

Advaitic Resonances in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*: An Imagery-Based Textual Study

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Abstract

This study examines how Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* develops a sustained system of imagery that resonates with the non-dual philosophical orientation of Advaita Vedānta. Through close readings of selected poems, the article analyses how sensory metaphors ranging from images of divine immanence and the surrender of the limited self to representations of silence as an inner contemplative space and the flowing continuity of life collectively gesture toward a vision of underlying unity beneath the diversity of the phenomenal world. Recent scholarship that situates Tagore alongside Advaita-oriented thinkers such as Vivekananda and Ramana Maharshi (Kumar & Annapurna, 2025), along with earlier critical accounts that perceived non-dual undertones in *Gitanjali*'s initial global reception (Ananthan, 2018), reinforces the plausibility of reading the text within a non-dual framework. Rather than collapsing Tagore's devotional lyricism into strict philosophical discourse, this study foregrounds imagery as the medium through which the poet aesthetically performs Advaita's central insights, revealing a poetic grammar that intertwines mystical experience with metaphysical intuition.

Keywords: Advaita Non-Dualism, *Gitanjali*, Mystical Imagery, Sensory Metaphors, Immanent Divinity, Ego-Dissolution, Poetic Phenomenology, Devotional-Nondual Synthesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Advaita Vedānta, formulated most influentially by Śaṅkara, teaches that the individual self (*ātman*) is ultimately identical with the absolute reality (*Brahman*), and that the experience of plurality arises from *māyā*, or ignorance (Śaṅkara, *Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya*; Radhakrishnan, 1996). This non-dual vision stands in marked contrast to Bhakti traditions, which emphasize a relational divide between devotee and divine, privileging emotional intimacy, surrender, and personal devotion as the structure of religious experience (Chaudhuri, 1954; Ramanujan, 1989). Although *Gitanjali* is often interpreted through the lens of its devotional tone or its humanistic ethos, its recurring images of unity, interior illumination, pervasive divinity, and the dissolution of boundaries suggest a metaphysical orientation that exceeds strictly devotional categories and resonates strongly with Advaita's philosophical framework.

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship reinforces the relevance of an Advaita-informed reading. Kumar and Annapurna (2025) position Tagore within an intellectual constellation that includes Vivekananda and Ramana Maharshi, arguing that all three thinkers deploy Advaita to articulate universalist and humanistic visions.

Ananthan's (2018) work further reveals that early European readers of *Gitanjali* sensed its "glimpses of Advaita," indicating that the poem's non-dual undertones have been perceptible since its initial global reception. Meanwhile, studies such as Khan's (2025) illuminate the mystical texture of *Gitanjali*—its meditations on nature, God, and the self, and its portrayal of devotional surrender—which provides fertile terrain for non-dual interpretations grounded in experiential phenomenology.

This scholarly landscape strengthens the justification for reading *Gitanjali* through an Advaita-oriented lens. The present study does not impose philosophical doctrine onto Tagore's poems; rather, it demonstrates how the imagery itself—streams of life, vessels emptied and refilled, silent footsteps, and the ever-present divine—creates an experiential field that naturally aligns with Advaita's conception of oneness. By foregrounding Tagore's sensory metaphors and attending to their symbolic patterns, the analysis shows that the non-dual thread is woven into the texture of *Gitanjali*'s lyricism, offering a way to read the work simultaneously as devotional poetry and as an aesthetic articulation of non-dual insight.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Tagore's spiritual thought reveals several converging strands that illuminate the relevance of an Advaita-oriented reading of *Gitanjali*. The first strand consists of studies that explicitly frame Tagore in relation to Advaita Vedānta. Kumar and Annapurna (2025) argue that although Tagore did not identify himself strictly as an Advaitin, his emphasis on universal consciousness, human unity, and the transcendence of ego aligns closely with Advaita's conceptual vocabulary. Their analysis situates Tagore alongside figures such as Vivekananda and Ramana Maharshi, suggesting that his philosophical orientation can be meaningfully understood within a broader non-dual intellectual tradition. Complementing this contemporary perspective, Ananthan (2018) documents that early European readers of *Gitanjali* perceived the poems as offering "glimpses of Advaita." This historical reception suggests that non-dual themes have long been apparent to audiences across cultural contexts, providing both historical and contemporary support for a sustained Advaita-based interpretation.

A second body of scholarship approaches *Gitanjali* through the lens of mysticism, highlighting qualities that naturally resonate with non-dual experience. Khan (2025) emphasizes the text's contemplative depth—its portrayal of devotional surrender, the intimate interrelationship between God and world, and the immanence of the divine within nature. These features align with broader studies of mystical consciousness, such as those by Forman (1998) and King (1997), which argue that mystical experience often involves the dissolution of the subject-object divide foundational to Advaita Vedānta. The mystical currents within *Gitanjali* therefore provide a conceptual and experiential bridge that makes non-dual interpretations not only possible but compelling.

A third scholarly thread focuses on imagery as a primary medium through which metaphysical insight is communicated. Critics such as Chakravarty (1949), Deutsch (1968), Potter (2014), and Katz (1976) have shown that poetic and mystical texts frequently express philosophical meaning not through explicit doctrinal statements but through metaphor, symbol, and sensory detail. This aligns with Hogan's (2010) and Dutta and Robinson's (1991) argument that Tagore typically conveys spiritual and philosophical positions indirectly, through the aesthetic and symbolic structure of his verse. Although these studies do not focus exclusively on Advaita, their recognition of Tagore's reliance on imagery to express complex spiritual intuitions invites the question of how specific metaphors—streams, vessels, silence, pervasive presence—function to evoke unity and dissolve egoic boundaries.

Taken together, these three strands of scholarship create a solid foundation for interpreting *Gitanjali*'s imagery as a symbolic enactment of

Advaita's non-dual metaphysics. Contemporary and historical analyses affirm the plausibility of Advaita readings; mystical studies highlight experiential parallels; and theoretical work on poetic imagery reveals how Tagore's metaphors can embody philosophical insight. This convergence justifies a closer textual examination of how *Gitanjali*'s sensory and symbolic landscapes invite readers into an experience of unity that resonates with Advaita Vedānta.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a close-reading methodology centered on the analysis of imagery within selected poems from *Gitanjali*. The approach assumes that Tagore's metaphors are not merely decorative but constitute a primary medium through which spiritual and philosophical meanings are conveyed. Imagery is therefore treated as a composite of sensory and spatial cues—visual, aural, tactile, and experiential—that opens pathways to deeper metaphysical insight.

Poems were chosen based on their deployment of images that align with four thematic clusters associated with Advaita Vedānta: Divine immanence, expressed through metaphors of pervasive or ever-arriving presence; Ego-dissolution, conveyed through images of reduction, emptying, yielding, or self-minimization; Unity of life, articulated through streams, natural continua, and organic interconnection; Interior stillness, represented by silence, waiting, or receptive mental states.

These clusters provide a framework for identifying passages where Tagore's sensory metaphors most clearly gesture toward non-dual awareness. While the analysis remains firmly anchored in the textual details of the poems, it is informed by Advaita concepts such as *ātman-brahman* unity, the notion of *vivarta* or apparent multiplicity, and the recognized limits of language in expressing non-dual realization (Deutsch, 1968; Potter, 2014). The aim is not to impose philosophical doctrine onto the poems, but to illuminate how the imagery itself creates experiential gestures toward oneness. Throughout, interpretive restraint is maintained to ensure that readings arise organically from the poems' symbolic patterns rather than from external doctrinal expectations.

Analysis

This section offers a sustained close reading of selected songs from *Gitanjali*, showing how Tagore's imagery enacts non-dual resonances aligned with Advaita Vedānta. The analysis remains grounded in the text while drawing upon global scholarship on mysticism, phenomenology, and Indian philosophy (Deutsch, 1968; King, 1997; Potter, 2014; Forman, 1998). Across Songs 1, 34, 45, 65, and 70, Tagore repeatedly returns to symbolic motifs—boundlessness, renewal, minimal selfhood, silent presence, rhythmic unity, and the continuity of life. These motifs together

form a poetic grammar through which Advaita's central insights become aesthetically embodied.

1. Song 1 — Boundlessness, Renewal, and the Dissolution of Ego

Song 1 establishes the fundamental conceptual tension between finitude and infinitude that structures much of *Gitanjali*. Tagore's declaration—"Thou hast made me endless"—is immediately juxtaposed with the figure of the "frail vessel" (Tagore, 1916). This contrast mirrors Advaita's distinction between the infinite *Brahman* and the limited empirical self (*jīva*). Radhakrishnan (1996) argues that Advaita views human limitation as a product of *māyā*, not of true identity; the "endless" self in Tagore's line aligns with this essential unboundedness.

The vessel "emptied again and again" and "filled ever with fresh life" becomes a metaphor for spiritual purification. In Advaita terminology, this resembles the shedding of *upādhis*—the egoic layers or superimpositions that obscure the Self (Deutsch, 1968). The repeated cycle of emptying and refilling dramatizes what King (1997) describes as the phenomenology of non-dual awakening, in which individuality loosens and awareness expands.

The moment when the poet's "little heart loses its limits" marks a decisive movement toward Advaitic intuition. This loss of boundaries corresponds to the Upaniṣadic insistence that *Brahman* lies "beyond speech and mind," exceeding conceptual containment. The resulting "utterance ineffable" parallels the inability of language to grasp non-dual experience—a theme widely discussed in comparative mysticism (Katz, 1976; Forman, 1998). As the vessel expands into boundlessness, Tagore's imagery offers an experiential glimpse of what Advaita sees as the identity of *ātman* and *Brahman*.

In this way, Song 1 enacts the central Advaitic process: ego dissolves, the heart expands, and the divine flows in as the self becomes receptive. The poem performs non-duality through imagery rather than doctrinal assertion.

2. Song 34 — Minimal Selfhood and the Transformative "Fetter of Love"

Song 34 expresses Tagore's desire to preserve only "that little... whereby I may name thee my all." This "little self"—a distilled, purified form of subjectivity—reflects what Chaudhuri (1954) calls the "refined ego" necessary for Advaita realization. In Advaita, the empirical ego is not annihilated but thinned and clarified so that the luminous Self may shine through.

Spatial imagery deepens this idea: the poet wishes to "feel thee on every side, and come to thee in everything." Instead of collapsing into isolation, the minimal self perceives the divine across the entire

sensory field. Ramanujan (1989) emphasizes that in Indian metaphysical traditions, the divine is not separate from the world but immanent within it; Song 34 vividly illustrates this through its omnidirectional sensory imagery.

The poem's most notable metaphor is the "fetter of thy love." While "fetter" ordinarily signals bondage, Tagore reconfigures it as a desirable bond—one that aligns the self with divine purpose. Ramanujan (1989) argues that Indian poetic and philosophical traditions often invert metaphors of bondage to express intimate unity with the divine. The "fetter of love" thus becomes a symbol of alignment, surrender, and liberation, reflecting Advaita's conviction that freedom emerges from recognizing one's unity with the absolute.

Song 34 therefore portrays a non-dual dynamic: as the self-contracts in ego, it expands in awareness; as attachments fall away, divine immanence becomes perceptible everywhere.

3. Song 45 — Silent Presence and Ever-Arriving Divinity

Song 45 introduces an auditory paradox that serves as a metaphor for inner awareness: "Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes." The phrase "silent steps" captures what Potter (2014) identifies as Advaita's epistemic model—awareness of the absolute arises not through sensory perception but through inward attunement.

The repetition of "he comes, comes, ever comes" produces a rhythmic insistence on constant presence. Forman (1998) notes that mystical states often include the perception of unbroken continuity, where presence is not episodic but perpetual. Tagore reinforces this timeless quality through the phrase "every moment and every age," collapsing distinctions between past, present, and future. This resonates with Śaṅkara's characterization of *Brahman* as *nitya*—eternal and ever-present.

The divine appears "in the rainy gloom of July nights" and "in sorrow after sorrow," suggesting that transcendence is not separate from human experience but woven into nature and emotion. The "golden touch of his feet" embodies the intimacy of this presence, aligning with Dutta and Robinson's (1991) observation that Tagore's spirituality renders the transcendent inwardly accessible.

Thus, Song 45 depicts non-duality as immanent presence, available in silence, sorrow, and the everyday rhythms of life.

4. Song 65 — The One Stream of Life Through All Existence

Song 65 contains perhaps the most explicit Advaitic image in *Gitanjali*: "The same stream of life

that runs through my veins... runs through the world." This parallel structure collapses the duality between self and world, illustrating Advaita's central claim that consciousness is universal (Deutsch, 1968).

Tagore extends this metaphor by describing the life-force shooting "in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass," and rising in "tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers." While acknowledging multiplicity, the poem asserts unity beneath its forms. As Dutta and Robinson (1991) argue, Tagore's ecological vision derives from spiritual ideas of interconnection, not merely naturalistic observation.

The metaphor shifts from stream to ocean: life is "rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow." This imagery transforms birth and death—usually seen as opposites—into complementary movements within a single continuum. King (1997) explains that non-dual traditions dissolve binaries, understanding them as fluctuations within one reality. Tagore's oceanic imagery exemplifies this philosophical insight.

Thus, Song 65 poetically affirms that all beings participate in one shared essence. The poem provides a symbolic enactment of Advaita's metaphysical oneness.

5. Song 70 — Cosmic Rhythm and the Continuity of Being

Song 70 reinforces the continuity motif through rhythmic imagery: life "dances in rhythmic measures." This dance evokes *rta*, the cosmic order sustaining all existence. The imagery of "numberless blades of grass" invokes what Radhakrishnan (1996) calls *vivarta*—the appearance of diversity projected upon an underlying unity.

The return to ocean imagery—being "rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death"—again synthesizes opposites. The image emphasizes that life's transformations occur within one vast, undivided field. The ebb and flow symbolize the experiential movement between manifestation and dissolution, echoing the non-dual metaphysics of the *Upaniṣads*.

Song 70 thus magnifies the Advaitic vision by expanding the scale from personal to cosmic, illustrating that the rhythm governing all life is fundamentally one.

6. Silence, Stillness, and Receptivity as Pathways to Non-Dual Awareness

Throughout *Gitanjali*, silence and stillness function as metaphors for the inner posture required to perceive non-duality. Figures who wait "by the wayside," watch in stillness, or listen for "silent steps" exemplify what Katz (1976) calls the suspension of conceptual thought necessary for mystical insight. Potter (2014) likewise argues that Advaita realization arises when the mind ceases to impose distinctions.

Silence becomes the interior condition in which unity can be sensed. The waiting figure is not passive but receptive—a state in which divine presence can be felt without mediation. This imagery suggests that non-duality is not discovered through intellectual effort but through the quieting of the ego's noise, allowing the Self to recognize its own identity with the absolute.

Imagery as the Aesthetic Performance of Advaita

Across the selected songs, Tagore constructs a coherent symbolic world in which non-duality is experienced through sensory metaphors rather than doctrinal propositions. Images of the "frail vessel," the "little self," the "silent steps," the "stream of life," and the "ocean-cradle" collectively dramatize the Advaitic processes of ego-dissolution, recognition of divine immanence, and awareness of underlying unity.

This aligns with global scholarship arguing that poetic and mystical traditions often express metaphysical insight through imagery, rhythm, and phenomenology (Deutsch, 1968; King, 1997; Potter, 2014; Hogan, 2010). Tagore's poetic imagination bridges devotion and philosophy, offering readers not a theological argument but an aesthetic pathway into non-dual awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *Gitanjali* unfolds through a carefully constructed poetic vocabulary in which imagery becomes the primary medium for Advaitic insight. Tagore's recurrent metaphors—vessels emptied and refilled, the deliberately minimized self-bound only by the "fetter of love," the divine whose "silent steps" arrive ceaselessly, and the single stream of life flowing through all existence—do more than embellish spiritual sentiment. They perform, at the level of poetic experience, the central gestures of non-dual realization. Through these images, Tagore transforms abstract Advaita metaphysics into a sensory and affective encounter, allowing unity to be felt rather than merely theorized.

The global scholarly discourse reinforces the validity of this interpretation. Contemporary research situates Tagore within an Advaita-friendly intellectual constellation (Kumar & Annapurna, 2025), while historical studies such as Ananthan's (2018) demonstrate that non-dual resonances were recognized even in the early international reception of *Gitanjali*. Moreover, as Khan (2025) observes, the collection's mystical register—its preoccupation with surrender, divine immanence, and nature as a locus of spiritual presence—creates a conceptual and experiential field in which Advaita readings can naturally and productively emerge.

Ultimately, Tagore articulates non-duality not through doctrinal exposition but through the immediacy of poetic imagery. Rain, silence, grass, breath, footsteps, and waves become vehicles through which readers glimpse the underlying unity Advaita describes: the

insight that *ātman* and *Brahman* are one, and that the multiplicity of the world is a shimmering surface over a deeper undivided reality. By dramatizing this insight aesthetically, *Gitanjali* transcends the boundaries of genre, functioning simultaneously as devotional lyric, mystical meditation, and poetic philosophy.

In synthesizing these dimensions, the study affirms that an imagery-based approach is not only appropriate but essential for understanding the Advaitic resonances that structure *Gitanjali*. Tagore's poetry embodies a vision of oneness that continues to speak across philosophical, literary, and spiritual traditions, fulfilling the central claim of this article: that *Gitanjali* is not merely influenced by Advaita Vedānta, but becomes one of its most compelling artistic expressions.

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