different from the mundane, through his poetry. But the way this path pursues wholeness is different from the West, fundamentally because it is not a straightforward and confrontational approach to the real world. As only on a snowy night, living in a family home and gathered around a fireplace, one can feel a great satisfaction and happiness with fire and home that is rarely found [3, 4]. The intuition and imagination of the ideal world and the pursuit of spirituality at the spiritual level do not change the alienated social reality and the generally fragmented spiritual world. Tagore and his ideal world were lonely, and he was able to achieve an intimate communication between the dreamer and the external world. There was no distance between the perceived world and the dreamer.

In contrast, almost at the same time, Lukács also upholds the aesthetic notion of the pursuit of totality. The idea of totality in the early Lukács' aesthetic thought clearly expresses the helplessness of the irreconcilable contradiction between the mind and the external world, and to a certain extent represents the pessimistic tendency toward totality in the Western context. According to the early Lukács, totality cannot achieve a reversion in the modern social context without fundamental changes in social reality. The mind and the external world, though homogeneous, have never been able to achieve a unity and harmony similar to that of ancient Greek culture. Nowadays our mind and the external world have even gradually evolved into a dualistic and antagonistic structure. Unlike Tagore, the "educational novel" promoted by Lukács goes through a confrontational stage and finally confronts the reality of the fragmentation of the real world and the inability to harmonize inside and outside, and obtains a dialectical stability from it. It can be said that the Lukács' aesthetics of totality takes different path with Tagore's aesthetics of wholeness, but in different forms, they aspire to a same dream.

Looking at Tagore's holistic aesthetics from the perspective of Lukács' holistic aesthetics, one finds that the holistic aesthetics of *Gitanjali* is a kind of "hopeless hope". By the virtue of his ideal quest, he has created a fictional world that transcends limits and is above reality. This world of dreams is fictional, the structure is imaginary, and the content can be imagined but distant. It embodies Tagore's philosophical concept of life, but it also reveals a similar helplessness and harsh reality to that of Western culture. In both the East and the West, the ideal that people pursue as a whole can be traced back in history, but it is difficult to achieve a certain reversion in modern society.

This pursuit of "wholeness" emerges simultaneously in different social contexts in the East and the West, and stems from different realistic foundations. It can be said that the pursuit of wholeness by the Western thinkers represented by Lukács is actually rooted in the reverence for classical standards, as Lukács showed in his early treatises. In his view, the age of the novel was a search for the "stars" of the epic era. The novel, as a literary genre that is particularly influential in modern society, has become synonymous with modern society in Lukács's writings. This modern society automatically carries with it a kind of modernity that belongs to the bourgeois modernity, if we use Calinescu's typology of modernity. This modernity, which has been the focus of criticism in Western

modernist literature since the nineteenth century, entered Asian countries through the colonial activities of European countries in the twentieth century and gradually formed different variants in different regions. Although these variants of modernity differ from the bourgeois modernity in Europe, they also have basic similarities. Among them, the alienation of the individual, the anxiety of time, and the division of the whole are common to social thinking in both European and Asian regions.

However, this reality of social thought is the reason for Lukács to form his overarching aesthetic and the object of his criticism, but not the source of Tagore's creative ideas in *Gitanjali*. On the contrary, Tagore's creation is rooted in the practical suffering and transcendence of his own life experience, rather than in systematic observation and criticism of social reality and thought. Thus, the holistic aesthetics of *Gitanjali* is not intended to criticize anything, but to create a literary world and realize an aesthetic ideal. And Lukács' aesthetics of totality begins and ends with criticism. Perhaps it can be said that this is the writing orientation resulting from the two different identities of literary critic and literary creator, but the difference in the aesthetic ideological orientation between the two is undeniable.

At this point, if we look back at the surprise that Tagore's poetry brought to European literature, we may better understand the difference in aesthetic thought between Tagore and Lukács. The difference between the two aesthetic ideas and the two writing identities may also represent two forms of thinking, or what we often call "Western thinking" and "Eastern thinking". The correctness of this categorization is not in question, but the wording facilitates the narration of ideas from different regions. One of the problems of modernity is the excessive proliferation of reason, which leads to the abuse of reason in real and spiritual life, and ultimately to a painful and numbing modern social life. While Lukács' aesthetics of totality embodies the rational character of his Western modern thought in an analytical way, the aesthetics of totality in Tagore's poetry rejects any analysis and systematic description. There are two isolated directions of understanding Tagore's aesthetics of totality, one naturalistic and the other religious. If these two directions are combined, it may be possible to summarize more fully the core of Tagore's holistic aesthetics, which is characterized by pan-god and pan-love, that is, "God is in nature and man is one with nature. In Tagore's aesthetic thought, subjectivity exists only between man and God, and the relationship between man and God is pure, irrational and passionate, so the problem of subjectivity in modernity has been dissolved. Tagore's aesthetic thought is not anti-rational, but rather a path of passion and pure faith in an irrational posture. This path is also what makes Eastern aesthetics different from Western modern rationality.

But both Lukács' total aesthetics, which focuses on realism, and Tagore's total aesthetics, which is pantheistic, are active thoughts and reflections on the fate of humanity in the same historical period. Although the "starry sky" [5] of the age of perfect culture is far away, it is necessary and the destiny of literature in the age of poverty to chant as a poet to trace the traces of the distant gods [6]. *Gitanjali* should be regarded as a miracle in the history of literature, and a bright color in the pursuit of happiness in an age of poverty in the light of humanity itself.

## 5 Conclusions

Overall, with its holistic aesthetic thought, Gitanjali exhibits the eastern wisdom that is very different from western philosophy. At the same time, the Gitanjali's achievement in thought and in honor is another side of our quest for a perfect community. This community includes not only people and people, country and country, nation and nation, but it also pursues a closer connection between human heart and the external world. This utopian community will achieve a certain sublimity in the intimate connection between people and everything. It is perhaps the ultimate goal of Tagore's holistic aesthetics. Looking at the present, this aesthetic thought may seem to be incompatible with most social realities under the problem of modernity. But this incompatibility actually proves the unique and fundamental importance of Tagore's holistic aesthetics in today's world.

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