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Metaphors in the Songs of Mirabai and Rabindranath Tagore: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT: This research article is an attempt to explore the profound impact of poetry in producing spiritual knowledge by probing into the language of the mystical songs composed by two renowned classical Indian poets: Mirabai, a sixteenth-century saint-poet deeply devoted to Shri Krishna, and Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Prize-winning poet who wrote in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These poets played a crucial role in establishing mystical literature as a significant aspect of Indian literary tradition. Both poets made colossal contributions to Indian mystical poetry, and their works continue to inspire people around the world to rethink and reinvent Indian history and culture. As is evident in their compositions, each of the poets exhibited an intimate companionship with the divine. Despite hailing from different backgrounds, both poets shared a profound sense of universality and regarded the entire world as their home. However, it is noteworthy that Tagore's literary pursuits were more extensive and diverse, as he expressed himself in a variety of literary forms such as poetry, fiction, and plays, which contributed to his presence in the realm of writing. Tagore's poems and short stories explore philosophical themes, and Mirabai's enchanting verses predominantly venerate the spiritual beauty of Shri Krishna. What makes Mirabai and Rabindranath Tagore's works remarkable is the finesse with which they wield the pen and weave magic through poetry. The musicality of their words and the loftiness of their ideas have left indelible marks on the canvas of Indian literature and continue to inspire people around the globe. Scholars have often compared Tagore's grand vision to that of Sufi mystics and British Romantics. Through a critical analysis of their famous works, one can achieve a better understanding of the Indian philosophical concept of the relationship between human and divine. This paper highlights the contribution of Mirabai and Rabindranath Tagore to Indian mystical poetry, with a particular emphasis on the metaphors of the mind and consciousness as they play out in the fabric of language and literature.

KEYWORDS: Mirabai, Tagore, mysticism, metaphors

Indian philosophy emphasises the importance of spirituality, where individuals can directly communicate with the divine and know the true nature of the self. It affirms that ordinary sensory experience is not sufficient to grasp the underlying reality of the universe. The nature of reality cannot be accessed naturally since it is veiled by perceptions, sensations and cognition. Saints have always believed in and upheld this idea and consider the visible universe to be unreal. They spend a remarkable amount of time in devotional activities and meditate on a selected aspect of the divine, seeking to connect with the reality of existence that forms the essence of everything. Mirabai, Kabir, Tagore, Rahim, and others who wrote devotional poetry in the form of songs and couplets are instances of such saint-poets who have explored philosophically relevant themes such as life, death, and spiritual love in their songs.

Even though, Mirabai and Rabindranath Tagore were separated by centuries, their timeless concept of the divine serves to connect them. While on the one hand, Mirabai's adorations were directed towards Shri Krishna since childhood and were manifest in her poems, on the other Tagore was involved in diverse activities like reading, writing, painting, and even participated in activism like social reform and political leadership. Mirabai's poetry was imbued with a sense of spirituality and used metaphors of divine beauty to demonstrate her devotion to Lord Krishna. Tagore, being a Bengali writer, was deeply influenced by the spiritual themes of *Baul* poems and brought Indian devotional poetry to the consciousness of the West. He also established an experimental school called Shanti Niketan on the ideals of Upanishadic study. Both poets had an intensely profound relationship with the divine and attempted to forge a connection with Shri Krishna through their poetry like Kabir and Tulsidas.

Tagore's renowned book of poems which won him the Nobel prize for literature, *Gitanjali*, translated by him as *Song Offerings*, explores the *atman* or the individual soul's desire to be reunited with the infinite, eternal soul in its purest form, which is referred to as *sat chit ananda* or truth consciousness bliss that is the subtle, pure self, the essence within everyone and everything and devoid of any attributes, and it comprises profound spiritual meditations in the

form of verses offered to the divine. Tagore's songs were based on mysticism and spirituality, while Mirabai's poems centred on her devotion to Shri Krishna and explored themes such as love, death, and nature. Mirabai was a saint of the *saguna* branch of Bhakti. Being immensely devoted to the divine in the form of Shri Krishna she left her husband for her spiritual love of Lord Krishna. Tagore's *nirguna* or formless devotion also focused on spirituality, devotion and nature. However, the devotion of Tagore was to a formless quality of the divine.

Mirabai's poetry exhibits a complete sense of ornamentation and expresses a sense of pursuit for the attainment of her beloved, the divine. Her poetic songs poignantly exhibit the core psychology and philosophy of humanity and religion, which is an essential feature of Vedas. She belongs to a secure religion of devotional poets of modern India who explore their feelings for their lord through the analogy of human relations, such as a mother's love for her children, companionship, and others. Mirabai's form of devotion is not one that breaks down virtue, disfigures values, and reduces religion to a mere ritualistic faith but is a profound faith.

Through her poems, Mirabai inspires human beings to look for a purpose in life and to recognise that life is a gift from the divine. She urges people not to forget their true nature and to enjoy this life instead of striving only for material possessions. Her aim is to raise awareness about the importance of a joyful and fulfilling life. She emphasises that in the whole world, only the divine truly belongs to us. She has searched everywhere and found that no one else is as loyal to her as Krishna. She has let go of attachments to family, friends, status, and wealth, and now only enjoys the company of saints. When she sees someone seeking spiritual enlightenment, it uplifts her, as this world only brings her down. Her poems speak of Mirabai's ardent love for Shri Krishna and how she considers him to be the only one who is truly loyal to her. She explains how she has lost everything: her property, her stature in society, her relatives and companions, and now finds delight only in her companionship with Shri Krishna.

In one of her songs, Mirabai shares her belief that the universe is like a wastebasket, wanting the knowledge of truth. People often waste their time criticising the divine when they could be utilising the opportunity of life to seek the perfect union. She emphasises the importance of the divine in our lives, comparing the relationship to that between a teacher and a student. Without the divine, one cannot feel anything holistically, just as one cannot experience sadness without having experienced joy. She speaks of enjoying the company of saints, particularly Krishna lovers. At the same time, she reflects on the fleeting nature of human existence, which grows smaller with each passing breath. Once gone, it cannot be regained, and the struggles of the world only wear one down. She suggests that victory in the sport of life is merely failure because the divine is not gained through any material gain. This idea is echoed by many saints who have emphasised the short duration of life and the importance of making the most of life. In another song, Mirabai insists that one ceases to exist when the time arrives to leave the body and is reborn with a new soul and a new destiny. This is the law of the universe that every saint believes in, as life is a brief gift from the divine.

As a mystic, Tagore believed in the formless aspect of the divine. He explored his spiritual love for the divine in his collection of songs, expressing that the soul never dies and lives on in this world, leading to immortality. His collection of devotional songs compiled in the form of song offerings titled *Gitanjali* is a testament to his spiritual beliefs.

Both Tagore and Mirabai were deeply inspired by their devotion to Shri Krishna. Tagore compared himself to the flute of Shri Krishna, emphasising his own spiritual inspiration and the reciprocal inspiration that the divine provides. Similarly, Mirabai explored the beauty of Krishna in her devotion, losing herself in his divine love. Other poets, such as Kabir, Rumi, and Rahim, were also similarly inspired by the divine. Through their poetry, Tagore and Mirabai address themes such as humanity, human existence, and nature. Tagore, like William Wordsworth and William Blake, was also inspired by childhood. Wordsworth famously wrote, "The child is the father of the man," suggesting that devotion to the divine is present even in childhood. Both poets elaborate on the concept of the divine and spirituality, with Tagore's collection of devotional songs, *Gitanjali*, reflecting Upanishadic beliefs. In their works, both Tagore and Mirabai suggest that the human spirit yearns to be united with the divine, and material bonds act as the greatest impediments on this path. However, once the knowledge of the identity of the self with the divine dawns upon the individual, one overcomes the hurdles of life and is full of compassion for everyone and everything.

In Mirabai's works, the pertinent concept of mind is explored through various metaphors and poetic devices. Mirabai often depicts the mind as a barrier to the devotee's spiritual progress, using metaphors of imprisonment and slavery to describe its oppressive hold on the soul. For example, in her song "Mere to Girdhar Gopal," Mirabai compares the mind to a bird trapped in a cage, unable to escape until it is set free by the compassionate grace of the

divine. This metaphor of the bird in a cage frequently appears in her songs to describe the pitiable human condition, in which the soul is trapped in the body and the mind, unable to reach the divine without the guidance and cooperation of divine intervention in the form of an embodied teacher. Mirabai's ultimate motive, as expressed in her compositions, appears to be the union with the divinity or pure consciousness to occur through harmony, mental fortitude, awareness, tranquillity, and the reunion of the human self with eternity.

Tagore, a mystic poet, explores his spiritual love for the divine in one of his poems by comparing human life with the flute of Krishna and believes that the soul is endless, always alive, and only the body is lost. He considers the human body a vessel, and all humans are the flutes of the divine, providing rhyme to the universe. Tagore also expresses that when the divine touches him, the persona's heart fills with joy and love for him. In another poem, Tagore states that when the divine commands him to sing, he feels immense pride, and tears come to his eyes as he looks at the divine's countenance. All the dissonance in his life melts into a mellifluous harmony when he sings, and he feels as though his adoration has spread wings like a bird on a flight across the sea. He knows that the divine takes pleasure in his singing, and he feels that he comes before the divine's presence as a singer. He even expresses that he forgets himself and calls the divine his friend when he is drunk with the joy of singing. Tagore is inspired by the divine and expresses his feelings through his poetry.

Mirabai's worship was of *Madhura Kanta Bhava*, where Mira met with Krishna most intimately, and she experienced the joys of elevation as well as the pangs of separation. The composition "*Doosra Na Koi*" explicitly illustrates the ecstasy of Mira, thereby breaking away from the stereotypical representation of Mirabai as an icon. The ocean but the sacrifice, the trail of love, defiance, and liberation, as exemplified by Mirabai, is so intricately layered that it demands a unique language to enact or embody in a symbolic way Mirabai's entire life and the complexity of emotional capacity weaving in elements of *Sanyoga*, *lajja*, *viral*, *upalambh*, *nishchay*, and protection. The treatment of the select compositions of Mira appears across generations, and therefore, senior dancer Vandana Sen, who was trained in her Jaipur family, depicts freedom in a male-dominated society. The impact of my choreography has to be devised to be compatible with the established image, for instance in the film "*BasoMore Nainan Mein*," the production employs very well-known film songs on Krishna.

The concept of *Madhura bhakti*, where the lord is the supreme lover, garnered popularity among the devotees of Krishna, especially with the compositions of the *Ashtachhapkavi*, who were eight followers of Vallabhacharya. The aesthetically imaginative songs of *Ashtachhapkavi* established human connection with the divine in an intensely emotional manner, and it appeared as though they were participating in his *leela* or divine play. The range of *Bhakti* forms like *Dasya bhakti* is reflected in Mira's songs, Surdas says "*Jasoda Hari Paalne Jhulaway*", and Rabindranath Tagore composed striking, expressionistic portraits.

Despite his poor physical condition, Tagore felt compelled to translate some of the poetry from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, one at a time, in a notebook that he carried in his pocket. In this manner, he recreated, in an alternative language, the emotions and thoughts that had brought him joy. Conversely, Tagore's songs explore the power of the mind to transcend earthly limitations and connect with the divine. He emphasises the mind's ability to lead us to spiritual truths, comparing it to a guide or compass. In both Mirabai and Tagore's work, the mind is not passive, but an active force that must be tackled and directed towards spiritual growth. Mirabai's songs often depict the mind as a barrier to spiritual progress, while Tagore equates the mind to the soul, imprisoned in the body like a flute. The use of metaphors helps to convey the complexity of the mind and its relationship with the divine. Mirabai's song "Drink the Nectar" offers guidance through metaphor, urging listeners to change their actions and attitudes in pursuit of permanent happiness and avoid the traps of earthly illusion. In Tagore's "Pluck this Little Flower, Take it, Delay Not," he compares life to a flower that must be offered in worship before it fades away. Love, joy, and the knowledge of oneness are intertwined, and these themes permeate the poetry of both Mirabai and Tagore.

Mira and Tagore are both renowned for their contributions to mysticism and spiritualism. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore's poems explore the themes of devotion to the divine, humanity, life and death, and the intensity of emotions. Similarly, Mira's songs also delve into spirituality, devotion, the soul, humanity, and the essence of human life. Both Mira and Tagore emphasise the connection between the divine and humanity, and the concept of the universe as a whole. Tagore believes that the essence of the divine cannot be understood through logic but can only be felt, and merging with the divine brings meaning to life. Tagore sees reality without name or form. He also compares the concept of the universe to that of man.

It is clear that both Mirabai and Tagore have a strong spiritual and mystical inclination, and they express their devotion and belief through their writing. Mira, in particular, is known for her devotion to Lord Krishna and her willingness to sacrifice everything for him. She also recognises the beauty and goodness in the universe and encourages others to immerse themselves in it. Tagore, on the other hand, sees the mind as the soul trapped in the body, and he emphasises the need for divine grace to release it. Both writers convey important messages through their writing, urging readers to look beyond earthly illusions and pursue a higher purpose.

Mirabai and Tagore both define life and death similarly. The concept of life and death is often intertwined with spiritual and mystical beliefs in many cultures and religions, including Hinduism. The idea of reincarnation, where the soul of a person continues to exist after death and is reborn into a new body, is central to Hinduism and is also reflected in the works of Mirabai and Tagore. They both explore the themes of the impermanence of life and the continuity of the soul, and how devotion to a higher power can help one transcend the cycle of birth and death. In this sense, they are both conveying the message that life is a temporary phase in our journey towards ultimate liberation and reunion with the divine.

Mirabai and Tagore both had a very significant role in mysticism, and both believed in spiritual love. In the Indian tradition, a lot of devotional points in passionate praise of Krishna are attributed to Mira. However, scholars believe that only a few hundred of these points are authentic, and early written records suggest that most were written down only in the eighteenth century. Many songs attributed to Mirabai were later composed by others who admired her, and such volumes are popular across India. In her songs, Shri Krishna is represented as a yogi and lover. Mirabai saw herself as a yogi ready to take her place by Shri Krishna's side and attain spiritual marital bliss. Her poetry is of high literary significance and demonstrates lyrical brilliance. Mirabai is often compared to the northern saints of *bhakti*, who spoke of formless divinity.

As an educator and reformer, Rabindranath Tagore founded Shanti Niketan, a unique open-air school, as well as the prestigious Vishwa Bharti University. Tagore was an anglicised Thakur. Tagore was fond of boating on the river Padma. The unspoiled natural beauty of the region seemed to stimulate his creativity, as his writing continued day after day. Tagore's joyful embrace of nature is woven into more than just his songs, as can be seen in this small piece written in both Bengali and English: "My fancies are fireflies, sparks of living light, 'twinkling in the dark'." The same voice murmurs in these desultory lines, which is born of wayside pansies letting hasty glances pass by. Tagore considered human life to be as fragile, precious, and feeling as a delicate flower. His style of songs ranges from traditional formalism to mystical visionary, and his approach can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Tagore was influenced by the mysticism of the ancient *rishis* who composed the Upanishads and by later spiritual figures like Kabir and Ram Prasad. Tagore's works were further enriched by his exposure to rural Bengali folk music. Over the years, respect for this great saint grew so much that he was referred to as 'Gurudev'. Most of Tagore's works are in the native Bengali language, but he translated some of his works into English. The most famous of these is a collection of songs known as Gitanjali. Tagore also composed the music and lyrics for many poems.

Tagore asserts that which is not known by sense and definition, whose value is not in any practical use but can only be directly felt within the deepest recesses of one's being. He talks about the relationship between man and the divine. If one desires to forge a relationship with the divine, one must try to understand the way of life. He tries to say that the soul is immortal and eternal and does not die when the body dies. The mysticism of Kabir, which causes him to call himself a bride and the divine the bridegroom, left a mark on Tagore. Tagore also addresses the divine by many names, akin to Arjuna in the epic *Mahabharata*, until he realises that the divine is formless and omnipresent, thus incapable of being confined to a form and place.

Mirabai and Rabindranath Tagore are celebrated as saint poets of Indian spiritual tradition and use metaphors in their songs to connote the spirituality of the self spiritually. They employ universal themes that bridge the materialistic and spiritual realms to convey their devotion to their lords. Their works reveal an evolution of awareness, and emphasise the importance of polyphony, mental toughness, human existence, life and death, pure consciousness, tranquillity, and reunion of the human self with eternity. They believe in spiritual love and were influenced by bhakti poets. Tagore's romanticism is notable for his intimate connection with nature, which he and Mirabai believed was necessary to transcend the self. The use of metaphor in religious poetry transcends language barriers and provides a chance to understand the nuances of meaning and implications that are entrenched at the conceptual and cognitive levels. Both Mirabai and Tagore wrote multiple songs in worship of the divine and share similarities with other mystics



who believe in the formlessness of the supreme and the importance of expressing love. While the Western intellectual tradition emphasises the intellect and mind to learn about the nature of the self and life, Tagore explores everything related to nature, both represented in the universe and beyond. Tagore's works demonstrate his belief in every lord, as seen in his comparison of himself with the flute of Lord Krishna in his collection of poems, *Gitanjali*.

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