

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE**  
**IMAGERY AND IDEAS**  
**AJAI SINGH**

# RABINDRANATH TAGORE

## HIS IMAGERY AND IDEAS

AJAI SINGH



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## Preface

Rabindranath Tagore was a prolific writer with a many-sided genius. His creative fecundity was inexhaustible, and the unlimited variety of his literary output is so extraordinary that the phrase 'myriad minded', which M. Arnold has used for Shakespeare, can appropriately be used for him too. He has written about 300 volumes—poems, plays, short stories, novels, critical essays, comic skits, poetic translations and discourses on religion, history, culture, philosophy, education, etc. To the West, he is known as a great writer of *Gitanjali*; to the Indians, a great poet-thinker. Ever since the publication of *Gitanjali*, he has fascinated quite a large number of scholars, and a number of brilliant and scholarly works have been written on him. Dr. B.C. Chakravorty's study, *Rabindranath Tagore : His Mind and Art*, though admirable, deals mainly with the mind of Tagore and does not examine the artistic side elaborately. M. M. Bhattacharji in his book, *Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Thinker*, has concentrated mainly upon Tagore the thinker; he has not paid due attention to the technical aspect of his poetry. Edward J. Thompson's books *Rabindranath Tagore : His Life and Work* and *Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Dramatist* are written with a view to eulogizing the poet. He, too, has not done justice to the imagery of the poet. S. B. Mukherji's book, *The Poetry of Tagore*, is by far the most comprehensive study of Tagore. Krishna Kriplani's *Tagore : A Life* seems to be the best biography of the poet. It is a well-known fact that the best critical work on Tagore is done in Bengali, and not in English. Dr. Amalendu Bose has written a scholarly book on Tagore's imagery in Bengali. In spite of continuous references to Tagore's imagery, scholars have not discussed in English the poet's imagery systematically and com-

prehensively. Moreover, no body has made the slightest attempt to examine Tagore's imagery in relation to his ideas. Hence the need to study Tagore's imagery in relation to his poetic ideas.

Tagore originally wrote in Bengali. A study of Tagore's imagery based on the English translations of his poems cannot claim to be very authentic. The poet himself has said that poems are not commodities which can be transferred from one market to another. In English translations, many of the images are omitted. The images concerning Hindu mythology are generally ignored. The reason seems to be that these images may not be understood by the non-Indian reader. Moreover, in English translations some of the beauty of the images is bound to suffer, for it is impossible to translate them exactly into the foreign idiom. Nevertheless, Tagore is known to the non-Bengali readers only through the English translations of his poems. The present study of Tagore's imagery in relation to his basic ideas is an humble attempt to assess the poetic sensibility of the poet who has become a legend after winning the coveted Nobel prize.

I cannot close these prefatory remarks without expressing my heart-felt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. K.K. Sharma, Reader in English at the Allahabad University, for his scholarly and affectionate guidance. I am also indebted to many other persons for their assistance and encouragement. Mr. Rajendra Pradeep, Dean of College, M.D. University, Rohtak helped me in many ways. I am thankful to Dr. Rajiva Lochan, Department of English, N.R.E.C. College, Khurja for the valuable suggestions he gave me whenever I approached him to discuss my problems. I am also beholden to Dr. Amalendu Bose for encouraging me to carry on my project. I express my gratitude to Mr. R.B.L. Goswami, Principal, S.D. College, Ghaziabad and Mr. O.P. Mital, Principal, Vaish College, Bhiwani for their constant affection and help. I am also thankful to Dr. T. R. Sharma, Professor and Head, Department of English, Meerut University, Meerut for his scholarly suggestions and encouragement. I am also thankful to Mr. M.C. Gaur Head of the Department of English, N.R.E.C. College, Khurja, who watched my work with a parental care. Also, I am thankful to my wife, Mrs. Shakuntla, who nursed me during my study hours and to my son, Jagdish, and daughter, Rajni who spent infinite labour in correcting the syntactical and typing errors. I should be thankful

to my grand-daughter, Ruchi, who never missed an opportunity to refresh me by her naughtiness. Above all, I am thankful to my Sudhi who inspired me into work.

I am much obliged to the authorities of the National Library, Calcutta, Delhi Public Library, Delhi, the Punjab University Library, Chandigarh, the Kurukshetra University Library, Kurukshetra, The Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh, The British Council Library, Delhi, the U.S.I.S. Library, Delhi, and the Libraries of N.R.E.C. College, Khurja, G.M.N. College, Ambala Cantt, and Vaish College, Bhiwani.

59, Park Colony  
BHIWANI (Haryana)

—AJAI SINGH

TO ESTEEMED  
K. K. SHARMA, D. LITT.  
TO WHOM I OWE MY ACADEMIC LIFE.

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## Introduction

Images are those many-coloured marble-pieces with which the poets build their poetic Tajmahals. Infact, imagery is so integral to poetry that without it a poem looks like "a day without sun, or a woodland without birds".<sup>1</sup> To Herbert Read, "all art is predominantly eidetic, emotionally aware of the plastic reality of its images."<sup>2</sup> T.E. Hulme, the father of Imagist Movement in England, asserts that poetry is not a counter language, but a visible concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which transmits sensations bodily to the reader.<sup>3</sup> Rosemond Tuve disagrees with T.E. Hulme who holds that imagery endeavours to prevent the reader from gliding through an abstract process. She, on the contrary, believes that poets use images 'to fairly push one into an abstract process' and that images are delightful if they make for a greater intellectual richness.<sup>4</sup> In her opinion, an image has a sensuous vividness; it amplifies and illustrates the thought content. It operates secretly and through it "we apprehend abstractions as if they were...concretions."<sup>5</sup> She seems to show that poetry is not more physical than intellectual.

Imagery is not a mere 'literary drapery'<sup>6</sup>; it bodies forth the inner meaning of a poem. It is "a relief and reassurance to descend from the clouds of the abstract to the solid world of things tangible, visible or audible. Concepts are enlivened and illuminated by percepts"<sup>7</sup>. As an image is regulated by the logic of the poet's sensibility, it cuts to size his emotional exuberance. It puts a reasonable restraint on his poetic frenzy and saves him from sagging into abstractions. It gives an emotional precision to the poet's aesthetic experiences and his imaginative thinking.

Moreover, an image is capable of making the experience live in the mind of the reader. Thus, images create a rapport between the creative artist and the receptive reader, thin contradictions are reconciled into a harmonious oneness. Naturally, imagery is considered as the very height and life of poetry :

The very word 'image' has taken on, during the last fifty years or so, a mystical potency : think what Yeats made of it. Yet the image is the constant in all poetry, and every poem is itself an image. Trends come and go, diction alters, metrical fashions change, even the elemental subject-matter may change almost out of recognition : but metaphor remains, the life principle of poetry, the poet's chief test and glory.<sup>8</sup>

As 'image' has taken on a mystical potency, it is difficult, if not impossible to avoid ambiguity and vagueness in defining it. One can "easily devote a volume to arriving at a definition of an image."<sup>9</sup> Though poetic image cannot be defined in a precise terminology, what we understand by Image is "words, or groups of words, which denote things or the quality of things, words with the power to elicit imagined sensory reactions."<sup>10</sup> In other words, images are word-pictures awakened by, and charged with, the emotion and thought of the poet, and they convey to the imaginative reader something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality. Although it is true that every concrete noun is an image, poetic images are more often phrases or even whole sentences than single words. Sometimes a whole poem is a total image composite of many subsidiary images. Adjectives are at times more important to an image than the unobtrusive noun or pronoun they modify.<sup>11</sup> No doubt, images may be created by epithet, simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, paradox, antithesis, juxtaposition, hyperbole, synecdoche, metonymy and Kennings ; but every image is to some degree metaphorical.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes poets recreate an image by turning an old myth into a new metaphor as Keats does in "Ode to Psyche" and Tagore in "Urvashi". An image may be dominated by emotional appeal as "Among the stones I stood a stone" in Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" ; on the other hand, an image may be

predominantly intellectual such as "Evening spreads out like a patient etherised upon a table" in T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". But every image is emotional as well as intellectual. It is its sensuous vividness that grants its physical quality, while it is its intellectual and logical aspect which provides depth to a poem. An image can have an imaginative or a spatial value; but it can also have an archetypal and universal appeal. It is, as V.K. Gokak says, "at the archetypal level that imagery ascends to the level of symbolism."<sup>13</sup> However, an intense image is more valuable than a symbol. A symbol is denotative; it stands for one thing. But a poetic image is affected by the emotional vibrations of its context and is capable of suggesting an infinite extension of the picture it evokes.

### Poetic Image and Modern Psychology

The psycho-analytic critics of imagery believe that images emerge from the unconscious mind which turns every experience into images. To them, S. Freud and C.G. Jung have spoken the last word on imagery. Influenced by the metapsychology of Freud, the psychoanalytic critics of imagery affirm that the roots of poetic imagination lie in the unconscious of the artist. It is from the unconscious that the visions and inspirations of the artist arise. No poet can be a deliberate artist, and he cannot compose a poem at will. They believe that a poem creates itself in moments of self-abandonment. When the poet's conscious self goes to sleep, when his creative lethargy abnegates his conscious self and the coherent organisation of his mental life, his unconscious automatically throws out its contents in the form of images and the poem gushes out from forces seemingly beyond his control. Freud's hypothesis is borne out by the works of certain great poets, exhibiting a peculiar dream-consciousness. Elizabeth Sharp in her memoir of her husband, William Sharp, writes that her husband organised his day-dreams and fantasies in such a way as to keep them apart from his conscious mind.

From time to time the emotional, the more intimate self would sweep aside all conscious control; a dream,

a sudden inner vision, an idea that had been dormant in what he called "the mind behind the mind" would suddenly visualise itself and blot out everything else from his consciousness, and under such impulse he would write with speed, hardly aware of what he wrote, so absorbed was he in the vision with which for the moment he was identified.<sup>14</sup>

The two great Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Keats, speak of a trans-state of mind in which their great poetry was composed. While the beautiful forms of Nature made Wordsworth 'asleep in body', the song of the nightingale and an anaesthetic effect on the conscious mind of Keats. Wordsworth's spiritual awakening seems to resemble the awakening of the unconscious; and Keats's 'drowsy numbness' had 'Lethe-ward had sunk' are images which suggest the complete obliteration of the conscious self. Both the poets seem to have a dreamy, indolent and ego-free sensation from which their poems seem to have emerged. Tagore's best poetry also exhibits some signs of the dream-consciousness. Sarasi Lal Sarkar writes that Tagore once told him that "his poems were the works of his unconscious mind, and that whatever was any play of his conscious mind at the time of writing, he was not at his best."<sup>15</sup> The modern surrealist poetry is engaged in the exploration of the unconscious finally to synthesise it with the conscious—a synthesis by which the surreal becomes surrational. It is enchanted by the dream poetry of Coleridge like "Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan", the mythopoeia of romanticism, and Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". It has an aversion to Dryden and Pope whose poems are said to have been conceived in their 'wit'. These psychoanalytical critics find in a poem "a feeling attaching to an image".<sup>16</sup> The poet's mind is a repository of numberless feelings, phrases, images which remain there until all the particles can unite to form a new compound.<sup>17</sup> Theirs is the theory of association. A poet's mind contains innumerable impressions. An impression, which may be said to be a cluster of memories of sights, sounds, scents, taste and touch sensations, will never rise up in a man's mind without bringing with it another impression which has

something in common with it. When a new impression enters the mind, it will draw up other impressions which have common properties with it. Edward A. Armstrong endeavours "to study Shakespeare's mind in the travail of composition" by investigating the associative processes revealed in his imagery. He finds some image-clusters frequently occurring in his plays. The frequency of image-clusters leads him to postulate his theory that below the conscious mind of the poet some active and organising principle was at work; that memory and emotion are the main factors for this grouping of cluster-images in the unconscious. Images are dropped deep into the dark well of the unconscious, where they undergo a process of incubation a sea-change, before finally emerging into light as materials of art. It is during this period of incubation that clusters of images are formed under emotional pressure. He observes :

If memory...contributes materials for association emotion troubles the waters in which they lie immersed. So that they float—up from the depths products of startling beauty.<sup>18</sup>

John Livingston Lowes<sup>19</sup> also seems to belong to the school of impressionism. He seems to believe that a poet's mind garners many impressions from his personal experiences during his life and also from the books he reads. In his mind these impressions, of their own and constantly too, combine and form new compounds. Until the mind of the artist is in complete repose, these impressions remain in the unconscious. But when the unconscious is at work, whether in dream or in the trans-state of poetic creativity, these impressions detach themselves from the memory and begin to float in all directions. As they float on the current of the unconscious, they collide against one another. From their mutual collisions, they produce new clusters of images which the poet uses in his work. In support of his argument, Livingstone Lowes examines the imagery of "Kubla Khan". He points out that the fragments of knowledge, words and phrases which Coleridge's mind stored during his conscious reading and experiences and which went to the ware-house of his unconscious, fused together and

coalesced and finally emerged as images in dream. He shows how one cluster of images roused up another cluster of images. The idea of a sacred river came from a passage about a green island and a fountain in a book Coleridge knew well viz. James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile*. 'The mount Amara' of *Paradise Lost* becomes 'mount Abora' which also possibly is a blend of 'Abola' a river mentioned by Bruce. Bartram's *Purchas, his Pilgrims*, was the book Coleridge had in hand before falling asleep. The images of 'stately pleasure dome', 'the fertile ground', 'gardens bright with sinuous rills', 'sunny spots of greenery', 'the mighty fountain' and Alph running "through caverns measureless to man", "sunless sea" are images which came to the mind of the poet from the books and the surroundings of his residence. When he fell asleep, the images of a sunny 'pleasure dome' with caves of ice were combined in his unconscious mind.

Miss Spurgeon agrees with the psychoanalytic critics of imagery only so far as Shakespeare's dramas are concerned. When it comes to poetry, she does not see them eye to eye :

...in a poem the writer is more definitely and consciously seeking the images ; whereas in the drama, and especially drama written red-hot as was the Elizabethan, images tumble out of the mouths of the characters in the heat of the writer's feeling or passion, as they naturally surge up into his mind.<sup>20</sup>

C.G. Jung goes many steps ahead of Freud. He modified the Freudian concept of the unconscious. According to Freud, the *Id* is the reservoir of the repressed desires of an individual. So, the unconscious is a personal unconscious. Jung believes that this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experiences and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer is the 'Collective Unconscious' which is not individual but universal. In contrast to personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour which are more or less the same in all human beings.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the unconscious is not so much the unconscious of an individual

as of the entire human race. This Collective Unconsciousness contains traces of racial experiences :

Except when motivated by external necessity, the will to suppress or repress the natural instincts, or rather to overcome their predominance (*superbia*) and lack of co-ordination (*concupiscentia*), derives from a spiritual source ; in other words, the determining factor is the numinous primordial images. These images, ideas, beliefs, or ideals operate through the specific energy of the individual, which he cannot always utilize at will for this purpose, but which seem rather to be drawn out of him by the images.<sup>22</sup>

Jung believes that an image is not an individual image ; it is an archetype which or lives in, and arises from, the Collective Unconscious. For instance, the Collective Unconsciousness has a ready image of a woman, which appears and reappears through the ages, and which is present before men when they describe the women who are significant to them. An inherited image of woman exists in a man's unconscious with the help of which he apprehends the nature of woman. The image becomes conscious and tangible through the actual contacts which a man makes with a woman during his course of life.

Maud Bodkin belongs to the Jungian School. She endeavours to sum up Jung's hypothesis of archetypes :

The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems—a significance going beyond any definite meaning conveyed—he (Jung) attributes to the stirring in the reader's mind, within (beneath) his conscious response, of unconscious forces which he terms 'primordial images' or 'archetypes'. These archetypes he describes as "psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same type", experiences which have happened not to the individual but to his ancestors, and of which the results are inherited in the structure of brain, A PRIORI determinants of individual experience.<sup>23</sup>

Maud Bodkin tries to re-establish Jung by observing that

the "configurations of emotional tendencies"<sup>24</sup>, which are planted in the racial unconscious and are termed archetypal patterns or primordial images, underlie the experience communicated by poetry. The conflict between the generations is the pattern which makes a good work of art so moving. Tragedies like *Orestes* and *Hamlet* move the reader because their emotional patterns correspond to the archetypal pattern in the Collective Unconsciousness of the reader. Maud Bodkin affirms that "The Ancient Mariner" has for its pattern "a movement, downward, or inward towards the earthcentre...balanced by a movement upward and outward"<sup>25</sup> evokes a deep response in the heart because it stirs the rebirth of the archetype in the reader's mind." In her view great poems strike a sympathetic chord in the reader's mind because of their power to stir those primordial images which lie stored in the Collective Unconscious. It is these primordial images which raise a poem from the personal to the universal level.

### Images as Figurative Language

Imagery is so intimately linked up with figures of speech that one can identify the two. Whether this identification is generally agreed to or not, it is certain that some figures of speech create images of startling beauty. Epithet is a device through which poets create their images. Although every concrete noun is an image, yet this image, is general and vague. For instance, if one uses the noun 'mare', a ready but vague visual picture of a smart and beautiful quadruped animal appears before the eye of the mind. A concrete epithet like 'bay' mare is needed to particularise the vague image. An epithet implying its abstract quality like 'good' or 'bad' hardly makes any difference, and a numerical epithet like 'many' either multiplies the image in its indefiniteness or creates another indefinite image of quantity. For instance 'many men' is equivalent to 'a crowd'. But to add an epithet of quality is to progress from the abstract and therefore unvisualized entity of substance to the definite entity of a sense perception.<sup>26</sup> In fact when Coleridge writes 'A hot and Copper Sky' in "The Ancient Mariner", the sky image, which is vague, becomes a particular image because of its epithets 'hot' and 'Copper'.



Similarly, 'Sinuous hills' in "Kubla Khan" becomes a vivid image because of the epithet 'Sinuous'. An epithet, if it is not redundant or presumptuous and does not suffer from inexactitude, creates a definite image. Epithets of colour—dark, white, blue, green—always help a noun in the creation of a definite image. An epithet becomes a personification by giving human attributes to an inanimate object; it can have the force of a metaphor. Visual, gustatory, olfactory and even tactile images can be created with the help of epithets. For instance, dark clouds, golden fleece, floating rafters, sour soup, cold blood and warm heart, are images which arrest the reader's attention at once.

An anti-thesis is also capable of suggesting an image. In Tennyson's description of Sir Lancelot in "Lady Clare"—

His honour rooted in dishonour stood / And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true—

two figures of speech are employed. The second line uses oxymoron—"faith unfaithful" and "falsely true"—and creates no particular image. But the words 'rooted' and 'stood' in the first line create a visual image. They suggest to our mind's eye the image of a flower-plant growing on and standing erect in a dunghill.

Kennings, Metonymy and synecdoche, too, create images, but the images created by them have the defect of periphrasis. Kennings is a simple periphrasis. It uses the word 'candle' for the Sun and 'the head jewels' for eyes. Metonymy is a special form of periphrasis. For instance, 'from the cradle to the grave', instead of 'from birth to death', is an image but not comprehensible to the mind directly. Synecdoche is also a kind of periphrasis. It uses 'fifty sails' for fifty ships, and 'all hands at work' for all men at work and therefore affords only a hint. But a traditional synecdoche may succeed in creating a symbol. As symbol is frequently a traditional synecdoche, the image created by a synecdoche is symbolic in nature. Moreover, as allegory is a continuous metaphor, so symbol is usually a fixed synecdoche.

Hyperbole, personification, myths and legends give us