CHAPTER III

MYSTICISM IN TAGORE’S POETRY...BEFORE GITANJALI

I

Whatever may be the aim and approach, almost every evaluation of Tagore’s work has ultimately to consider the problems of continuity or discontinuity, consistency or inconsistency in his overall development as a mystic-poet. Some are of the opinion that between 1901 and 1912 there was a major shift in his centre of thought. But, this opinion tends to become immaterial if his work can be shown as a progressive and coherent development. I am suggesting that if one takes any Tagore one must take all, and that those who wish to ignore Tagore’s early works in favour of the later works are simply evading the real significance of Tagore’s oeuvre. The present thesis seeks to define and establish the general characteristics of continuity and coherence in Tagore’s development as a poet, especially in the light of his mystical position, which has always been emanating from his life and his writings.

The intimate parallelism between the poetry of Tagore and the teachings of the Upanishads is comprehensive. There is, one particular verse of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad repeated in the Isa Upanishad which penetrated the innermost layer of Tagore’s
mind and held it in firm grip throughout its literary development. The sloka in its translation runs thus:

"The face of truth is covered with a golden disc. Unveil it, O Pusan, so that I who love the truth may see it ... O Pusan, the sole seer, O controller, O Sun, offspring of Prajaapathi, spread forth your rays and gather up your radiant light that I may behold you of loveliest form. Whosoever is that person (yonder) that also am I ... May this life enter into the immortal breath; then may this body end in ashes. Intelligence remember, remember what has been done ..."¹

Radhakrishnan in the course of interpreting the verse says,

"When we break down the surface of appearances, reality is uncovered."²

and in the Introduction to The Principal Upanishads he says with obvious reference to the same sloka,

we must tear the cosmic veil and get behind the golden brightness which Savitri has diffused."³

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------


3. Ibid., p. 87.
in order to know the real nature of Brahman. Though Tagore has quoted this verse in a number of his Shantiniketan addresses and even incorporated it in some of his poems, it must be made clear that he was not expressing his deep insight but was only teaching what he had learnt through sheer personal experience, that this sensible material world is an obstruction in our union with God, the Infinite.

The Upanishadic vision of God is both cosmic and acosmic, immanent and transcendental. But there is an important sphere of difference between the referred trend and the vision of Tagore. The Upanishadic seers and most other mystics denigrate the individual, but for Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, the individual too has a permanent focus of value. Sri Ramakrishna Praramhamsa, for example, was fond of saying, "I want to eat sugar, not to become sugar." Tagore's humanism is based upon a deep devotion irrespective of caste or creed and covers every aspect of human life. The pre-Gitanjali period is primarily concerned with Indian life and philosophy, wherein Gods needs the devotee for His divine perfection as much as the devotee needs God for his human perfection.
The pre-Gitanjali period begins with Sandhya-sangit - Evening Songs and ends with Kheya - Crossing. The Awakening of the Waterfall is the most important poem of this period. Its importance lies in the fact that it marks the beginning of a change in the literary career of Rabindranath Tagore. Edward Thompson has rightly called it the "key poem" of Morning Songs. This poem was the product of some novel experience of the poet. It expresses a feeling of exuberance, as all of a sudden a veil was lifted and the poet felt a close kinship between his imprisoned mind and the world around him. This feeling or experience was similar in nature to the experience of many other mystics like Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramakrishna and Sant Kabir. Tagore himself attached much significance to this particular


experience. He writes,

"When I was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at the early dawn the sun sending out its ray from behind the trees. I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the common-place was removed from all things and all men and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind; and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man. The poem I wrote on the first day of my surprise was named 'The Awakening of the Waterfall' ... After four days the vision passed away, and the lid hung down upon my inner light. In the dark, the world once again put on its disguise of the obscurity of an ordinary fact."

Tagore now bade good-bye to the sad and dreamy world of self-obsession in which he had indulged so far in his Evening Songs, and welcomed the vast world outside with its apparent trivialities infused with a new significance and joy. The poem relates how the waterfall remained concealed in a dark icy cave and how it had no communion with the outside world. Then, all of a sudden the rays of the morning sun and the chirping of birds

---

penetrated into the dark cave and brought with them the message of the outside world. And with what result? The waterfall broke down all barriers of stones and ice and pushed out into the open, outside world. The underlying idea of this poem is that life is a dynamic force and so it cannot remain imprisoned in a dark cave of isolation. The stream of individual life in its onward march towards the sea of universal life must break down barriers after barriers of age-old customs and conventions that might stand like mountains blocking the path of progress. The poet would, likewise, go throughout the whole world, carrying with him the message of love and friendship and helping in the exchange of culture and civilization between one country and another. In the last stanza of the poem the poet says that his heart has awakened to hear the call of the mighty ocean, and henceforth he will set out on his mission of progressive realisation of unity with the world outside.

This newly awakened consciousness of reality becomes deeper in the next two books of verse—Pictures and Songs and Sharps and Flats. Just as The Awakening of the Waterfall is the key poem of Morning Songs, "Life" may be called the key-poem of Sharps and Flats.

Flats. The poem opens with the lines:

"I do not want to die in this beautiful world; I want to live in the midst of men."

In this poem Rabindranath says that the eternal play of human life with its love and friendship, tears and laughter is dear to him. The joys and sorrows of mankind will give him inspiration to build up the edifice of immortal poetry. But if his songs cannot gain immortality, he would be happy if they can give even temporary joy to men and women. As long as he lives, he wants a place in the hearts of men. He would, therefore, go on producing flowers of songs in the morning and evening. The readers may enjoy the perfume as long as it lasts. And then, alas! if the flowers of songs are dead, they may be thrown away in dust.

II

These early works anticipate the two religious moods which came to dominate the head and heart of Tagore in his seventies, in the
last phase of his ceaseless development as a mystic-poet. One of his religious-cum-aesthetic quests in the phase before *Gitanjali* found expression in his yearning to attain to that serenity of mind beyond pleasure and pain which would enable him to contemplate the divine in the heart of man. The other religious quest for God in man, not as man is in all his self-centredness, but in the infinite promise and potency which every individual bears in his making.

The finitude of the Infinite and the divinity of man form the central theme of Tagore's poetry. Tagore observes.

"The I am in me realises its own infinity, whenever it truly realises something else."8

God is the supreme Man or Superman in Tagore's thought. Tagore says.

"Whatever character our theology may ascribe to him, in reality he is the Infinite Ideal of Man, towards whom men move in their collective growth, with whom they seek their union of love as individuals, in whom they find their ideal as father, friend and beloved."9


Radhakrishnan remarks,

"The loyalty of God, the highest Universal is meaningless if it does not work for man the finite particular. The One is not beyond many but is in the many. To the true mystic who realises by direct experience the central harmony of the universe, there is no mystery beyond the present, no striving for the impossible, no shadow behind the charm, no grasping, in the depth of the dark."10

Manasi, published in December 1890, is the first book of verse which bears the stamp of genius. "Empty House", "Cruel Creation", "To Nature", "Sea Waves", are some of the poems having a direct reference to the loving and terrifying aspect of Nature. There is, however, one poem in which God is directly mentioned:

"O God, Thou art not! Pity is not! Life is not!
There is only the sport of Nature.
Seeing the terror, the infant is frightened, and screams and wails;
The piteous cry is stilled in a moment,
... ... ...
This brute madness knows not others' anguish
Knows not itself
Why in its midst the mind of man was
So loving, so weighted with suffering?11


Here an alternative picture of the world is given as a checkboard on which the God of love and the god of destruction play a game of dice wherein the fortunes of the game fluctuate from day to day. The devotional poet of *Gitanjali*, as seen, is still decades away. The joys of union and the sorrows of separation between the poet as bride and her lord (who is also the just and merciful lord of the universe) are yet to be known to the poet of *Manasi*; nor is nature charged with that deep mystical intimacy that was to become a means of communication between man and God. In short, the mystical insight had just begun. His quest of God, in the early phase was through the beauty and mystery of woman.

*Dharma Prachar* — Preaching Religion, *Banqa-bir* — Heroes of Bengal, *Naba-Banqa Dampatir Premalap* — loving conversation of a Newly Wedded Bengali Couple, and *Duranta Asha* — Wild Hopes, are among the most notable poems occurring in *Manasi*. In *Dharma Prachar* the poet deprecates the spirit of religious intolerance and cowardice among his countrymen. In *Banqa-bir* the poet satirises the character of the weak bodied and spectacled young students of Bengal who cover up their present idleness and inactivity by indulging in tall talk about the glories of the ancient past. In *Naba-Banqa-Dampatir Premalap* the poet attacks
the matrimonial system which allows an elderly man to marry a young girl. And in Duranta Asha the poet denounces cowardice, inactivity and narrow-mindedness of his countrymen. He goes on to exhort his countrymen to cast off this sloth and cowardice and live a bold and vigorous life. He cherishes in his heart wild hopes of freedom from this narrow and sordid life of his countrymen.

Tagore's transformation, however, comes in his love poems. An evolution from romantic love to mystical love can be observed in the two love poems of Manasi: "The Woman Speaks" and "The Man Replies". Here the wife is still full of romance while the husband is in no mood to respond. At the end of the dialogue the husband pleads:

"My love was once a form of worship
Oh do not ask for that today;
Let us live together, sharing joy and sorrow

Flower-offerings are meant only for God." 12

Love, undoubtedly is, one of the important themes in Tagore's early poetry. In a letter to Framatha Chaudhuri, also a poet, Tagore writes,

"If you examine the question critically you will find that the love poems of Manasi are an exercise in poetry - a play of imagination, beautiful and grand, but play nonetheless. The underlying truth is that man does not know what he wants; he has infinite desires but his powers are limited. So he dwells in the domain of desire, and in his disappointment with the real, fashions idols out of his imagination, which he then worships. Do you call it love? My love is directed towards many objects - but the one I have built up in Manasi has no existence outside my mind. That is the unfinished image of God shaped by an artist. Will it ever be finished?" 13

This letter reveals the inner process of growth in Tagore, which later led to the outburst of song and poetry in *Naivedya*, *Kheya* and *Gitanjali*. A deep sense of self-realisation is made apparent in these works. Wisdom, Tagore felt, lay in rejecting both the negations: the ascetic's denial of sensuality and the sensualist's denial of the spirit. Physical love or union is not to be denied but its transcience, its impermanence ought to be

recognized. One should, therefore, transcend from the physical plane to the mental plane and finally to the spiritual plane and thereby be in constant communion with God.

Sonar Tori (1893) is the next book of verse after Manasi. Here his faith in himself is further strengthened and contradictions laid to rest. He says,

"My faith is in myself: this cup I have filled with the universe and drunk. And filled it too with every moment's LOVE.

... ... ...

When I finally leave the stage, I know the flowering grove Will season after season bear witness that I love this world. A lifetime's gift, this love is the truth. At the time of my departure from truth, unfading, will deny death." 14

Neither my achievement, nor my person, nor therefore my love as a psychological fact will survive. Only the truth that I once loved this world inspite of all its horrors, is of such supreme importance that it will shine through all eternity. Manas Sundari, a poem from Sonar Tori has been equated by some with

Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*; Krishna Kripalani paraphrases it as "Beauty behind all beauty". "It must, however, be noted that poetry conceived as ideal beauty of *Manas Sundari*, for all the ecstatic love and anquished devotion that it extracted from Tagore, was never a beauty that was of absolute intrinsic worth, a perfect fabrication that was sufficient unto itself. It was always either a silken bond that bound him to the world, or the woman at the helm of the golden boat that ferried him over to the realm of transcendent perfection glimmering behind the world. The "Voyage of the Unknown", ultimately brings about the devotional aspect in Tagore’s poetry. Most of the imagery suggests that the poetry of this period is conscious of the horror of existence, but is seeking solace and peace in some imagined perfection beyond. Doubts often assail the poet and there appears to be hope only in the mysterious smile of the strange maiden and therefore he sings,

"Where are you, oh, come close
And touch me
Not a word will you say, even your smile
Will be lost in the dark."15

This search for the "Lord of Life" continues in Chitra (1896). To illustrate, in the Farewell to Heaven, A Night of Full Moon, Tagore sings:

"O mysterious one, have pity!
Put off thy infinite mystery!
Come thou!
Rend apart today that never quivering
shroud of boundless sky, and
from that midst of that unfathomed
stillness of waveless sea,
Rise slowly like the youthful Lakshmi,
Rise to my heart's shore as I gaze."

In this poem the poet says that he can hear the soft voices, the sweet jingling of golden anklets, but he cannot see the Lord of his Life. Among the other poems in Chitra, Atmotsarga or self dedication, Sesh Upahar or the last present, are some of the oft quoted poems where the poet's mystic mind carries the reader to a different world — to the "calm loneliness" in search of the "heavenly form no man has seen."
Man and nature are indeed closely related to one another. Manasi, Sonar Tori and Chitra stand testimony to this truth. In Manasi there are a number of poems describing nature in different forms. Some of the more important of them are Ode to Nature, The Cruel Creation, On a Rainy Day, This age and that age, The Cloud Messenger and The Sea Waves. The Golden Boat consists of some beautiful pieces like the Dance of the Universe, Mother Earth and Ode to Sea, which are gems of poems through which the poet has expressed his adoration of Nature. In one of the said poems, the poet says,

"You are my earth of ages. There was a time when I was one with your soul and you went on revolving round the sun through infinite space for countless days and nights. On my bosom the green grass has grown, the flowers have blossomed and trees have shed their tears and dropped their fruits and flowers. Today when I sit on the bank of the river Padma and see the blades of grass sprouting from your soil, my heart is filled with a sense of delight and wonder."  

In *Chitra* too there are a number of poems on natural scenery as the *River* and the *Message of the Forest*. Tagore, it is observed, regards Nature as the primal store-house of life out of which humanity has evolved through countless ages and births. He feels sad at the thought that his human birth has cut him off from the vast life of Nature and he wants to merge himself again into this universal life. This attitude towards Nature is, however, not confined to romantic fancy and a mysterious feeling of affinity with her. He also accepts Nature's influence upon the growth of human mind. He resembles Wordsworth in this respect who also, like Tagore, believed in the ennobling influence of Nature.

As a poet of Nature, Tagore has often been compared with Shelley. There are indeed, some affinities between the two. The dynamic aspects of Nature were specially liked by Shelley. He loved the storm, the cloud, the rivers and the sea waves. He loved the vast expanse of the sky and the light of the sun. Tagore also loved these aspects of Nature. The river Padma, the light of the sun and the ever-changing play of clouds in the sky were his special favourites. The secret of this affinity lies in the fact that both of them were dynamic in their character and temperament and
this dynamic personality was reflected in their poetry. But in
the case of Shelley, his dynamism had a full scope for
development without any restraint. The result was that he
developed an abstract idealism which refused to recognize the
limitations of real life. However, this is not the case with
Rabindranath. Shelley placed the “ideal” before the “real” but
Tagore always had a full view of the “real” without losing sight
of the “ideal”. Despite his idealism and imaginative flights
Tagore’s descriptions of Nature are realistic. His pictures
reveal a close and detailed observation of Nature and from this
point of view, he has greater affinity with Keats and Tennyson
than Shelley.

The Kalpana (1900) period can be considered as Tagore’s dark
night of the soul before he emerged into the morning light of
Gitanjali. Most of the poems of Kalpana along with the appealing
songs of Chaitali (1896) and Kshanika (1900) express spiritual
darkness, fatigue and despair. The wings though dead tired in the
seemingly unending night must not be furled —

"Bird, O my bird, listen to me,
do not close your wings."
Although Tagore was born a modern poet, he was trying hard to link himself not merely with poetry but with the whole spirit of ancient India. No doubt he had been influenced by the Sufi poets of Iran, the Christian doctrine of God as love but most of his religious ideas and mysticism rested on the verses of the Upanishads. Inspired by his father the poet made sincere efforts in building up the religion of his heart which essentially was the religion of humanity. Tagore himself writes.

"Man’s religion, which is in his realisation of the infinite, began its journey the impersonal dyaus, ‘the sky’, wherein light had its manifestation, then came to life, which represented the force of self creation in time, and ended in Purushah, the ‘Person’, in whom dwells timeless love ... The person has his immortal truth. Of him it is said, Esha devo visvakarma Mahatma Sada Jananam hridaye Sannivishatah’ - This is the divine being, the world worker, who is the great soul ever dwelling inherent in the heart of all people ... Those who realise him, transcend the limit of mortality - not in duration of time, but in perfection of truth." 17

The individual self, can therefore, after possessing sufficient quantity of super-consciousness, very well visualise the Super-

consciousness. God is immanent in all inanimate and animate beings. He is the supreme reality. Man has to discover his religion, which obviously is the religion of humanity and thereby merge with the ubiquitous reality. God is the supreme reality of the cosmic beings. One has to unite with Him if one achieves identity and unification with the supreme Reality and this is the highest goal of one's life. This union of the finite soul with God results in freedom, liberation and salvation. Tagore writes,

"The Isa of our Upanishad, the Super Soul which permeates all moving things, is the God of this universe, whose mind we share in all our true knowledge, love and service, and whom to reveal in ourselves through renunciation of self is the highest end of life."18

The first fruits of Tagore's Sadhana were, however, only gathered in Naivedya. The word means devotional offering and the volume consists of the out-pourings of a God-intoxicated soul which delights to efface itself in the thought of the Heavenly King and His service (Gitanjali, no.5). It sings how the darkness of night reminds the poet of Him like the glare of the day, the lonely

forest as much as the crowded city, and how he is ready to give himself up completely to Him. God knocks at the door of every heart (Gitanjali, no.4). His presence fills the world: "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork." The hundred poems of Naivedya, in fact, give a perfect conspectus of Tagore's mind. His spiritual, mystical tenor is well revealed in these poems:

"Let honour come to me from thee through a call to some desperate task,
In the pride of poignant suffering
Lull me not into languid dreams;
Shake me out of this cringing in the dust,
Out of the fetter's that shackle our mind.
Makes futile our destiny;
Out of the unreason that bends our dignity
Down under the indiscriminate feet of dictators;
Shatter this age-long shame of ours.
And raise our head
Into the boundless sky,
Into the generous light,
Into the air of freedom." - (Poem No.24)

Most of the poems are pretty close to the spirit of the theistic Upanishads as interpreted by the poet's saintly father, full of moral zeal and patriotic fervour. The God of Naivedya, the 'Jivan-devata' (Life's - deity) was admittedly a purely personal God. Tagore's 'Jivan-devata' was not the lord of the universe but
only the lord of his own life and destiny. Like Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, the poet had his own religion. Swami Vivekananda often said that each man has his own God, Who is as different from the Gods of other men as he himself is from them. This was the stage of individualized monotheism not polytheism. However, most of the sonnets of Naivedya are almost an exact rendering in verse of well known Upanishadic slokas. The God of Naivedya is only a God of love, a God of justice, the dispenser of reward and punishment and the force behind righteousness. In Manasi, the artist in Tagore had joined hands with the poet in Tagore. In Naivedya the moralist in Tagore joined hands with the poet in Tagore. There appears to be a gradual evolution in the basically mystical poet. Tagore, in the said context, sings in Naivedya:

"O King, the dispenser of punishment
the sparkling gem.
That you put on the forehead of this land is uncared for
By its people, they do not see your light.
...
...
Where to forgive is to be cowardly, there,
O Punisher, let me ever be ruthless in Your service...
The unjust tyrant and he who meekly bears and submits—
may both be consumed like heaps of straw in the blazing fire of Your holy wrath."19

__________________________

True religion, to Tagore, must be born in the heart, in the passionate experience of beauty and sublimity, in the anguish of confrontation with horror and tragedy. Naivedya concludes with the prayer that even if all other beliefs lose their life blood, let one faith i.e., faith in God, remain firmly rooted in the poet's mind and heart. This book of verse began the unfolding of Tagore's poetry and religion. And now begins the devotional phase in Tagore's early poetry, which starts with Kheya and ends with Gitali (1905-14), with a little carry over into Balaka (1914-15). The faith in a personal God that came to Tagore in Naivedya appears to have left him in Kheya and Balaka, never to return, thus widening the scope of Tagore's God.

In sharp contrast with Naivedya dedicated to his father, professedly and recognisedly a man of God, Kheya was dedicated to a reputed scientist - Jagadish Chandra Bose. This proves the fact that for Tagore science and spirituality were not distinct and separate disciplines. In fact, both are a part and parcel of all types and levels of education. They are like the two halves in the seeds of pulses; the germ that sprouts is in between; it is fed by both.
The dedicatory inscription in verse begins by calling this book of verse a shy and tender touch me not creeper, and ends, by modestly claiming that even this unobtrusive little thing might contain a grain of truth, and "Where there is truth, the world dwells there." For "On its shyly furled leaves you will perhaps read life and death, light and shade, and the message of storm."

Kheya, which can be translated as crossing is a pathetic longing to cross over and the equally passionate determination to retain his love and loyalty to this shore and this constitutes the theme of most of its poems. It can be observed that Tagore’s heart is torn between two loves - love for the world and love for the beyond. Before dwelling further on the mystical aspect of Kheya, I must refer to a poem called Dinasesh in Kheya. It runs thus:

"I spent my day on the scorching hot dust of the road. Now, in the cool of the evening, I knock at the door of the inn. It is deserted and in ruins. A grim ‘ashath’ tree spreads its hungry clutching roots through the gaping fissures of the walls. Days have been when wayfarers came here to wash their weary feet. They spread their mats in the courtyard in the dim light of the early moon, and sat and talked of strange lands. They woke refreshed in the morning when birds made them glad, and friendly flowers nodded their heads at them from the wayside."
But no lighted lamp awaited me when I came here. 
The black smudges of smoke left by many a forgotten evening 
lamp stare, like blind eyes, from the wall. 
Fireflies flit in the bus near the dried up pond, and bamboo 
branches fling their shadows on the grass-grown path. 
I am the quest of no one at the end of my day. 
The long night is before me, and I am tired."20

The poem is evidently symbolical. The blistering road is of 
course the road along which man must journey to God. The inn, 
refers to the traditional religions. They gave a new life and the 
much needed rest of body and peace of mind to weary travellers in 
times past. But now they are dilapidated and ugly; they have lost 
all freshness and life; they have lost the truth of their vision 
and they "stare, like blind eyes, from the wall." "Days have 
been" refers also to those days when Tagore himself found comfort 
and inspiration in the religion of his father - Brahmoism 
regarded as the quint-essence of Hinduism, purified of idolatory, 
animal sacrifice and other superstitions. This religion Tagore 
had inherited from his father but lost it for all poetical, if 
not for all practical purposes, when he reached adulthood in 
Sharps and Flats (Kadi-o-Komal). He rediscovered it in Naivedya 
but soon realised that the religion of his father and forefathers 
was not the religion of his thirsty heart. "The scorching hot

20. Quoted by A.S. Ayyub: Tagore's Quest. Calcutta, Papyrus, 
dust of the road" refers to his anquished quest for ideal beauty and perfection which began in Manasi and went on through Manasi to Kalpana, becoming step by step the quest of something deeper and more mysterious.

The first poem called, The Last Ferry or Sesh Kheya expresses a yearning for leaving home and being ferried across to the other shore, the golden shore over which evening descends like a veiled maiden giving a magical touch to the dim twilight. The same strain, that was present in Kshanika is now further developed in Kheya. Although the poet in Taqore was satisfied in Kshanika, the religious enquirer, the God-seekling man in Taqore was left insatiate. And this is what brought him to the shore of the river lying between this little but charming world and the great mysterious world beyond, in other words to Kheya. But this moment of relief, of consolation and of reconciliation was short lived. The restless heart of the poet again becomes disconsolate -

"Traveller, O traveller, must you go
Now in the depth of this pitch-dark night."
In this poem called the Traveller or Pathik the imagery has changed but it expresses the same conflict between the longing to venture out in the dark night, and the desire to stay amidst the odour of flower and music of flute. In the two successive poems Nest and Sky and Out in the Sea the poet's oscillating mind finds clearer expression. In the former, he professes to have experienced the boundless joy of the sky "in shadeless luminiscence, without a companion, without an emotion." In the second poem he decides to set sail in the tumultous high seas. "Suddenly, in a moment's recklessness, utterly alone, embrace with both your arms the shoreless unknown."

These poems of Kheya are characteristic of the phase of crossing, when the heart of the poet was turned to the earth, and yet was filled with a vague deep yearning for the other shore, which is described by contradictory epithets such as "shining like gold" and covered by "pitch black darkness". However in the three collections of songs called Gitanjali, Gitimalya and Gitali, Tagore has already crossed the other shore. The God in Kheya is a transitory conception standing between the heartless Nature of earlier poetry and the personal God of Gitanjali tenderly responsive to the cry of each individual's heart:

"If I call thee not in my prayers, if I keep thee not in my heart, thy love for me still waits for my love."
(i) The first stage in Tagore's development as a mystic-poet came when he was at the crossing of adolescence and youth; when he was rising above the vague, self-obsessed miseries of adolescence and discovering his own ground. The subject matter of Sandhya-sanqit (The Evening Songs) voiced only the frustrations and frettings of the poet for himself as not being acceptable to the world and the world not being acceptable to him. But this dismal phase of emotional gloom was only a phase of adolescence and it did pass off in Prabhat-sanqit (The Morning Songs). The life now appeared to the poet as bathed in the glory of sunshine. Analysing his creative mood during this period Tagore writes:

"The strength I gained by working, freed from the trammels of tradition, led me to discover that I had been searching in impossible places for that which I had within myself. Nothing but want of self-confidence had stood in the way of my coming into my own. I felt like rising from a dream of bondage to find myself unshackled. I cut extraordinary capers just to make sure I was free to move."

(ii) The second stage begins with the appearance of Kadi-o-Komal (Sharps and Flats) and Manasi (The Desired She). Both of them are noticeable for the expression of Tagore’s mysticism. S.B. Mukherjee observes four major tendencies in Tagore’s early poetry:

(1) Nature in its various aspects; (2) Beauty that evolves as a spirit enthralling, becomes the great ‘God-bearing image’; (3) Man towards whom the poet has already stretched his hands with intense longings and Man as symbolising ‘the Life infinite in the universe’; (4) Love.

In Kadi-o-Komal (Sharps and Flats) the poet’s soul has passed through purgatory, as it were, for a very dear friend (a sister-in-law) who had stirred the hidden depths of his emotional being and had called forth the best in his poetry suddenly died, leaving an unnegotiable emotional abyss. The blow was cruel but was necessary for the waking up of the poet. It shattered the sentimental make believe of self-centered fancy and helped him to

gain mental equipoise and an emotional centre of gravity. The sorrow that was only a personal bereavement became the symbolic bond of a spiritual union and it acted as the master key that opened almost all the gates of perception, imagination, sympathy and revelation. The important symbolic value of death in Tagore's poetry has its root here. The immediate effect of this bereavement was to make the poet more conscious of his writings. This collection includes some of the best specimens of Tagore's love poems. But the urge of the flesh makes no permanent hold on the poet. He writes:

This infatuation lasts but a few days; this illusion vanishes, and nothing can keep. The clasp of the soft arms snaps, and the intoxicating eyes no longer stimulate. One knows not the other on a dark night; when the flowering days are over, birds sing not.23

Thus the poetic spirit of Tagore was liberated from the shackles of imitativeness and began to enjoy expression in flawless poetry:

I clasp both thine hands in mine,
And keep thine eyes prisoner with my hungry eyes;
Seeking and Crying, where art
Thou, where, O where;
As in the solitary star of the dark evening sky
Quivers the light of heaven with its immense mystery
In thine eyes, in the depth of their darkness
There shines a soul-beam tremulous with a wide mystery.24

The poems in Manasi (The Desired She) reveal a clear maturity in Tagore’s poetry. The period of musicality extending from The Evening Songs to The Sharps and Flats was over. The poet is now faced with a clash between the ideas and the ideals. The Hopeless Desire is the most distinguished poem in Manasi (The Desired She). The poet says:

The immortality that was hidden in you, where is it now? As at dusk, amidst the isolated stars throbs the boundless secret of heaven’s light, so does tremble the flame of the secret of the soul in your eyes, under the depth of compact darkness.25


25. Quoted by Dr. Sukumar Sen: op. cit., p. 256.
Some of the poems of Manasi register the poet’s disillusionment with some of our national leaders of thought whom he had held in admiration. The dogmatic sentimentalism of the neo-Hindu revival invoked bitter sarcasm from his pen. The narrow and complacent life and outlook of the average city-dweller pained the poet whose vision was constantly seeking light and energy.

(iii) The third stage begins with the two masterpieces of this period: Sonar Tori (The Golden Boat) and Chitra (The Wondrous She). In the characteristic poems of Sonar Tori, viz., I Won’t Let You Go, Earth and On the Doctrine of Maya, the poet realizes through his own emotion the momentary life which is flowing on unceasingly and eternally with a longing and lingering look behind. The cry of his infant daughter, ‘I won’t let you go’ when he was just leaving home echoed through time and space. It was the heart-breaking cry of Mother Earth for the sparks of life on her lap, which she cannot hold for long:

It was as if the flute of Eternity was sobbing in a rustic note in the barren wilderness of the universe, and it made the Earth sad and sit up with her tresses dishevelled in the far-flung cornfields, on the banks of the Ganga, a son-bright golden-scarf drawn over her person, her unmoving eyes fixed on the far-off blue horizon, speechless. I saw that sorrowful sweet face of hers—standing close to the door-jamb, quite and sad, like my daughter four years old.  

26. Ibid., p. 257.
In Vasundhara (Earth) the poet delves deep. He feels in his heart
beats the primitive impulse of creative evolution and is vaguely
conscious of his identity with the soul of the universe
transcending time and space. It is a novel synthesis of the
ancient Indian conception of pantheism (Brahmavada) and the
modern scientific theory of biological evolution. The poem
breathes Tagore’s intense love for the earth—the sights,
sounds, smells, feelings and emotions of life and nature against
a shifting background of growth and decay:

My earth, you are
so many years old; with me mixed in your clay,
unwearied in the limitless firmament,
you have orbited the sun; and for nights and days
spanning millennia within me your grass has grown,
flowers in clusters have opened,
so many trees have shed their leaves, buds, fruits,
odoriferous pollen! Hence in the present time,
maybe one day, sitting alone with a drifting mind
on Padma’s bank, gazing with charmed eyes,
with all my limbs and awareness I can sense
how grass-seeds sprout with shivers within your soil.27

27. Rabindranath Tagore: I Won’t Let You Go—Selected Poems,
Translated by K.K. Dyson, Delhi, UBS Publications, 1992, p.90.
The most significant poem in *Sonar Tori* is *I Won't Let You Go*, which incidently forms the title to the book by K.K. Dyson. The allegoric strain is continued in *Earth*, which contains a magnificent picture of the early rains on the banks of the Padma, a picture where sound and sight synchronize perfectly. The larger and truer life of man is that which links him to the stream of life which has created the world for him, and it is the immortal part of the individual. That part of the individual which has no significance for the larger life is his own personality which has no permanence. Before one starts on the quest of the ideal, one must be prepared for the loss of what one considers as valuable gatherings for which there would be no room in the *Golden Boat* of time.

In the next book of verse *Chitra* (*The Wondrous She*), the role of *Manasi* (*The Desired She*) as the Boatwoman is changed for a permanent one as the Queen Goddess of the poet's destiny who regulates the poet's thoughts and impulses and guides him in the course of his destiny. This Mistress of Destiny is conceived in some poems as the CONTROLLER OF LIFE accepting the homage of the poet's efforts and in some others as the GUIDE OF DESTINY that
pilots him through the tangled and zigzag course of life. The sense of repose and calm perception of the beauties of nature and simplicity of the joy of living distinguish such poems as *Happiness, Farewell to Heaven, On a Moonlit Night, The Victorious Woman* and some other poems in *Chitra*. But even a poet's life is not all peace and sweet repose. All around there is death and decay, distress and despair, poverty and disease, cruelty and injustice. The poet now feels that the time has come to tread the path that runs through all that, and he must not tarry. A call has come from the *Destiny of Man*. So he says in *Turn Me Round Now*:

Who is He? I know Him not. I recognize Him not, but I know only this that for Him, under the pall of the darkness of night, the pilgrimage of humanity is on from eternity to eternity, despite storm, stress and thunder, carefully guarding the tiny flame of the torch of the soul. I know only this: whoever catches His song of call, he runs fearlessly into the vortex of danger, he discards his all, and bares his bosom before torture; the roar of death comes to him as music. He is burnt alive in fire, he is impaled on the stake, he is hacked by the axe; all that is dear to him he makes fuel, and without hesitation lights a sacrificial fire that burns as long as he lasts, and all this for Him alone. Tearing off his heart and making it as offering as if of a red lotus, he lays it with deep devotion and for the last time as the final offering to Him; and so he makes his life fulfilled in death.28

28. Quoted by Dr. Sukumar Sen: *op. cit.*, p. 259.
(iv) The next stage in Tagore's development as a mystic poet began with the publication of *Chaitali* (The Crop of the Year's End). The poems of *Chaitali: Renunciation, Against Meditative Knowledge, True Meditation* and some others—all breathe the peace of joyous release from the strain of the quest, receiving solace from contemplation of Nature, his first and last love. In this stage Tagore's feeling was not the mystic experience of the Vedic poet that measured everything in the scale of eternity. His joyousness is derived from the impermanence of the phenomenal world, from a chance contemplation of the momentary patterns of life and nature:

Blessed I am as I see the light of heaven,
Blessed I am that I am in love with the world.29

This mood of deep contemplation continues in *Kahini* (Tales), *Kalpana* (Fancy) and *Kshanika* (The Momentary She). A veiled seriousness and emotional realism give these poems a tone and depth that was beyond the reach of serious and traditional poetry. Shorn of all the trappings and the folds of coverings the

29. Ibid., p. 260.
heart of the poet is laid open in these poems, throbbing with the pure joy of existence:

The mind is endowed with the eyes of a camera; the shadows of petty pictures imprint themselves on the mind.30

(v) The fifth and the last stage began with a spiritual experience. Describing this experience he says that one morning he was looking upon the rising sun when all of a sudden,

... a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. The radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart and flooded it with universal light.31

30. Ibid., p. 110.

Thus from the indolent mood of contemplation the poet wakes up in Naivedya (Offerings) and Kheya (The Ferry), to the surging of life around and he feels the majestic presence of the Omnipotent Force that controls the life of man and the destiny of the universe. Tagore writes:

HE IS
the Repose of my life
the Joy of my mind
the Peace of my spirit.32

There was a gradual change in Tagore's poetry after 1900. He now began to write beautiful religious poems, filled with the joy and peace of the presence of God:

They who are near to me do not know that you
are nearer to me than they are.
They who speak to me do not know that my
heart is full with your unspoken words.
They who crowd in my path do not know
that I am walking alone with you.
They who love me do not know that their
love brings you to my heart.33


33. Ibid., p.43.
From the poems of Kheya (The Ferry), it appears that the poet's spiritual thoughts are leaning towards the mysticism of Vaishnava poetry and his lyricism is approaching musicality. The Ferry very easily brought the poet to the temple of the Song Offering. Although this period comprises some of the most harassed years in the life of the poet. His second daughter died in 1903, soon after the death of his wife in 1902, and his youngest son soon followed in 1907. And above all, the school at Shantiniketan was costing him dearly. Gitanjali (Song Offerings), Gitimalya (Song Garland) and Gitali (Musical Songs) are the books of this period. The common feature in the three books is that their contents are as much poems as songs and their import is distinctly devotional or mystic. It was in between the publication of Gitanjali and Gitimalya that the poet visited England and America, made many friends as G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells, Galsworthy, Andrews Bradley, Masefield, Robert Bridges, William Rothenstein, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Commenting on the characteristics of these poems S.B. Mukherjee
writes:

... in these works the vision sweeps over the totality of existence and in its cosmic wings takes in the universe of time and space, of the timeless and the spaceless; the dim edges of primal creation; the first evolutions of life on ancient shores; the tumult of nations and civilizations; the cosmic forces streaming in endless activity through them all as through Nature's myriad forms and phenomena — they all swim within its ken. Yet, at the same time the wonder and mystery of the meanest flower that blows, the humblest grass blade that dances in the air, the tiniest creature that breathes, man or animal, and creates a world of its own — they all hold the poet in thrall. 34

Thus it is now clear that Tagore's development as a mystic-poet is complete. The spark that was ignited in the Morning Songs was now a flame in Gitanjali. He and his poetry were now full of mysticism.