

The Quest for Beauty in Rabindranath Tagore's Poetry

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Abstract: *Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) pursued beauty all through his life. In his quest for beauty, he passed through many stages of development. His early poems incorporate sensuous observations of nature. The effect of sensuous magnetism persists, but the soul is awakened towards a greater vista of beauty. The soul keeps searching and comes to the conclusion that mere sensuous beauty is not the goal; it needs a revelation of a deeper meaning. He finds beauty in harmony with the inner and the outer principles of nature midway through his poetic life. It is also at this stage that he finds beauty and truth synonymous. To find the absolute beauty, the Infinite, Tagore reaches the final stage where he discerns God and seeks communion with Him. The paper aims at showing how Tagore sees beauty in every object of this universe; how he correlates beauty and truth; and how he seeks communion with the Infinite, the definitive source of all beauty and truth.*

Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European Nobel laureate and poet-saint of India, started his career as a poet and turned out to be one of the most powerful litterateurs, educators, painters, social reformers, and philosophers of his times. He has poured out outstanding masterpieces which have given spiritual nourishment and delight to all those who read them. His messages to the world are, by and large, the messages of truth, beauty, peace, and love which, seeping out of his deep insight of human life, encompass God, nature, and the human soul. In the words of W. B. Yeats, “[The poems of] Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years . . . These lyrics . . . display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long” (ix, xii). Yeats was so pleased reading the poems from *Gitanjali* that he remained engrossed with the book and would carry it with him during his travels. Ambidextrous, Tagore has covered “almost every literary genre” (Radice 21) and the “core object of his writings has been truth and beauty” (Ahmed 9). Believing that ultimately truth and beauty will prevail, Tagore occupies himself in a quest for beauty all through his life. However, while searching for beauty, Tagore often relates beauty to truth and remains aware of a supreme principle pervading nature and the entire universe. This supreme principle, the absolute truth or the unknown mystery, is beautiful, because it shines through the finite, and it is only in the Infinite that mankind finds perpetual freedom.

The quest for beauty is eternal and universal. Throughout history, all cultures and civilizations have searched for and defined beauty in their own ways. From the time of

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Plato till today, many thinkers have tried to explore and define beauty. The quest and an eye for beauty have always been there though there are differences among individuals in the perception of beauty. Plato believes that just as the world people live in is not complete, similarly the beauty people seek is a part of the absolute beauty which is beyond sense perception. His disciple Aristotle adds, “the essential constituent of beauty are symmetry, order and proportion” (qtd. in Chaudhary 62). The beauty Aristotle searches for in symmetry is completely external. Neo-Platonic humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino states, “The beauty of the bodies” consists “in a kind of luminous harmony (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 35-36). However, to Keats, beauty and truth are synonymous as he writes one of the most quoted lines on beauty, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Tagore’s position on beauty and truth is also revealed “in the well-known dialogue with Einstein,” that Kaiser Haq quotes in his essay “Tagore’s Humanism: A Philosophic Quest” in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

Einstein: Truth, then, or Beauty, is not independent of man?

Tagore: No.

Einstein: If there would be no human beings any more, the Apollo of Belvedere would no longer be beautiful?

Tagore: No.

Einstein: I agree with regard to this conception of Beauty, but not with regard to Truth.

Tagore: Why not? Truth is realised through man. (52)

Tagore associates beauty and truth with the conception of the human mind that plays, “a part in the perception of truth” (53) and beauty. He thinks beauty and truth are not independent of the conception of human mind. As the human beings realize them, truth and beauty exist in their mind. Emily Dickinson also finds beauty and truth to be analogous. In the second stanza of her “I died for beauty but was scarce,” she addresses beauty and truth as “one” and “brethren” who are also “kinsmen.” In the poem, one who dies for beauty and the other who dies for truth are brought together to converse, “He questioned softly why I failed? / ‘For beauty,’ I replied – / ‘And I – for Truth – Themself are One – / We Brethren, are,’ He said –” (5-8). Beauty and truth are considered inseparable as one is reflected in the other.

Beauty is also close to goodness. It is assumed that all that is beautiful has to be good and morally correct. Plato in his *Lysis* sees beauty in line with good, “the good is the beautiful.” Much later, Kant agrees with Plato, “Beauty is the symbol of good” (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 92). Seventeenth century philosopher Lord Shaftesbury writes, “what is at once both beautiful and true is of consequence agreeable and good” (qtd. in Knight 165-66). Shelley finds beauty in various objects of the universe. In “Alastor,” he depicts a poet who sets forth to search for “all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe . . . The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions.” To Shelley, ideal beauty is the beauty of all beauty. Tagore has, to a greater extent, semblance with these thinkers and poets in his perception of beauty. The beauty which ordinary people see in a particular image is seen by Tagore as well as Shelley throughout the world. Like Plato, Kant, and Shaftesbury, Tagore sees beauty as good, and like Aristotle and Ficino, he sees beauty in unity and harmony. Like Keats and Dickinson, he sees beauty and truth to be analogous. But unlike them, Tagore’s quest for beauty is a spiritual one that shifts from

the tangible to the intangible, from the finite to the Infinite and sees fulfillment in union with the Infinite who is the absolute beauty and truth.

Tagore, an unparalleled worshipper of beauty, pursues beauty not extrinsically but essentially introspectively, and the sense of beauty appears in his conception as a living, dynamic force. As the spring of beauty is heart, his quest for beauty is chiefly in the heart's Eden. He searches for the basis of the budding beauty of creation within himself and finds an indomitable force within himself. However, as human creativity is dependent upon forces from the phenomenal world, unless and until it is motivated by something in this world or universal life that generates human capacity to appreciate beauty, the human mind cannot succeed in appreciating it. Tagore's quest for beauty, in such a case, is stirred by his wonderful experience with nature. In his own words, "The first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with nature" (qtd. in Sharif 11). The world of nature quivering inside the poet's heart leads him to search for beauty in the outer world. It appeals to him both on account of its purer beauty and the sensuous beauty of the most trivial and commonplace objects. One day he stands on the balcony of his brother's residence and observes:

The glow of sunset combined with the wan twilight in a way that gave the approaching evening a special wonderful attraction. Even the walls of the adjoining house seemed to grow beautiful. The effect of the evening had been from within me; its shade had obliterated myself. When the self was rampant during the day, everything I perceived was mingled with it and hidden by it. Now that the self was put into the background, I could see the world in its own true aspect. That aspect has nothing of triviality in it, it is full of beauty and joy. (qtd. in James xv)

The description of nature that is found here is extraordinary, and it mesmerizes him as he is an avid admirer of nature. Absorbed in the amazing beauty of nature, the poet can discover truth in it. Though it seems to be trivial, he finds it as a source of beauty, truth and joy. It reminds everyone of Keats's celebrated poetic line "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Looking toward the same Sudder Street, Tagore experiences:

The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of the trees. As I continued to gaze, 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. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light. (qtd. in James xv)

This extravaganza of nature invokes thoughts in the poet. He can see the "waves of beauty and joy" pervading the surroundings. He can also feel despondent within a flash of a moment and his heart gets "flooded" with "universal light."

Tagore discovers through the flush of a glorious sunrise the fountains of beauty and joy in the universe and in his famous poem "Nirjharer Swapna-bhanga" (The Fountain's Awakening), his newly stirred soul expresses itself beautifully. It appears in the poem that the new experience unlocks the door of his heart, and he awakes to a new morning:

O, how did the sun's first ray
Into my heart find its way?

This dawn, how could birdsongs pierce my heart's dark den?
 After all this time, why does my heart suddenly stir again?
 My heart stirs again,
 Like a river swelling and bursting its banks
 My desires overflow. (Alam 205)

Through an open door enters the beauty of the natural world. Nature at this moment casts aside her façade and with endless wonder, the poet discovers for the first time how pleasant the beautiful nature is, how captivating her majesty. Tagore's soul stands in admiration before the naked beauty of nature's charms and thus nature, a being of heavenly beauty, steps out in all her magnificence. This beauty of nature, without any doubt, is completely sensuous. Nevertheless, it generates a sort of inspiration and creativity in Tagore's mind. Philosopher poet George Santayana notes, "Sensuous beauty is not the greatest or most important to effect, but it is the most primitive and fundamental, and the most universal" (78). Similar is the case with Tagore. Though sensuous beauty is not ultimate; it has a great appeal to Tagore. The natural world invites him affectionately; and he responds with joy in a way that suggests he had a connection with nature since time immemorial. All these instigate him to build up an all-pervasive relationship with nature. This union of his growing consciousness and the spirit of nature generates joy that springs, Tagore feels, from a realization of the inner harmony of objects.

Tagore's sense of beauty is manifest in almost every poem of *Sonar Taree* (Golden Craft) that reflects his absorption in beauty. That beauty lies in everyday life and not in the distance is well-expressed in "Akasher Chand" (Moon in the Sky) and "Parash Pathar" (Touchstone). "Akasher Chand" portrays a votary who is busy with his whims ("Give me the Moon") and rejects everyday life. To get the distant beauty (the moon), he denies the beauty of the blowing "breeze," laughing "sky," singing "birds," "boys and girls, brothers and sisters" playing and the mother smiling at her child (5-12). In the words of Tagore:

So much earthly life happiness
 comes very close to him and drifts away.
 With face averted and eyes full of tears,
 he just sits there and keeps saying,
 'I don't want any of you;
 I only want the moon.' (James 34-39)

However, the moon "stayed where it was" and he "in the same place" (40-41). But when time passes, he recognizes his mistake and realizes that beauty does not lie in the rejection of everyday life. The world then turns out to be beautiful in his eyes:

he suddenly thought of something;
 He turned round and gazed about –
 He saw that the green earth was beautiful
 on the shore of the blue sea. (James 43-46)

At the sight of the beauty of the world, the worshipper thinks of his past and repents. He heaves a sigh of grief, "I don't want the moon / if I can get back this life" (54-55). Now he discovers the never-ending beauty, "He saw the beautiful village full of life, /

ever noisy with daily joys and sorrows" (56-57). He reviews the "Tiny flowers, flitting smiles, trifling remarks, / fleeting joys, the loves of every moment, / cheerful faces," and so on, which blossom out "spontaneously / around the life of" (65-69) human beings.

A similar truth is explored in "Parash Pathar" (Touchstone) in which the poet implies that earthly and everyday life is pleasantly beautiful. No one can taste the beauty of life if he or she denies the joys of life and thinks of it only partly. Tagore seeks to reach beauty through the joys and sorrows of life. In the poem, a madman who has rejected the joys of life searches for "the touchstone," the absolute truth, the God who can make his life beautiful. His body looks "Like a dark shadow" for "dust and mud" has turned his hair matted and brownish (4-5). He rejects "food and shelter" and smears "dust and ashes on his body" (12-13). Wearing "a gray loin cloth" around his waist and looking "lowlier than a street beggar," he despises "Gold and silver" and is "not envious of riches" (14-19). However, he is so obsessed with the idea of the touchstone that he has no time to look at the beauty of the things around him:

The sky stared with a steadfast look,
The moaning wind blew freely.
At dawn the sun climbed toward the forehead
of the eastern sky,
In the evening
the moon rose slowly.
Incessant streams of water babbled sweetly
as if they longed to tell some deep mysteries, (James 29-36)

The external world looks very beautiful, but the man does not pay any heed to it and goes on searching for his touchstone. Tagore informs that "His old strength is gone, / He stoops under the load of his body, / His heart sank like a felled tree" (125-27). As he rejects the beauty of the world to get the touchstone, he gets neither the glimpse of beauty nor the touchstone. Tagore adds, "Now he offered the remaining half of his broken life / in search of the touchstone" (136-37). That the touchstone of beauty lies in everyday life is not understood by the madman. Hankering after the illusive, he is indifferent to the beauty and joy of everyday life and thereby deprives himself of the easy and simple joys of life.

Several other poems incorporated in *Sonar Taree* (Golden Craft), especially "Mayabad" (Illusionism), "Khela" (A Game), "Bandhan" (A Bond), and "Gati" (Motion) enhance the idea of beauty. This world, replete with diverse joys and sorrows, is beautiful and not an illusion. Through these poems, Tagore seems to emphasize that to have beauty in life, people should not deny the world they inhabit. Our success and beauty lie with everyday things – there is no beauty, no freedom without them. In "Khela" (A Game), Tagore asks people whether they will "keep sitting / in some dark corner of" their heart "after giving up everything" (5-7) and tells them that they should not "stay that way, sitting all alone, / grown old before" (22-23) their age because "The fair of this world / consists of countless creatures" ("Mayabad" 21-22) of this world. He adds in his poem "Gati" (Motion):

I know
that life is full of joys and sorrows,

smiles and tears,
 that cruel bonds form knots and knots of scars.
 I know
 that in the churning of the ocean
 of earthly life,
 it is someone's luck to get nectar,
 someone's luck to get deadly poison.

... ..
 I don't want to tear by myself
 the world-wide bonds –
 I have only one way to go –
 it's with the countless creatures
 of this world. (James 1-9, 22-26)

Tagore wants to live by enjoying the beauty in this world rather than living a life of an ascetic. Narasingha Sil, an Indian American Professor of History at Western Oregon University, writes in his article “*Devotio Humana: Rabindranath’s Love Poems Revisited*,” “Rabindranath Tagore was no world-weary self-abnegating ascetic. He was a seeker of the ultimate freedom and beauty in this life on this planet, and not a beyonder. ‘Not self-immolation, but self-expression must be our aim,’ the poet proclaimed.” Rejection only brings about frustration. It is the experience of life that gives the ultimate joy. And these thoughts are, as evidenced above, well-expressed in Tagore’s poems.

It is obvious that Tagore’s poetry is not an escape from life; rather, it is an expression of joy in the mere act of living. “In his writings, we encounter no longing to escape the world,” observes Kalyan Sen Gupta, “but instead the love of a world that he had found beautiful ever since childhood: ‘I don’t want to leave this beautiful world / I want to live among men.’ And this love never waned, it seems, even for a moment” (87). For his love of this world, Tagore feels the touch of beauty everywhere. And this touch makes everything sweet to him. In his poem “Madhumoy Prithibir Dhuli*,” Tagore remarks that “The heaven is honeyed, honeyed is the dust of this world” (*Sanchayita* 559). To Tagore, real beauty is to be found not in the pursuit of distant gains, but in the enjoyment of the trifles of the moment. He finds beauty in his surroundings. The beauty of the dew-fringed paddy-plants fascinates him. He says that people vainly go far away and waste huge sums of money to seek beauty. If they observe their surroundings intently, they would not be deprived of the real beauty of the dew-fringed paddy field. In Verse no. 34 of *Sphulinga* (Spark), Tagore writes:

For many days I trekked miles after miles
 And spent vast wealth traveling countries,
 Went to see mountains and oceans.
 But hardly did I see
 Walking only two steps from the house
 The beauty of a drop of dew
 Perched upon an ear of paddy.* (*Sanchayita* 511)

* All poems marked with an asterisk have been translated by the authors of this article.

As beauty exists everywhere, no one can separate it from the whole. When one tries to find beauty only for one's own purpose or for a particular intent, he or she blemishes its originality. Tagore gives an excellent analogy to explain the idea:

Be it religion, beauty or any other great thing, whenever someone tries to achieve it, especially by fencing, it loses its originality. For instance, if one dams up the river to keep it for himself, it doesn't remain a river; rather, it turns into a pond.* (*Shahitya* [Literature] 51)

In *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Kalyan Sen Gupta states that, according to Tagore, to appreciate the harmony and beauty of the world, it is not necessary to deny or ignore the evils or the ugly because they are a part of the whole. To support his claim, Gupta paraphrases Tagore's analogy:

A piece of cloth looks beautiful to us even though, were we to look at it through a microscope, we would find it full of ugly, jagged holes. These holes are indeed parts of the cloth, but they in no way spoil its beauty when the cloth is viewed from an appropriate standpoint. Only when they are unduly magnified do they interfere with enjoyment of the whole piece of material. (90)

The analogy clarifies the point that one has to admire beauty as a whole and not in parts. When someone considers beauty a matter of consumption and pride, and attempts to get it narrowly and in parts like the votary ("Akasher Chand") or the madman ("Parash Pathar"), he or she damages beauty, and then the beauty loses its grandeur.

Beauty is not what one tends to consume as Tagore considers beauty to be more valuable than other things in life. One cannot satisfy his or her thirst for beauty and reach it with a corporeal, unrestrained, and impatient mind. He or she has to get it by means of peace and holiness and by controlling passion for worldly or earthly things. If one looks for beauty for narrow, worldly purposes, he or she will not have its grace. Monotony and apathy will grow out of all these vain pursuits. Tagore rejects the material approach to beauty; he enjoys the fountain of beauty, and his world is jovial, lively and full of music. In "Chhinna Patrabali" (Torn Letters), Tagore writes, "Beauty is a real addiction to me. In fact, it cheers me up . . . It is beyond the perceptibility of the senses. Not to speak of eyes and ears; one cannot satisfy one's quest even if he or she tries with the whole heart"* (qtd. in Sharif 11). Sacredness of mind is important to attain eternal beauty.

However, Tagore's rejection of material approach does not suggest that one needs to be a monk and renounce one's family to appreciate beauty. In his essay "Soundarja O Sahitya" (Beauty and Literature), Tagore reports that somewhere in Europe there are people who reject the natural and everyday aspects of life and mark them as trivial and "humdrum" in the name of beauty in literature. They insult the average people's lifestyle all the time and keep themselves aloof from everyday life. Tagore takes pity on them and suggests that if passion for beauty keeps people aloof from family life and hinders them from living life with the surroundings, they had better not seek such beauty (Tagore, *Sahitya* 50). He also adds that their quest for beauty is similar to the extraction of wine from grapes and then throwing away its juice and splendor (50). On the other hand, Tagore writes in Verse no. 73 of *Gitanjali*, "Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. / I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand / bonds of delight" (1-3).

Tagore does not endorse separating beauty and ugliness from daily life. He accepts the bonds and everyday life of enjoyment. He asserts further, “No, I will never shut the doors of my / senses. The delights of sight and hearing and / touch will bear thy delight” (11-13). Tagore believes that the enjoyment by the senses continues to come to people, and they should not stop the flow in any way. According to Sen Gupta:

For [Tagore] truth and beauty are omnipresent, representing, respectively, the law and the harmony of the universe. So there can be no ugliness or untruth in life; it is man’s incapacity to see life as a whole that gives rise to untruth and ugliness. . . . If man can get over his selfishness and view things in a detached manner . . . he can have the true vision of beauty that is everywhere. (qtd. in Tilak 55-56).

People should forsake their selfishness and narrow-mindedness and view things broadly as beauty and ugliness are omnipresent in the world, and they altogether represent the law and harmony of the universe respectively. To deny this co-existence is to show a partial attitude to life. Tagore urges people to shun this partial attitude and see beauty with broader perspectives, and only then they can have a true vision of beauty.

Tagore is never exhausted in enjoying the beauty of nature; he seems attached to nature to feel the presence of beauty. He, therefore, refers to the sky and millions of stars in Verse no. 21 of his *Rogshajyaye* (Sick-bed):

I can only gaze at the universe
 In its full, true form,
 At the millions of stars in the sky\
 Carrying their huge harmonious beauty –
 Never breaking their rhythm
 Or losing their tune,
 Never deranged
 And never stumbling –
 I can only gaze and see, in the sky,
 The spreading layers
 Of a vast, radiant, petalled rose. (Radice, 20-30)

The poet sees the “harmonious beauty” in the countless stars in the sky. His heart is invested with pleasure that he attains from nature’s rhythmic music. He keeps his eyes on the vast sky and finds the image of the rose there.

For Tagore, the world of matter is empty of significance and it becomes true, beautiful, and meaningful only because of human perception. Beauty is a matter of realization and can be perceived through sincerity. If one looks for beauty intently with a beautiful mind, he or she can find it everywhere. In his poem “Ami” (I), Tagore writes:

Emerald becomes green in my perception
 and ruby glows red
 I take a glance at the sky –
 light begins to sparkle
 in the East and the West.
 I take a look at the rose and say ‘beautiful’ –
 beautiful does it appear.’ (*Sanchayita* 482:1-7)

Beauty lies in the perception of the people who portray its image in their mind in various ways. One who has a mind to see beauty in a rose can admire the flower. It depends upon how a person approaches a thing.

Tagore's incessant quest for beauty is well-expressed in his "Niruddesh Jaatra" (Aimless Journey). "Oh Beauty, how much further will you take me?" – with this line begins "Niruddesh Jaatra" as translated by Brother James. The poet asks his ideal Beauty to tell him "on what shore [her] Golden Craft will dock" (2). She "seems to be there in her very flesh, not only beautiful herself, but the cause of beauty in that vast oceanic scene" (Bose 54). The sun is "setting in the distant west" ("Niruddesh Jaatra" 10) but the journey is not yet finished. The poet's ideal Beauty is guiding him from seen to the unseen and known to the unknown. The poet begins his quest for beauty and gathers new ideas and experiences overcoming a great many obstacles. But when will the poet reach absolute beauty? Has this journey any end, any termination at all? The poet asks, "Is there new life there? / Do the dreams of hope / grow into golden fruit there?" (47-49). His Muse "only smiled," in reply, "without speaking" (50-51). Tagore asks again, "Is calm death there – / Is peace there? Is sleep there in the darkness?" (61-62). But "she never speaks or moves; her sole gesture is a lifted finger pointing at the endless seas" (Bose 54). Here beauty seems to be elusive to Tagore because his Muse makes him swim in the maze of mystery.

In *Chitra*, Tagore still searches for his ideal beauty and finds a beautiful place to take respite in. Here he may have a glance of his ideal beauty. In "Din Sheshe" (Day's End), he leads his boat ashore because "It is too late for further sailing" (Radice 2). "On the bank," he finds a girl and asks her on whose shore he is landing. The girl with her bowed head "leaves without a word" (5) and her water-jar overflows. Tagore finds the place lovely, "On the forest's thick canopy shade is falling, / I find the sight of this country pleasing" (8-9). Neither the water nor the leaves stir or move; the birds sleep throughout the forest. At this moment, the bangles on the girl's hands rub the water-jar and produce sweet melodies. The distant temple-lantern glimmers, the marble road, sprinkled with fallen *bakul*-flowers, gleams in the shade, and the breeze brings a melody from the king's distant palace. The poet wishes to anchor his boat in this place as the beautiful nature attracts him so much. Radice illustrates the poet's fascination with the place, "Sunset, strangely beautiful, girl, royal buildings, music combine to suggest an ideal world of beauty, drawing the speaker away from worldly concerns" (135). It is the ideal beauty that the poet is in quest for, and now he feels that he has found that beauty in this place. At the end of the day, he intends to harbor in the land of ideal beauty.

In *Chitra*, Tagore also eulogizes beauty as a whole. With immense variety, the poems "Chitra," "Urvashi," and "Bijayini" reflect Tagore's feeling of ideal Beauty that gives the poet peace, and he sees the image of this beauty in this world. He envisages the presence of that beauty pervading the external world in Bijayini and Urvashi, two beautiful women. In "Chitra," the title poem, Tagore sees beauty in its diversity. Beauty makes its appearance in various forms. In the poem, he explains how beauty exists in this world in various forms. It pervades the blue sky, the flower gardens, the world, the heaven and so forth; it takes various complexions, rhythm and tunes. Nature's diverse forms and its beauty are described in the poem. Countless stories have also been written

and studied, exploring beauty. However, in spite of its multiplicities, beauty has a single undivided reality in his psyche. Tagore writes:

How diverse you are in the world,
 how varied in beauty.
 You're alone within the heart,
 alone, you pervade the heart.* (*Sanchayita* 166: 15-18)

Through these lines, Tagore seems to say that though beauty in the external world is diverse, the heart catches hold of it as one entity. Thirst for beauty lies in the heart of all people, and for Tagore, this thirst cherishes an unfulfilled yearning in his heart.

“Urvashi,” another poem from *Chitra*, authentically embodies Tagore’s perception of beauty. In the poem, there is a picture of a perfectly beautiful woman that the poet has always dreamed of. The beauty which is absolute and essential, incessant and integral, is beyond reach, and that beauty is perfect on its own. Tagore’s Urvashi symbolizes the dancer who scatters the manifold beauties of nature as she dances. She also symbolizes the eternal yearning in the soul of man for Beauty, for union with the Eternal. Moreover, she symbolizes ideal Beauty, eternal youth, and boundless freedom and joy. Tagore sees perfect beauty in the image of the female indeed. But that is beyond consumption, beyond necessity and description, “Not mother, nor child, nor wife, but the beautiful woman, / Thou Eden-inhabitant Urvashi!” (“Urvashi,” *Sanchayita* 1-2). The poet accolades the eternal beauty in this poem; Urvashi stands for that perfect beauty.

According to Hindu mythology, Urvashi is a blissful dancer of Lord Indra’s court, the type of eternal Beauty, who in the beginning rises from the sea when it is churned by the gods. She carries nectar in the right hand and poison in the left. Urvashi “slumbered till day came, and then appeared in her ‘awful little bloom’; she is of all men adored, the ageless wonder” (Tilak 99). Her nectar and poison have special significance. The nectar symbolizes the delight people get by reaching beauty while the poison symbolizes their disappointment and sorrow when not reaching it. In the translation of Edward Thompson:

In the assembly of Gods, when thou dancest in
 ecstasy of joy,
 O swaying wave, Urvashi,

 In the crest of the corn the skirts of the earth tremble;
 From thy necklace stars fall off in the sky;
 Suddenly in the breast of man the heart forgets itself.
 The blood dances! (qtd. in Tilak 99-100)

The poem is an adoration of perfect beauty which is seen to be incorporeal, formless, beyond words, and of no earthly use; it has no relation to this world, no bond and connection as well. “Tagore’s ‘Urvashi,’” asserts Sen Gupta, “is the essence of pure beauty, timeless and eternal as God himself” (qtd. in Tilak 94). In “Urvashi,” as evidenced above, Tagore’s perfect worship of timeless beauty finds its expression.

In “Bijayini” (The Victorious Woman), Tagore’s perception of beauty is expressed through the image of a woman. He considers this victorious woman to be a symbol of

perfect beauty. Human beings crave beauty, but when they see perfect beauty, they can no longer enjoy it. They become captivated then, and their minds tend to adore the beauty with devotion. In the poem, Tagore depicts the image of a woman who comes to bathe in a lake. Her deep-blue clothes lie forlorn in a corner, her girdle lies discarded from her waist, and the breast-cloth becomes disordered upon the ground as if fallen from the twin heavens of a hard stone. Sweet melodies rise in water, land, and sky from four directions and the Love-god (Madan), sitting secretly under a *bakul* tree, frames a winsome story in shadow and sunshine. To get this beautiful woman, “the Love-god, friend of Spring, / was sitting concealed at the foot of the bokul tree, / on fallen flowers, carelessly leaning on the trunk” (Trans.Ketaki Kushari Dyson 70-72). He smiles “with sidelong glance” and observes “the alluring young woman’s / bathing-dalliance” (76-78). When “the beautiful woman came up to the bank” (88), the Love-god rises and comes before her with a soft smile on his face. But when she appears before him after bathing, he becomes spellbound seeing her perfect beauty:

. . .kneeling on the ground,
speechless with wonder, his head bowed down,
at her feet laid his offerings of adoration,
his flower-bow and all his flower-arrows,
emptying his quiver.

At Love after disarmament

the beauty looked benignly, with a serene countenance. (Trans. Dyson 109-15)

In this poem, beauty is depicted concretely. The grace of such beauty is so intense that the Love-god surrenders to the victorious woman, the symbol of perfect beauty. Through this poem, Tagore gives the message that real and perfect beauty lies above sensuality; before it, all carnal desires disappear, and everyone is happy to see this beauty. As the Love-god sees the beautiful woman bathing in the lake, he desires to get her close sensually, but as she appears before him, he changes his sensual mood and begins to adore her perfect beauty, abstaining from all thoughts of sensuality.

Tagore firmly believes that admiration of true beauty cannot be limited to an assessment of color, fragrance, and form. External beauty can entice the eyes momentarily but can never make a permanent impact upon the soul. In his quest for beauty, Tagore moves from the most tangible and visible level of perception to a level where perception is a little more subtle, where beauty is not limited within sensual observations, but in the abstract ideas. In Verse no. 35 of *Gitanjali*, Tagore dreams of a beautiful country where there is no place for negative elements. He calls the Infinite to raise his country “Into that heaven of freedom” (14) “Where the mind is without fear and the / head is held high; Where knowledge is free; / Where the world has not been broken up / into fragments by narrow domestic walls” (1-4). Here the “words come out from the depth / of truth” and “tireless striving stretches its arms / towards perfection” (5-8). The reason does not lose “its way into the dreary desert sand of / dead habit” and “the mind is led forward . . . into ever-widening thought and action” (10-13). In the poem, Tagore wishes not only for inner but also for outer freedom and fearlessness of mind. He seeks the Lord’s support in expanding the consciousness of his people and awakening the country from its lethargic position. He believes that only a perfect harmony where “narrow walls” cannot break the world “into fragments” can help a nation progress. This harmony between the inner and the outer is the essence of Tagore’s spirituality and a distinct sense of beauty.

Apart from Tagore, many other great thinkers of the world have also seen beauty in harmony. Plato states that “The deformed is always inharmonious with the divine, and the beautiful harmonious” (*Symposium*). As referred to earlier, Ficino also sees beauty “in a kind of luminous harmony.” In his *Creative Unity*, Tagore mentions that “[L]ife finds its truth and beauty, not in any exaggeration of sameness, but in harmony” (*The English Writings*, 2:552). Though Tagore’s views on beauty have similarity with those of the aforementioned thinkers, Tagore shows his distinctiveness. His notion of beauty matches Keats’s, and he seems to have been influenced by Keats. Buddhadeva Bose points out in *Tagore: Portrait of a Poet*, “The only line of European verse he quotes repeatedly and with a constancy of admiration . . . is Keats’ ‘Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty’” (113). Tagore declares, “When our universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty” (qtd. in Datta 22). He sees truth as beauty, “. . . the personal expression of truth in its perfection is beauty” (*The English Writings*, 2:524). Tagore’s view of beauty is akin to that of Keats. While Keats states “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” Tagore acknowledges that truth reveals itself in beauty. He adds that “Beauty is no phantasy,” and “it has the everlasting meaning of reality” (500). For Tagore, beauty is everlasting and akin to truth and is to be found in harmony with the universe.

Tagore continues his quest for beauty, and the beauty stands with truth, and he finds that truth in the Infinite, “thou art that / truth which has kindled the light of reason in / my mind” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 4). God is truth and it is He who illumines the mind of man with the light of truth, wisdom, and knowledge. Tagore reveals that God has endowed him with the faculty of reason, and He always provides him with the necessary strength and energy to act in this world. His spirit of beauty dwells in the Infinite, “thou who art the King of / kings hast decked thyself in beauty to / captivate my heart” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 56). The Infinite, the king of kings, has decorated Himself to look beautiful and to enslave the poet’s heart, “O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is / thy love that encloses the soul with colours / and sounds and odours” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 67). God objectifies Himself in the countless beautiful objects of nature. He writes that “To crown the earth” morning comes “with the / golden basket in her right hand and bearing the / wreath of beauty” while the evening comes “through / trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of / peace in her golden pitcher from the western / ocean of rest” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 67). According to Tagore, morning and evening with their respective charms and beauties are different manifestations of God. Though God resides in multitudes, in reality, He is one and indivisible. Through these poems, the poet seems to affirm that the beauty and splendor of nature are only the decorations in which God decorates Himself to captivate his heart and win his love.

The Indian philosopher and poet Sri Aurobindo states, “To find highest beauty is to find God; to reveal, to embody, to create, as we say, highest beauty is to bring out of our souls the living image and power of God” (qtd. in Bidwaikar). To find absolute beauty, Tagore also strives to find God and seek communion with Him. Linking beauty with truth, he expresses the view that it is through our sense of truth that we realize order in creation. Our sense of beauty helps us recognize harmony in the universe (*The English Writings* 2:335). The more we become conscious of this harmony in creation (both within our soul and within the physical world), the more our apprehension of the blissful spirit of the world becomes universal and then “the expression of beauty in our

life moves in goodness and love towards the infinite” (336). And Tagore’s *Gitanjali* explicitly manifests this journey to the Infinite.

Nothing within bounds can reach perfection until it transcends its limitedness and merges in the unlimited and the unformed. The finite and the Infinite, the form and the formless, the part and the whole coexist. Tagore believes that this great world which is an expression of the Infinite calls upon all human beings to explore truth. And that truth is not in his intellect or his possession, but in the illumination of his mind and recognition of the world, not merely as a storehouse of power, but as a habitation of man’s spirit, with its eternal music of beauty and its inner light of the divine presence. Tagore writes:

The light of thy music illumines the
world. The life breath of thy music runs
from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy
music breaks through all stony obstacles and
rushes on. (*Gitanjali*, Verse 3)

Tagore feels bewitched by God’s music, the light of which brightens the world. It is the source of life and vitality which spreads over and permeates all skies. He wants to win the Infinite who illumines the world with His music. In “The Realization of The Infinite” of *Sadhana*, he speaks about the nature of communion with God. He asserts that God cannot be possessed, but experienced. To reinforce this remark, he draws the analogy of the river that joins the larger body of water, the ocean, but cannot become the ocean. Likewise man’s soul, though it yearns to become one with the Infinite, cannot become Brahma Himself (*The English Writings* 2: 341-42). Man can only experience Him, and if one tries to be like Him, he or she is sure to lose everything.

Through his quest for beauty, Tagore reaches the point of death knocking at his door, but he is not afraid of death. Rather, he sees his path wrapped in beauty, “At this time of my parting, wish me good / luck, my friends! The sky is flushed with the / dawn and my path lies beautiful” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 94). He is not scared of death because to him, death is not the end, but a gateway through which he can reach the Infinite. It is not the termination of life, but the rejuvenation of life. In nature, there is a never-ending rhythm of birth, death and re-birth. Tagore experiences many deaths of his near and dear ones. After the death of Kadambari Devi, his sister-in-law, Tagore realizes that his sorrow only enables him to view the beauty of nature from a more accurate perspective. Death gives him a sense of freedom, and he comes to appreciate the deeper meaning of beauty of the world. He realizes that like birth, death has its own beauty and truth. Death is the fulfillment and completion of life, “O thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 91). In death, nothing is lost; rather, it is the channel through which life incessantly flows and renovates itself, and through which one can commune with the Infinite. For this reason, Tagore is not afraid of death.

Tagore is optimistic about meeting his much adored God, the absolute beauty and truth. He has “no fear” in his mind though the way is long and unfamiliar. He wishes to commune with God and describes the “unification scene” through the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom’s union, “The flowers have been woven and the / garland is ready for the bridegroom. After / the wedding the bride shall leave her home / and meet her lord alone in the solitude of / night” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 91). He writes more about the

point of meeting his God, “The evening star will come out when my voyage / is done and the plaintive notes of the twilight / melodies be struck up from the King’s gateway” (*Gitanjali*, Verse 94). Then God will welcome him with His sweet music, and thus the poet will be united with his King, the absolute beauty and truth.

Tagore’s quest for beauty continues till his last days, and his constant contemplation on beauty and truth leads him to a new realization of the presence of the Supreme spirit. He sees beauty in the trifles of the world while nature, as the endless vessel of beauty, appears before him, opening up windows and revealing sights and objects touched with ethereal beauty. Charmed by the diverse and amazing panorama of nature, he pursues beauty unremittingly, and in his quest, he never advocates a renunciation of life. He accepts and enjoys the manifold beauties of life and nature enthusiastically. His fascination for beautiful nature becomes so elevated that Edward J. Thompson claims in “Criticism,” “No poet that ever lived (I shall use this phrase again) has had a more constant and intimate touch with natural beauty.” In search of beauty, Tagore does not follow the path that the ascetics choose nor does he suggest it to others. With an inquisitive mind, he continues his search for beauty and truth. He firmly believes in participating in the humble activities of daily life to realize and reach absolute beauty and truth, the Infinite. The sense of beauty in Tagore is strong and distinctive, and the quest for beauty is certainly his major poetic object.

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