Mysticism in Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘The Gitanjali’

1. Mysticism means having a hidden or symbolic meaning, especially in religion, or inspiring a sense of mystery and awe. A mystic is a person who seeks to reach a communion with God through spiritual contemplation.

2. In ‘The Gitanjali’, Rabindranath Tagore visualizes God as one who descends to the level of his creation, and communicates with his devotees through various personae. The songs in Gitanjali bear out the influence of Bhakti poetry and Vaishanava poetry. The title ‘Gitanjali’ itself means a handful of offering of songs. These songs are used by the poet to express his communion with God through nine forms of devotions.

3. To express the Kirtana form of devotion the poet pleads with God to allow him to sing in his presence, because his music in any other place would be meaningless. “I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine I have a corner seat”. (No.15) “.... command me, my master to stand before thee to sing”.

4. In the Sravana form of devotion, God is the sky and the poet’s soul takes flight in it and reigns the stainless white radiance. He is the morning and the evening bearing wreaths of beauty and draughts of peace in golden pitchers. In Song 10 padaseva is offered. “When I try to bow to thee” my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest...”

5. In Song 65, the poet experiences the ecstasy of his closest intimacy with God: “Thou givest thyself to me in love and then fillest
thine own entire sweetness in me”. In Song 6 the poet’s surrender of self to God is through the image of a flower waiting to be plucked by God. “pluck this little flower and take it, delay not I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust”.

6. In the final act of devotion, the poet welcomes death to come and whisper to him, and he will leave like a willing bride to meet her Lord alone in the solitude of the night.” (Song 91) In sum, all the songs of ‘The Gitanjali’ are pervaded by the mystic devotion, yearning and love for God.

a. Critically evaluate the poetical elements in ‘The Gitanjali’

1. ‘The Gitanjali’ (English version) contains 103 songs of devotion, selected and translated from the Bengali version by Rabindranath Tagore himself. The title means ‘a handful offering of songs’ describing the poet’s relationship between God and man, through various personae assumed by the poet. Tagore was influenced by the philosophy of the Bhakti School of poetry and the forms of Vaishnava poetry. He symbolised for the rest of the world Indian thought at its greatest and best.

2. As a poet Rabindranath Tagore firmly believed that it was possible to reconcile the opposing claims of flesh and the spirit, the human and the divine. He wanted man to realize the beauty around him and to accept the mastery of the divine will in the lives of men. Above all, he wanted men to recognize the oneness of all men. All deeply felt and intense emotional feelings get expressed as poetry. ‘Gitanjali’ too is surfeit with poetical elements of love of God. It
expresses the entire range of love, from human love offered to God as total devotion, an ‘arpana’ to an unseen power.

3. Tagore uses personification to invest essentially abstract concepts with vividness God is variously described as a Friend (2,3) Master (4,5,8) Poet (65) King (49,50,51) Light (47,57) Playmate (43,97) Lover (41,42,52,53,59) and Bridegroom (53).

4. The poet himself adopts several personae to express his relationship with God. For example, Maiden (14,52,54) Devotee (76,77) Beggar (9,39,50) Musician (2,3,7,13,15,16) Traveller, Servant, Friend (2,17) Child (8,43) and beloved (41,42,47).

5. These personae are used by the poet to express the nine forms of devotion known in India, such as Sravana, kirtana, archana. The empathy of Tagore in expressing his emotional involvement with God imparts a universal appeal to his poetry in ‘The Gitanjali’. He dramatises the great love of God, who he believes, descends to the level of his creation and communicates with all through various forms of love and devotion.

6. Tagore also uses the metaphor of music and musician. As a musician, the poet is invited by God to perform at the festival of life organised by Him. Poetic devices such as simile, images, epithet, are used by the poet in ‘The Gitanjali’.

7. Often a series of images are used. For example, the evening is pictured as the world retiring for the night and God’s presence is
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seen in the image of a mother tucking in her children for the night
(24) The image of flashes of lightening serves to intensify the contrast of darkness of the night. (27) Similarly, Rain is made the symbol of the spiritual life of enlightenment, when the poet’s despair filled heart awaits the coming of the rain.

8. The morning with its golden sunshine is pictured in terms of melody and light. (48) The poet experiences the whole world filled with joy at the ecstasy of the experience in being one with God. (57) In the final song 103 the final experience of death is expressed by merging two similes into one. “Lime rain clouds of July, hung low with its burden of unshed showers, let my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee .... Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee ....”

9. Tagore also makes effective use of dramatic element in ‘The Gitanjali’. Songs 31, 33, 50, 51, 54, 62, 02 are good examples of dramatic effect. They are in the form of a colloquy between the poet and God. In No. 31 the paradoxical turn of events occurs where the person forging the chain finally finds himself in its grip. In Song 50 the poet is in the role of a beggar awaiting God’s chariot to ride by in the form of a king, who happens to be passing through the village. The beggar expects the king to give him alms unasked. But to his great surprise, “the King of all kings” asks him “What hast thou to give to me?” and holds out his right hand to receive it. The poet gives him the least little grain of corn, and at the end of the day, finds to his utter dismay that he has received back a single grain of
gold. Therefore, he bitterly weeps for not having given his all to God.

10. ‘The Gitanjali’ expresses the poet’s aspirations of mankind to communicate with God, and to reach God. “I came out alone on my way to my tryst. But who is this that follows me in the silent dark?” He is my own little self, my lord, he knows no shame, but I am ashamed to come to thy door in his company.” (Song 30) This illustrates the most effective use of imagery, dramatic element and personification, direct communication between the poet and God, used as poetic element by Tagore in ‘The Gitanjali’.