CHAPTER III

MYSTICAL IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN GITANJALI

Modern criticism attaches considerable significance to the study of imagery as an important instrument of poetic communication. Naturally, we have many definitions of the term 'image' available to us. Some critics now look upon a poem itself as a "living image."\(^1\)

Of course, in such a poem the images it employs are well woven into its total pattern and never superimposed. Only then will they be functional in the poem and have a pattern\(^2\) or significance of their own beyond serving the purpose of illustration or embellishment. It is generally seen that every poem contains a pattern of imagery, and each image is often a pattern.

The appeal of poetic images often extends beyond the visible to the invisible. This is very clearly suggested in Caroline Spurgeon's definition of the


image, emphasizing the variety of its terms.3 Hulme considers images as the very essence of an intuitive language. The moderns prefer more the kind of imagery used by the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Now what is particularly expected of the image is that it be a verbal embodiment of thought and feeling.

'Symbol' is a term very closely associated with 'image'. Often the two shade into each other, though opinions differ about their respective nature and significance. C. Day Lewis emphasizes the multiple significance of the poetic image, its connotative function as opposed to its denotative function. W.Y. Tindall is just at the other extreme. In his view 'image' is a principal kind of 'symbol' the latter having a wider connotation and significance.4 On the whole, critical thinking and practice today seem to be in favour of recognising the terms 'image' and


'symbol' as related, sometimes even as interchangeable. At times it so happens that ancient myths which embody archetypal images which persist in the "collective unconscious" often intrude into poetry and take on symbolic significance. Tagore, often and almost always in *Gitanjali*, speaks in terms of images and symbols, similes and metaphors in order to convey his mystical experience. He relies more on sensibility than on sense, more on suggestiveness than on precision and meaning. 5

It seems the use of imagery in the mystical poems of *Gitanjali* can even be equated with the practice of the French symbolists. Like the symbols employed by the latter, the symbols and images in *Gitanjali* are private, rather than universal or communal in association. But Tagore's aestheticism, unlike that of the French symbolists, does not lack a religious inspiration or motivation, besides being

concerned with Ideal Beauty beyond the senses. But like them, again, Tagore seems to delight in a withdrawal from the compulsions and moral concerns of life. In that sense the mysticism discernible in the poems of Gitanjali is "a mystical form of Aestheticism." 6 And it does not have much to do with the traditional or universal kind of symbolism associated with mysticism of the sacred type such as Christian mysticism. The imagery and symbolism the Gitanjali poems employ in the service of a mystical meaning are mostly individual and unique in appeal.

Here, again, we have to bear in mind that poetry concerned with mysticism does not present us with mystical experience as it is, but is constantly rebodying it and bringing it back into the realms of nature. 7 Many Christian mystics in their accounts of the experience of mystical union, paradoxically and


inevitably fall back upon the images of earthly love.
The language of symbolism is perhaps the only medium of communication available to the mystical poet or the articulate mystic. The Transcendent is often conceived under forms and symbols founded on sound analogies grounded in the truth of Divine immanence. This is what we find verified in the poems of Gitanjali.

According to Evelyn Underhill, when we pass to the mystical poets, we find that nearly all their best efforts are due to their extraordinary genius for indirect, suggestive imagery. Then only will they be effective and functional. Their mystical images are fresh and original. They possess intensity and evocative power too. And these are some of the qualities which C Day Lewis associates with the poetic 'Image.' These are very well illustrated in the poems of Gitanjali.

8 Lewis 40.

Before discussing the mystical images and symbols in the individual poems of Gitanjali, it is proper to consider what Tagore thought about the significance of poetic imagery. Certainly, he was not a committed theorist and a conscious practitioner of the poetic art, though he always professed that he was first and foremost a poet. In his early poetry Tagore emphasised spiritual realism and international humanism. It is in his Naivedya, he clearly marks out these two characteristics. As he progressed in mystical thought especially during the Gitanjali period, Tagore came to fully realise the importance of the symbolic use of language in religious poetry. It seems, as in the case of Coleridge, for Tagore a symbol or an image was characterized by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible. And while it communicates the whole, it abides itself as a

10 It was published in 1901 and has just hundred poems. It can very well be assigned to the poems of the Gitanjali period because of its strong spiritual note.
living part in that Unity of which it is the representative.

To Tagore symbolism is never opposed to realism. The visible always holds for him the key to the mystery at the heart of things. He believes that the things which are unseen are known by the things which are seen. His mystical perception of the world of sensory experience is revealed in his use of natural and erotic images. In the lyrics of *Gitanjali* images are quite consciously used in the service of mystical symbolism. In some poems, of course, the images are more descriptive and the symbolic element is present only germinally. Nevertheless, the recurrent images illustrate the unity of *Gitanjali* which presents a unique mystical experience. The following is a cursory review of some of the images Tagore employs to convey his mystical experience.

In the very first poem the poet compares himself to a flute made of reeds and the Infinite to a flute player, who is a skilled musician. The skilled musician
plays upon the flute everywhere, over "hills and dales" breathing through it "melodies eternally new" (I, 1). What the poet here asserts is that he can compose and sing poems only when he is inspired by the Divine. Tagore confesses that when he looks back and considers the long, uninterrupted period of his work as a poet, one thing appears clear to him that it was a matter over which he had hardly any authority. He affirms:

Residing in the innermost me
You snatch words from my lips
With my words you utter your own speech,
mixing your own melody.11

The second poem affirms that music has an ennobling and uplifting effect upon the poet. Mystical bliss results when he devotes his talents to the worship of the Almighty. In such blissful moments the poet rises high above the trifles and becomes one with his Maker. This truth is conveyed through a very

telling and vivid image. "All that is harsh and
dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony --
and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its
flight across the sea" (II, 2). The poet likens
himself to a "glad bird on its flight across the sea."
The 'sea' is sea of life. The unity that a mystic
experiences with God, man and the universe is
dexterously depicted here.

The mystical imagery used in the third poem is
synaesthetic. The various sensations are intermingled.
The poet listens to the sweet music of the Master
Musician "in silent amazement" (III, 2). He enlivens
the universe by the life-breath of this song. Like
a holy stream, His music rushes on overcoming all
obstacles on the way. Here the images used are light,
life-breath and the strong current of water. The
music pertaining to the ear is compared to light
pertaining to the eye. "The light of thy music
illumines the world. The life breath of thy music
runs from sky to sky" (III, 2).
Life, truth and love are universal images symbolising God. In poem no. 4 of Gitanjali the poet addresses the Divine as "Life of my life" and promises Him that he will ever try to keep his body pure, "knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs". Mystics often consider their body as the temple of God and they insist upon keeping it pure. Truth is also an attribute of God and the poet knowing himself to be God's temple, promises Him to keep all untruths out from his thought, "knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind" (IV. 3). Tagore's affirmation in Sadhana is quite revealing. He writes, "To live in perfect goodness is to realize one's life in the infinite." As Sadhana belongs to the Gitanjali period, the statement is very revealing. God is love and as He has his seat in the innermost shrine of the poet's heart, the latter will try to drive all evils away from his heart and keep his love in flower. Flower, again, is an ever-recurring symbol

12 Tagore, Sadhana 47.
in Gitanjali. In this lyric it symbolises the sweetness and beauty of love.

In poem no. 5 the poet uses telling images to express his yearning for reunion with the Divine. He confesses, "Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite, and my work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil" (V, 4). The poet is very tired of the world and its activity and longs for a moment of solitary contemplation and meditation. This is what might be termed the mystical restlessness of a sincere soul in search of the Sublime. St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and many other mystics have had the experience of such "Divine Darkness." 13 Johann Tauler affirms that God is far above every outward thing and every thought, and is found only where we hide ourselves in the secret place of our hearts, in the quiet solitude where no word is spoken, where is neither creature nor image

13 Cox, Mysticism 109.
nor fancy. 14

The flower image with a different connotation appears again in poem no.6 of Gitanjali. The poet compares himself to a flower. He is anxious to offer it to the Divine and prays to Him to accept his humble offering. Like the flower his life too is short and soon it will fade away. "Pluck this little flower and take it" (VI, 4), entreats the poet. He fears lest it should droop and drop into the dust. Even if this flower is not fit to find a place in God's garland, He should accept it and place it at least on His feet. The flower here also symbolises the mystic's awareness of the shortness of human life and also the offering of love he makes to the Divine.

In the seventh poem the poet pictures God as the Master Musician, the cause and inspirer of all melody in the whole universe and especially in his own life. The poet compares himself to a reed which must empty itself out before the Musician Par Excellence can fill

it with sweet music. He confesses that his poet's vanity dies in shame before God's sight. However, he is consoled that he has been sitting down at His feet. His only prayer to Him now is, "Only let me make my life simple and straight" (VII, 5). Images like the flower and reed contribute very much to the open air atmosphere of Gitanjali poems, which remind one of the Nature mysticism so pronounced in some of the Gitanjali poems.

The lamp image in poem no. 9 is very significant. Desire tries to put out the lamp of reason and wisdom burning in the mystic's mind, which must be purified of all such unholy desires before it will become fit to be united with its God. In short the poet of Gitanjali implicitly expresses his readiness to surrender himself wholly to the Almighty and be resigned to His holy will. The poet uses the lamp image in poem number thirteen also (XIII, 8).

The journey motif is very common in mystical literature. In poem no. 12 the traveller signifies the
poet in search of the Divine. And he makes it clear that it began long long ago with the very dawn of creation. He affirms, "I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wilderness of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet" (XII, 7). It took ages and much effort for him to realize that the Infinite is immanent in him and through the universe. It is interesting to note how the poet explains the point through a simile taken from music. A skilled musician harmonises the varied notes of an Orchestra to create the sweet harmony of a simple tune. Similarly through constant training and spiritual discipline over long periods of time the poet has learnt to transform his knowledge and experience into that mystical vision which will make him realize that the Divine is immanent in him.

The lyric concludes confirming that the question and the cry "Oh, where?" will melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the divine assurance "I am." It is humanistic mysticism that is emphasised here.
The images in poem no. 13 express the poet's eager longing for re-union with the Divine but he has not yet had the realization. He is like a musician who keeps stringing and unstringing his instrument, but is unable to sing. He cannot find the right words for his song. He complains, "The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set" (XIII, 8). And the poet confesses, "only there is the agony of wishing in my heart" (XIII, 8). However, in the very next line the poet says, "The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by" (XIII, 8). It implies that he has a vague realization of God's presence in his soul. Perhaps this is what he implies in the very next passage, "I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house" (XIII, 8).

The bride-bridegroom image is one of the most prominent in Gitanjali and it is used with a number of slants and shades. The mystical tradition does often employ it. Hence we have to dwell at a little length on this image. It appears in a number of the poems
of Gitanjali. In fact this is the theme of the poems seventeen to twentyseven. Poem no.17 is a classic example. The refrain, "I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands" (XVII, 10), reveals the depth of the poet's desire for union with his Beloved. One does not find much of a hint to such a yearning either in the Hindu or in the Sufi or in the Buddhist contexts except of course in Kabir. But it is there in abundance in the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. Psalm 42 would be the best illustration, "As the hind longs for the running waters, so my soul longs for You, O God. Athirst is my soul for God, the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?" 15

The poet presents himself as waiting passionately for his Divine Lover. When He comes he will surrender himself whole-heartedly into His hands. It is because of his love for the Almighty that he was forced to neglect his worldly duties. It is this the poet emphasizes in the statement, "That is why it is so late and why I have been guilty of such omissions" (XVII,10).

15 Psalm 42, 1-3.
In the foul weather, the poet waits outside the doors of his Beloved. He is seeking entrance. The lover is cruel and does not call him in. And "Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens." He asks in dismay, "Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?" (XVIII, 11). And the poet pleads, "If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside, I know not how I am to pass these long, rainy hours" (XVIII, 11). He cries out for the Divine Lover, and his wailing mingles with the wailing of the wind. The "foul weather" and the "clouds" symbolise the trials and tribulations in the mystic's path.

The mystic's attitude is wonderful. Even if the Beloved does not give him His darshan and speak, still the lover will endure His silence and continue to wait patiently until He is moved and speaks to him. He assures, "If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it" (XIX, 11). The poet conveys his feeling graphically through a beautiful image.

He affirms, "I will keep still and wait like the
night with starry vigil and its head bent low with patience" (XIX, 11-12). The poet is quite optimistic that the morning will surely come, the darkness will vanish, and the Divine voice pour down in golden streams breaking through the sky. The morning is the morning of the divine darshan, the morning of mystical encounter. Darkness symbolises the separation between the poet and his God. And the poet is sure that this darkness of separation will disappear and the bright, beautiful dawn of his re-union with the Divine Lover will arrive.

The beloved has no sleep. Ever and again he opens his door and looks out on the darkness. He can see nothing before him. He exclaims, "I wonder where lies thy path!" (XXIII, 14). He asks in alarm, "Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend? The sky groans like one in despair" (XXIII, 14). In and through these images the poet conveys his mystical restlessness and his eager yearning for the Divine.

The poet wants his Divine Lover to draw the veil
of darkness thick upon him, even as He has wrapped the earth with the coverlet of sleep and tenderly closed the petals of the drooping lotus at dusk. He is quite sure it is God, his Beloved, who draws the veil of night upon the tired eyes of the day to renew its sight in a fresher gladness of awakening (XXV, 15).

In the peace and silence of the night the Divine Lover comes to His beloved and sits for some time by his side. But the poet is not roused up. He feels that it was a "cursed sleep." The Divine Lover plays upon His harp and his music echoes through the dreams of the sleeping poet. In absolute darkness and rain the poet-beloved hears the sound of sweet music floating to him through the darkness of night. He is sure that it is the call of the Divine Lover "to the love-tryst" (XXVII, 16). And he goes out to his Bridegroom, his Lord and master, all alone. But he does not find Him. He exclaims, "Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows?" (XLI, 23). He sits and looks at the sky
waiting for the splendour of His golden chariot, with golden wings fluttering over it and filling the entire sky with golden light.

The Tagore of Gitanjali exploits the bride-bridegroom imagery to its best advantage and graphically expresses through it his mystical experience. This practice is quite common in mystical literature. The Song of Songs is the finest example. It symbolically represents the holy affection between Yahweh and the Israelites.

The first section of The Songs which consists of the first chapter and the first half of the second chapter beautifully presents the bride's yearning for her Beloved, Yahweh. The second section which comprises the second section of the second chapter and the first half of the third chapter presents the restlessness of the bride, Israel, until she is invited to the field and meets her Beloved, Yahweh.

The second section of the third chapter and the
fourth present the pomp of a royal pageant, the bride's mystical rapture and the corresponding infinite joy in the Bridegroom at the bewitching beauty and the graceful charm of the bride. Chapter five and the first versicle of the sixth chapter together present the bridegroom's arrival, his sudden disappearance, the bride's frantic search and their final inseparable union.

In poem no. 41 of Gitanjali the poet presents himself as sitting on the grass and gazing upon the sky and dreaming of the sudden splendour of his beloved's coming. All the lights are ablaze. Golden pennons fly over His car. They, at the roadside, stand agape, when they see Him come down from His seat to raise the "ragged beggar girl", "a-tremble with shame and pride, like a creeper in a summer breeze" (XLI, 24), from the dust and set her at His side. The "beggar girl -- a-tremble with shame and pride" symbolises the poet himself. He sits before his door, and he knows that suddenly the happy moment will arrive when he will be able to behold the Divine face. The air
is being filled with this promise (XLIY, 26).

In poem no. 22 Tagore uses erotic imagery, imagery derived from sexual love, to illustrate his mystical communion. In many a *Gitanjali* poem, the poet presses the worldly, the physical and the sensuous into his service to illustrate his mystical concepts. He is quite anxious and restless and he whispers: "Thou art the solitary way-farer in this deserted street. Oh my only friend, my best beloved" (XXII, 13).

Poem no. 27 presents the irresistible call of the Divine lover to the beloved to come out through the dark night. But the lover is miserable and wretched. He cannot find his way. Addressing his restless inner self he says, "Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy Lord is wakeful and He calls thee to the Love-tryst through the darkness at night" (XXVII, 16).

One of the very unique ways in which mysticism is presented in *Gitanjali* is through the imagery of "King and Subject." Here the Infinite is the king and the
poet the subject. The poet regretfully confesses, "The day was when I did not keep myself in readiness for thee; and entering my heart unbidden as one of the common crowd unknown to me, my king, thou didst press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment of my life" (XLIII, 25-26). The poet, thankfully, confesses that the Infinite many a time, graciously blessed him with unmixed mystical rapture.

God is the King, the Lord and Master of the poet's soul. He does not need any invitation to enter the poet's heart and life and be one with him. God the king immortalises every moment of his subject's life. This king is so kind and considerate that He does not turn away in contempt from the poet's childish play in dust (XLIII, 26), and the steps that he hears in his "playroom are the same that are echoing from star to star" (XLIII, 26).

The poet had to wait very patiently for the arrival of his King all the night through, but He has not yet come. He wonders, "I know not from what
distant time thou art ever coming nearer to meet me. Thy sun and stars can never keep thee hidden from me for ayer" (XLVI, 27). Then the poet confesses that on many a morning and evening the divine footsteps have been heard. His messenger has come within his heart and has called him in secret (XLVI, 28). And he does not know why that day his life was all astir, and a feeling of tremulous joy passed through his heart (XLVI, 28). Now the poet is tired and is afraid that he will be found asleep when the king comes to his door all on a sudden or at least in the morning. He wishes no one forbade the King from coming to His subject, but none should wake him up from his sleep either.

The poet is tired and lies down to rest. He gives himself up entirely to the repose of the moment. When he wakes up from his sleep and opens his eyes he finds the Divine King standing by his side flooding his sleep with a smile (XLVIII, 30). The light of His smile floods the poet's soul. Such an experience is certainly mystical.

Poem no. 49 pictures God as a King who has many
master-musicians in His court, ever ready to play to Him and delight His heart with their sweet melodies. Still, when He hears the "plaintive little strain" of the poet, singing in a humble corner of his little cottage door, he is enamoured of the "simple carol" of the poet-novice and gives him a "flower for a prize". Tagore expresses the idea beautifully when he sings, "One plaintive little strain mingled with the great music of the world, and with a flower for a prize you came down and stopped at my cottage door" (XLIX, 30-31). What is presented here is a beautiful mystical experience.

The presentation of the King-subject relationship in poem no. 50 is quite singular in the whole range of mystical literature. The poet assumes the persona of a beggar, who goes a-begging from door to door. All on a sudden, he sees the golden chariot of the king at a distance. The chariot stops near him. The beggar's hopes rise high. He feels that the luck of his life has come at last. But to his astonishment, the King comes out of the chariot, extends His right
hand to him and asks, "What hast thou to give to me?"
The beggar is at his wit's end. He takes out a little
grain of corn and places it in the king's hand. The
king goes away. The beggar returns home, and empties
his bag. He could not believe his eyes. He finds "a
least gram of gold" among the heap of corn. He exclaims,
"But how great my surprise when at the day's end I
emptied my bag on the floor to find a least gram of
gold among the poor heap" (L, 31). And the beggar (the
poet) bitterly weeps and wishes, "I had had the heart
to give thee my all" (L1, 32). Tagore, through this
lyric, comes to the great realization: self surrender
is essential to the mystical realization of the Divine.
And the divine touch will transform all that is gross
into gold.

Eternal vigilance is the price of mystical
realization. The mystic must be prepared to welcome
the Divine King as and when He comes. Like the wise
virgins, he must keep oil in his lamp. Tagore
illustrates this in poem no. 51 through an allegory.

16 Matt 15: 1-3.
The people of a certain village wait long for the arrival of their king till late in the night. Some of them do hear "knocks" at the door, but they dismiss them as the beatings of the wind. "No, it must be the wind!" (LI, 32), they say. They close the door and retire for the night.

Later, sounds of thunder are heard and the earth shakes and trembles at the noise but it too is dismissed as the mere roar of the thunder. They do not recognise it as the sound of the royal chariot. Somehow, all on a sudden, some people see the king's flag. They ask others to get out of their beds. There is utter confusion. They are not adequately prepared to welcome the king. All are filled with shame. Finally they decide to welcome the king empty-handed, in their bare, undecorated homes. They spread their tattered carpet for the King's rest. They shout, "Greet him with empty hands, lead Him into the rooms all bare!" In real mystical communion there is no room for pomp and paraphernalia but humility, selfless love and total surrender.
This is what the poet emphasizes when he invites, "Bring out thy tattered piece of mat and spread it in the courtyard" (LI, 33). The poet surrenders himself to the king, to the Divine. They have a night of bliss. With the light of day, the King goes away. Then the implication would be that the mystic must ever be ready to welcome death any time it comes. Death comes unasked and most unexpectedly.

In chapter six it will be shown that the poet of Gitanjali is mystically in love with death, whom he considers the Bridegroom who comes to the bride with his rose wreath on his neck, and himself as the bride. He will welcome him wholeheartedly and they will eternally be in mystical communion i.e. the poet is prepared to undergo "the seachange" and be mystically merged in the Divine who presents himself as death.

Poem no. 56 makes it clear that the Divine King is well pleased with His subject so much so that He takes the latter as partner of all his wealth. The poet grants, "Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this wealth" (LVI, 37). The quester-subject experiences
the endless play of the King's delight in his heart. He affirms, "In my heart is the endless play of thy delight" (LVI, 37). The King's will, the Divine will, is ever taking shape in the subject's, the poet's, life. The King's joy is so full in him. Like a lover the King of Kings has decked Himself gorgeously in order to captivate the protagonist's heart and make him do His will always and everywhere. Again, to make the subject surrender fully to his King and Lord, the latter's love loses itself in the love of his subject and there is perfect communion between the two. The poet confirms, "And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two" (LVI, 37).

In poem no. 54 the poet presents the king as revealing Himself to his subject in the persona of a thirsty traveller. This is clearly expressed in the exclamatory statement, "Ah, I am a thirsty traveller" (LVY, 36). Like Christ the King at Jacob's well, 17

17 John 4: 4-27.
and the Buddhist monk Ananda at Chandalika's (Prakriti's) house, he begs His beloved for water. The beloved is shocked out of his day-dreams. He gives his Lord water and as He drinks, the leaves rustle, the cuckoo sings and there is the perfume of flowers all around. Herein we have a fine pen-picture of a very deep mystical experience.

The baba flowers spreading their aroma symbolise the freedom of the subject (the poet) from earthly bondage and his setting out to meet the Divine King. The offering of water to the "Thirsty King" is symbolic of the love and devotion that the poet is prepared to bestow wholeheartedly on his Lord. Consequently divine bliss flows into his heart and the desired mystical communion takes place.

With the dawn of day, the King goes away. The subject now searches for some gifts that the King may have left behind for him. Poem no. 52 opens, "I thought

I should ask of thee -- but I dared not -- the rose wreath thou hadst on thy neck. Thus I waited for the morning, when thou didst depart, to find a few fragments on the bed. And like a beggar I searched in the dawn only for a stray petal or two" (LII, 33).

But the King has not left behind any flowers, spices or vase of perfumed flowers. The only gift He has left behind is His sword. The sword, in this context, symbolises suffering and the consequent spiritual strength and courage the poet experiences through his communion with the Divine. This, again, will be dealt with in detail in chapter six.