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Mysticism in Dylan and Tagore: Shedding Light on *Gitanjali* and the *Christian Trilogy*

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Abstract: Both Dylan and Tagore are mystics, who presented deep devotion to Lord in their lyrics. In three of his albums of early 80s namely “Slow Train Coming”, “Saved” and “Shot of Love” popularly called as “Christian Trilogy”, Dylan has a number of spiritual gospel songs. On the other hand, *Gitanjali* has the most appealing spiritual poem-cum-songs of Tagore’s, carefully chosen by himself from among his poems and translated in English by himself and edited by W.B Yeats. Their mysticism is clearly evident in many popular lyrics of theirs, many of which are found in the mentioned compilations. The reason behind choosing these compilations is that they represent the mystic thoughts to the greatest extent, compared to their other works. The *Christian Trilogy* albums present the spontaneous expression of Dylan’s metamorphosis as an Evangelic Christian from Judaism, whereas *Gitanjali* is the selection of Tagore’s best lyrics and it brought him the Nobel Prize in 1913. Both of the poets received the Prize for writing lyrics, which is the other reason why they are brought together here.

Keywords: Mysticism, Tagore, Dylan, Christianity, Hinduism

Introduction

Bob Dylan and Rabindranath Tagore, two lyricists from two different centuries and two different cultures received the highest accolade of literature in the form of the Nobel Prize. Dylan, after his conversion to Christianity from Judaism in 1979, released three albums that are popularly called together as Christian trilogy subsequently in three consecutive years featuring his mysticism and spirituality. Released in 1910 Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, the “Song Offerings”, brought him the highest honor in literature. A born Hindu and a secular in practice, Tagore put his signs of mysticism in the song compilation. In the midst of controversy on if songs are literature in the wake of Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize it was mentioned in famous press media that Bob Dylan was the first lyricist to receive the prize for writing songs, but they were wrong. It was Rabindranath Tagore who was the first lyricist to have the honor. This controversial press releases triggered questions about world’s knowledge of Tagore. It is the same lack of knowledge of the western media that triggered this write-up. As fan of both the lyricist, this author felt an urge to bring these two lyricists together through a comparative study. We come to know from Joshi (2019) about Purna Das and Laxman Das, two famous Baul singers who went to live in Woodstock at the house of Bob Dylan in the mid-1960s and their resulting friendship”. That might be considered as a bridge between the oriental and the occidental culture, but that necessarily does not create any

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bridge between Dylan and Tagore. A number of scholars have explored Tagore's mysticism. So is the case with Dylan. However, no attempt has yet been taken to bring Tagore and Dylan together, in spite of the fact that both of them received the highest accolade for their lyrics. It seems like, scholars admiring Dylan did not know Tagore, and vice versa. Cultural journalists tend to be ignorant of the fact that, Tagore was the first lyricist to receive Nobel Prize for writing lyrics, as they, at times, mistakenly credit Dylan with the title. In response Amit Choudhury put it as, "The first (and the only other) songwriter the prize went to was the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, in 1913." (Choudhury, n.d.) Dylan and Tagore have few features in common. Both of them are lyricists, music composers, singers and performers - these being Dylan's mainstream and Tagore's part of a vast literary endeavor.

Research Methodology

This paper is a literary analysis in the form of close reading of the poems from the mentioned compilations. This author made a comparative analysis between *Gitanjali* and the Christian Trilogy albums in terms of the elements of mysticism found in them. A major limitation is the author's religious belief that is completely different from that of the two poets. Another possible limitation is that, the scope is limited to few albums and their might be more powerful examples of mysticism outside them. The two poets chosen here belong to two different cultures and lived a century apart from each other, which can be an obstacle to true comparison though.

Mysticism in General

The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary defines mysticism as "the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As we find in Britannica, mysticism is "the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them." (Mercur, n.d.). John MacArthur finds, "Mysticism is the belief that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the human intellect and natural senses." Also he thought, "Mysticism ultimately derives its authority from a self-actualized, self-authenticated light rising from within." (MacArthur, 1994). According to Woorburne, there are "two kinds of mysticism", one of them being "personal mysticism" and the other "impersonal mysticism". And he added, "too often Indian mysticism is lumped into the category of impersonal mysticism..." (Woodburne, 1925).

In Walter Stace's (1960) observation mystical consciousness takes two forms, of which, one is "introvertive mystic" pointing to those with awareness of one with which they experience union or identity, and the other "extrovertive mystic" indicating those perceiving all things as one. Grace Jantzen sees modern philosophers' discussion on mysticism as measured by their close association with visions, trances, raptures, and other extraordinary experiences. What he misses here is "a lifetime of "being toward God"", which is the heart of mysticism, as he thought. (Jantzen, 1989).

Mysticism in Hinduism has some unique features. As Arion suggested, when it comes to mysticism, "Hinduism emphasizes true knowledge", He farther added "knowledge (jñāna), obtained through meditative contemplation, is the path of mysticism in Hinduism". In Hindu mysticism, "union with Brahman" has to be achieved

“consciously through the salvific gnosis” and “removing the veil of ignorance (māya), that is, by knowing that the world is illusory, by the act of consciousness that man is essentially, always, identical to God.” (Arion, 2018).

Literature Review

In academia, Dylan's and Tagore's mysticism have been discussed time and again. However none attempted to do a comparative study between them, which is why review of literature on the comparative study of the two poets and their mysticism is not being possible. We can review few of the pieces that are available, though.

Originally a Jew, Dylan's religious beliefs have evolved over the years, and in 1979, when he released “Slow Train Coming,” he was deeply immersed in Evangelical Christianity. In the introduction of his book *Dylan Redeemed* (2006) Stephen H. Webb mentioned that as he himself is an Evangelical Christian, Dylan's conversion, which coincided with Webb graduating from High School, meant a lot to him personally. (Webb, 2006). Dylan's conversion, naturally, had a big impact on the three subsequent albums. On the other hand, mysticism that *Gitanjali* portrays is of Rabindranath Tagore, a Brahmin, though he “inevitably evolved with modern Indian culture away from the more rigid forms of Brahminism, as instanced by his relinquishing the sacred thread which he was entitled to wear by birth as a member of the Brahmin class” (Glaysheer 2011). Discussion of mysticism from Christianity and Hinduism points of view may make it clearer what their mysticism entail. As for Evangelic mysticism Ken Hornok suggests, “There is no agreement on a formal definition in modern day evangelical literature”. However, it is clear that Evangelists do not believe in claimed revelation of God to man other than the scripture. Hornok clarifies, “Conservative evangelicals reject the validity of mystical experiences claimed by Catholics” such as “The Lord spoke to me.” Or “I feel led to...” or “The Holy Spirit prompted me to...” and the reason is “... it threatens the sole authority of God's already revealed word, which He has recorded in Scripture.” (Hornok 2012).

Dylan's Christian Trilogy albums were not taken seriously by the listener folk in the first place, as put forward by Altinius (2024). He remarked “when he stopped preaching, many chose to overlook the three albums *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981) both musically and spiritually” (Altinius, 2024). The significance of the albums started being felt after the Nobel Prize and the late release of “*Trouble No More: The Bootleg Series vol. 13 / 1979 – 1981*” in 2017, he added. Altinius, (2024) refuses to consider that the Christian Trilogy albums are about ‘mere religion’.

Because of Tagore's obsession with nature, Tagore's mysticism found in *Gitanjali* is being called “Eco-mysticism” (Hebbar & Mallya, 2024). His mysticism is being taken as different from that of the saints, as the former practices mysticism through love and desire for union, and the later achieve it through “deep meditation” (Matta & Morve, 2017). Sometimes his mysticism has been termed as a relationship between “the beloved and the lover” (Kannath, 2004). Some aligns his mysticism with that of the Sufis saying that Tagore's mysticism presented in his words “intersects with Sufi philosophy” (Khashnabish, n.d.). After the release of *Gitanjali* and the Nobel Prize, “Mystery was the first thing that the West found in Tagore” (Sen, 1996). The western community love to tag Tagore as one with mysticism as the brightest feature. Ezra Pound called *Gitanjali* a “series of spiritual lyrics” (Pound, 1913). W. B. Yeats, E. M. Forster and Leonard Woolf join the row as put forward by Nabanita (1966).

Some Unique Features of Dylan's Mysticism

Dylan believes human beings, irrespective of their social identities, cannot be spiritually neutral; they have to serve the Almighty, or serve the devil. This is what "Gotta Serve Somebody" has to say. He makes it clear that, no matter how much powerful one is, one has to serve "the Lord", or it will ultimately mean, one is a servant of the devil.

Dylan was spiritually "blinded by the devil, born already ruined". Then he was "saved by the blood of the Lamb", which is a direct reference to Christian theology, where believers are saved by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, often referred to as the Lamb of God. He requires human guidance to attain his spirituality. Dylan was away from the path of light and was "little too blind to see". Some woman, whom he, out of utter respect, addresses as "Precious angel" and "lamp" of his "soul", took her to the path of light, as we find in the song "Precious Angel" He puts it as,

*"Precious angel, under the sun
How was I to know you'd be the one
To show me I was blinded, to show me I was gone
How weak was the foundation I was standing upon?"*

Lord and woman come side by side in "The Covenant Woman" too. It is a triangle – the man, the woman and the teaching of Christ. Here there is a covenant between a man and a woman who not only love each other but also share a belief about God's existence.

Reference to the scriptures and adherence to the Christ are remarkable of Dylan. In the line "we're living by the golden rule, whoever got the gold rules" from the song "Gonna Change my Way of Thinking" there is a direct reference to the New Testament's golden rule such as do unto others as you would be done by. In "Do right to me baby" the very first Christian song Dylan composed, he referred to this Golden Rule, "if you do right to me baby, I'll do right to you." In "Do right to me baby" The line "Don't wanna judge nobody, Don't wanna be judged," may suggest every single day of a Christian is judged according to how well he/she fulfils what the New Testament requires people to be.

This kind of submissiveness is really unusual from Dylan who was called an "Outlaw" by some critiques due to his habitual protest against establishment through striking lyrics in his early years of performances as a singer cum songwriter. Dylan is in a constant renewal throughout his creative career, at times about his spirituality and at times in his musical endeavor let alone the romantic episode.

The song "In the Garden" Dylan presents the Christian belief in the Second Coming of through some rhetorical questions about Jesus Christ. The Christ will come back to judge the world on the Judgement Day, which is being softly reminded of. The song "Saving Grace" has devil's duplicitous nature which "can be most blinding" and also Lord's mercy.

The "solid rock" from "Saved" refers to Jesus's pains and sacrifices. In "Are You Ready" Dylan wants the Christians to be "ready" to "meet Jesus" or on the day of Judgement He may say, "Depart from me". Christians are required to "lay down" their lives "for the brethren" for the ultimate salvation. Dylan is "Gonna change" his "way of thinking" and is no more ready to be "influenced by the fools" as he puts in the song "Gonna Change My way of Thinking. But Dylan gradually grew cynical views of

prevailing Christianity. In “Dead Man, Dead Man” from Shot of Love Dylan is turning away from a type of Christianity that has disappointed him and even has misused his trust. Green termed Dylan's 70s as the period when he “oscillates between two objects of salvation - woman and God”. (Green 2024). His swinging between God and women, though sounds weird, marks the unique nature of his spirituality.

Some Unique Features of Tagore's Mysticism

Tagore is a master of portraying nature in poetry. Very few poets can portray nature in more details than Tagore. Song 48 presents a glimpse of Tagore's obsessive love for nature. He has innumerable instances of that kind, one of which being, “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.” (Song 69). He compares human body with the universe, both of which have “the same stream of life”, that indicates his awareness of the *dehotatva* (doctrine of the human body) of the bauls of Bengal.

Tagore's mystic thoughts are filled with joy. It is joy that “makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass” and it dances “over the wide world”. He is obsessed with “light” and “joy” in a similar fashion, as if light is joy, and joy is light. To Tagore He is “the innermost one” and he awakes his soul with “deep hidden touches”. It is He who “joyfully plays on the chords” of his heart (song 72). Tagore finds joy in the proximity of God. Nothing but God's joy fulfills him. In song 56 he says, “Thus it is that Thy joy in me is so full”. Tagore loves to act as an instrument in the hand of God. He loves it when God uses him as a flute to produce divinely music (song 1), or to see His creation through his eyes (song 65).

By saying “Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well” in song 67 he firstly creates a puzzle and then elaborates and explains why it is so. He means to say, sometime God covers us “silently to crown the earth”, sometimes frees our soul “to take her flight”. Here comes “freedom” which is another crucial term in Tagore's mysticism. He feels “the embrace of freedom” in His love and blessings (song 73). He found God as mysterious.

Nirod C. Choudhury does not see Tagore as a “true mystic” because he “could never abolish the duality between man and God,” (Choudhury, 1987). He rightly observed that, Tagore - very habitually - is submerged in worship and to worship is to show devotion to God considering oneself separate from Him. However, this is another form of mysticism as Walter Stace called it “extroverted mysticism” (Stace 1960), as opposite to the kind of mysticism Choudhury expected from Tagore.

Tagore's music and his mysticism go hand in. In *Gitanjali* we have the word “song” 30 times “music” 18 times, “melodies” 6 times, in the 103 songs of 100 word length each on an average, which proves Tagore's love for the concept of music, especially during divine thoughts. The word “music” plays a major role in Tagore's poetry recurring time and again. His mystic thoughts in *Gitanjali* are music-quoted, both literally and implicitly. His frequent use of the names of musical instruments such as “flute”, “vina” “harp” etc. shows his love for music. In song 1 he considers himself a flute that produces “melodies eternally new”, that spread “over hills and dales”, which is being possible, as God himself is blowing it. As if, music is the life-blood, filled by God himself in his veins or, it represents the power of knowledge that God has

empowered him with. In song 2 he says, God “takest pleasure” in his “singing”. Song 3 has to say, “The light of thy music illumines the world.”

In fact, generally, music and mysticism are inter-related, in a sense that, most of the mystics love music and music is an element for their spiritual attainment. Many of them practice mysticism through music or vice versa. Lalon Shah of Bengal is one of the brightest examples of a poet of spiritual mysticism who attained that through music. His *dehotatva* (doctrine of human body) has been presented through his baul songs, a kind of Bangla folk songs.

Like “music”, the word “light” plays crucial roles in Tagore’s mysticism, which is proved through his use of the word as many as 58 times in *Gitanjali*. As St. Teresa De Aliva put it, while talking about Christian mysticism, we mingle with God like “light in light”. Tagore is illuminated by heavenly light, as we see in Song 57. Light is everywhere and it illuminates the world, as well as Tagore himself and his soul.

Tagore’s contemplation of death cannot be separated from his mysticism. Tagore wishes to offer is “forlorn self” to Lord through death (song 86). In song 90 he reiterates about offering “the full vessel” of his “life” to death. In song 91 he compares death with a “wedding” when “the bride shall leave her home and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night.” In another instance Tagore says: “Let your life lightly dance on the edges of time like dew on the tip of a leaf.” Here Tagore finds life as temporary as a dew drop on a leaf.

Patriotism and divinity come together in Tagore. In Song 35 he seeks freedom for the land and for all. He wishes the country along with the people may “awake” into the “heaven of freedom” and they may thrive “where the mind is without fear” by the grace of “Father”. He “came down” from his “throne” and stood at his “cottage door” (song 49).

Comparable Features of Dylan and Tagore in Terms of Mysticism

Dylan seeks divine guidance and relies on the divine mercy. In “When He Returns” he says, When the Almighty will return, all wrongs will be rectified and peace will reign on earth. According to him, He can cause our misery, but he will not, and so we should not cry or burn ourselves in distress. He says:

“It is only He who can reduce me to tears
Don’t you cry and Don’t you die and Don’t you burn
For like a thief in the night, He’ll replace wrong with right
When He returns.”

Tagore is sure about divine guidance. “When I give up the helm I know that the time has come for thee to take it.” (song 99). In song 103 he says, In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet.” In song 3 Tagore says,

“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.”

Dylan realizes, it is futile to struggle, and “What there is to do will be instantly done” by God. In “Trouble in Mind” Dylan is taking the religious view that one cannot simply be a good person and try to do the right thing, by oneself. One has to do it with the Lord. To both Dylan and Tagore, Almighty is the source of solace in troubled time. In song 39 Tagore has to say, “When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.” which seems to be echoed by Dylan in “Trouble in Mind”

“Trouble in mind, Lord, trouble in mind
Lord, take away this trouble in mind.”

Dylan is “pressing on” to have Lord’s mercy. In “Pressing On,” from “Saved” he says, “I’m pressing on to the higher calling of my Lord” which indicates an adherence to God.” Similarly Tagore adheres to God saying “I dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.” in Song 100. Dylan has all the faith in God’s plan for all. In “When He Returns” we see that, between a conflict of human plans and divine plans, the later wins. Tagore’s endless gratitude to God is expressed in the lines from song 16. He says, “I have had my invitation to this world’s festival, and thus my life has been blessed.” In “Every Grain of Sand,” from “Shot of Love” Dylan expresses gratitude to the Almighty:

“In the fury of the moment I can see the Master’s hand
In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand”

This is an evidence of Dylan’s introverted mysticism, as he considers God as one with the creation like “water in water” (Teresa 1577). In the similar fashion Tagore says, His gifts are infinite and they come to him in the form of purity and abundance in song 1.

In Dylan’s belief, God has special things to do and He does not micromanage. In “When You Gonna Wake Up” he says: “There’s a man up on a cross and He’s been crucified for you/Believe in His power that’s about all you got to do.” He believes that God has supreme purposes. He refutes his petty tasks, as some people think mistakenly. He does not think “He’s just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires.” (Dylan 2014). In *Gitanjali* Tagore realizes His purposes, which is to illuminate the world, wherein music might be a means: His music of mercy and love will soften even the stony obstacles. Tagore distinguished between considering Him as commonplace and giving him a high position. “I know thee as my God and stand apart—I do not know thee as my own and come closer” in song 77, which is a similar tone like Dylan’s refuting to consider Lord as “an errand boy”.

One interesting dimension of the mystic lyrics of both of them is the sweet ambiguity, as there are some songs that can be interpreted as love song and on the second thought as spiritual ones. This ambiguity applies to both Dylan and Tagore. Dylan’s “I Believe in You” can be treated as spiritual expressions to the “Lord” or as a romantic expression to the beloved and there are votes for both the opinions. The song “Heart of Mine” from “Shot of Love” is considered by some as a spiritual song, by some others as a love song, and still some others as a moral song as it talks about a control over oneself by saying, “Heart of mine, be still/

You can play with fire but you’ll get the bill”.

Many Tagore lyrics have this double meaning. Consider the case of song 98 where Tagore says, “I will deck thee with trophies, garlands of my defeat. It is never in my power to escape unconquered.” which applies both to Lord and a beloved. Metaphysical

features are evident in many of Tagore's lines one example being, "I shall ever try to keep my body pure, knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs." From song 4. In song 30 he has a mystic experience like the metaphysical poets do-
 "I came out alone on my way to my tryst.
 But who is this that follows me in the silent dark?
 I move aside to avoid his presence but I escape him not."

John Donne has similar kind of spiritual mysticism in his Holly Sonnet xiv. This "batter my heart" reminds us of "...my lord – strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart." In Tagore's song 36. Tagore's plea to God is, "send thy angry storm" and "call back this pervading silent heat, still and keen and cruel" because it is "burning the heart with dire despair". (Song 40). Like metaphysical poets, Dylan also delves into deep spiritual themes such as faith, redemption, sin, and the human condition. In "Precious Angel" Dylan's comparison of the lady who guided him towards Christianity to an "angel" and in "Every Grain of Sand" seeing God's presence "In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand" are similar to extended metaphor used by metaphysical poets. In "I Believe in You," there's a sense of seeking solace and guidance from a higher power, which can be interpreted as a metaphysical quest for meaning and enlightenment.

Tagore has mixed feelings about Lord's placement. Sometimes Lord is down to earth and omnipresent. He sees Lord's "footstool" around "the poorest, and lowliest, and lost"(Song 10). In song 11 he finds God's presence not "in the lonely dark corner of a temple", rather he finds him "where the tiller is tiling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones." Here Tagore is a Marxist, talking about the subaltern which is now mixed with his mystic thoughts. At times his Lord is "King of all kings", Tagore's Lord is sometimes gorgeous too, as we find in song 50. However, Dylan says, Lord is not an "errand boy". Tagore's Lord is "the formless" and "the deathless" and "the silent" (song 100), whereas Dylan's lord obviously has a form as he was killed by crucifying on a stone, and will have a second coming.

In "What Can I Do for You" from "Saved", I see a shadow of Tagore in Dylan the way he is submissive to Lord. He says, "You have given everything to me." Next Dylan asks "What can I do for You?". Tagore has a similar kind of reciprocal relationship with Lord in song 76, where he wishes to "stand" before Lord "face to face".

Conclusion

By a close analysis of the lyrics of the Cristian Trilogy albums, we can see that, in "Slow Train Coming" Dylan discovers truth in Christianity. The next album "Saved" includes more phrases than thoughts with "I'm saved" and "Are you ready" as the basic messages. In the third one called "Shot of Love" he refuses cheap slogans and attacks the establishment. Bob Dylan's spirituality was far from approved by the Christian establishment. As Reuters reports, at a 1997 concert of some Italian artists, Pope Benedict criticized Bob Dylan terming him as a "wrong kind of prophet". After listening to Dylan's song on stage, Pope John Paul II while addressing the crowd of young Italian Catholics said that the answer was indeed "in the wind" -- but not in the wind that blew things away, rather "in the wind of the spirit" that would lead them to Christ.

Due to the mystic nature of the poems, W. B. Yeats wonders about Tagore's *Gitanjali* "if he has it from the literature of Bengal or from religion and at other times,

remembering the birds alighting on his brother's hands, I find pleasure in thinking it hereditary, a mystery that was growing through the centuries like the courtesy of a Tristan or a Pelandore." (Yeats 1914). This is how he relates it to the mysteries of the mythology.

Tagore is unparalleled in two major sectors namely portray of nature and showing unconditional submissiveness to God but Dylan is average here. Though Dylan and Tagore are from different cultures and religious orientations, they resemble in many ways when it comes to mysticism in their lyrics, probably because of the fact that, the fundamental human thoughts are similar, irrespective of culture and religion. It is worth mentioning that, in addition to presenting the oneness of the Creator, Dylan's presentation of the Christ and Tagore's intentional bypassing of the names of Hindu deities in his poetry are where they are unique and different from each other. Tagore's mystic devotion has an extra softness, the possible reason being the built-in melody and sweetness that the regional culture possesses in their music and dialect. Dylan's adherence to the New Testament, his soulful devotion, presentation of Evangelic zeal filled with the themes of sin and salvation, blending of secular and sacred thoughts are where he stands out. In the presentation of spiritual songs - it is observed in the Christian trilogy albums—Bob Dylan is an introverted mystic, whereas Tagore should be termed as extroverted. Dylan's and Tagore's mystic thoughts are essentially different, with some resemblance.

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