



# Oriental Vision of Bonds and Related Metaphors in Literature

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**Abstract:** The paper analyses symbols and references related to freedom lost and finding by the human being, with the sample of Rabindranath Tagore's literary work, Indian poet, philosopher and painter (1861-1941). Through those elements a symbolic framework is built, showing a certain conception of true freedom, always related to transcendence. That conquest is desired and feared at the same time, as a contradiction that presents itself as a reflection of human nature.

**Keywords:** Bondage, Spiritual Liberation, Liberation of the Senses, Elements

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## 1. Introduction

In the work of Rabindranath Tagore, Indian poet, philosopher and painter (1861-1941), readers can find a significant frequency of thematic motifs related to losing and winning back human being's free nature. Through his books, translated to English by himself, the writer builds a symbolic framework, where one can find a certain conception of true freedom, always related to transcendence [1], but with a philosophy full conscious about humanism [2, 3, 4].

The poetic images about lack of freedom are often related to human passions. In his book *Gitanjali*, written trough 1910-1912, are especially plentiful. Pride, for example, is assimilated to a wall that encloses and nullifies the true being:

He whom I enclose with my name is weeping in this dungeon. I am ever busy building this wall all around; and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow.

I take pride in this great wall, and I plaster it with dust and sand lest a least hole should be left in this name; and for all the care I take I lose sight of my true being. [5]

The prologue of *Gitanjali* was written by W. B. Yeats in September 1912. He said about these "song offerings": "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination". And he adds: "yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had

walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream" [6].

## 2. Symbols and Meanings

If we return to the first quotation, we can observe a kind of contradiction: in one hand, the wall is considered like something negative, producer of sadness and crying, that deprives of freedom—"enclose", "dungeon"—and sum in the "dark shadow". But in the other hand, the same wall is described as beautiful, or "great", being object of careful care. We can conclude that the impediments that the "true being" finds to be realized are not always wished to be destroyed.

Obstinate are the trammels, but my heart aches when I try to break them.

Freedom is all I want, but to hope for it I feel ashamed.

I am certain that priceless wealth is in thee, and that thou art my best friend, but I have not the heart to sweep away the tinsel that fills my room

The shroud that covers me is a shroud of dust and death; I hate it, yet hug it in love.

My debts are large, my failures great, my shame secret and heavy; yet when I come to ask for my good, I quake in fear lest my prayer be granted. [5]

In a complementary imaginative movement, the positive bonds are associated with the musical strings, producing pain in this case not when breaking but when tensing. "The pain was great when the strings were being tuned, my Master!" is

the poem XLIX of *Fruit-Gathering* (1616) by Tagore [7]: to tune the strings is to compromise the deepest being with true convictions. However, the same music you produce will make you forget the pain. In any case, it is difficult to break the bonds because every tear is hard to feel, so that sometimes it is preferred to live with this “shroud” of “dust and death” rather than tear it from the skin. Bonds and debts Tagore refers to are not only vices or spiritual defects of the human being, but very often material realities which also enslave. This is his personal way of searching aesthetic joy transcending Indian aesthetics, which is “truthfully based on the Satyam, Shivam and sundaram” [8]. In some poems these ideas are expressed explicitly:

‘Prisoner, tell me, who was it that bound you?’

‘It was my master,’ said the prisoner. ‘I thought I could outdo everybody in the world in wealth and power, and I amassed in my own treasure-house the money due to my king. When sleep overcame me I lay upon the bed that was for my lord, and on waking up I found I was a prisoner in my own treasure-house.’

‘Prisoner, tell me, who was it that wrought this unbreakable chain?’

‘It was I,’ said the prisoner, ‘who forged this chain very carefully. I thought my invincible power would hold the world captive leaving me in a freedom undisturbed. Thus night and day I worked at the chain with huge fires and cruel hard strokes. When at last the work was done and the links were complete and unbreakable, I found that it held me in its grip.’ [5]

The human beings are so chained to these tyrants of life that, blinded by the reality of their submission, even impose it on their children as a model of education. Let us see another text of *Gitanjali* in which, as in the previous one, we can read a double sense of passions, in this case we find the chain as a symbol of both wealth and slavery:

The child who is decked with prince’s robes and who has jewelled chains round his neck loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step.

In fear that it may be frayed, or stained with dust he keeps himself from the world, and is afraid even to move.

Mother, it is no gain, thy bondage of finery, if it keep one shut off from the healthful dust of the earth, if it rob one of the right of entrance to the great fair of common human life. [5].

In the preface, Yeats [6] had said: “when he is speaking of children, so much a part of himself this quality seems, one is not certain that he is not also speaking of the saints”. In this case, the child is chosen to holiness but his hands are like tied. He seems to look for comfort in those chains, because the opposite hurts—they are stuck to the skin. Nevertheless, they are not impossible to break. When someone gets it, the result is a Deep pleasure, which far surpasses that recess in own stinginess. We can see a reformulation in the poem LXXIV in *Fruit Gathering* (1916):

My bonds are cut, my debts are paid, my door has been opened, I go everywhere.

They crouch in their corner and weave their web of pale

hours, they count their coins sitting in the dust and call me back.

But my sword is forged, my armour is put on, my horse is eager to run.

I shall win my kingdom. [7]

The opening of this poem has to do with mission [9]: “A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble” [6].

The subject is at last free from the bonds and debts that he could not undo. The use if the passive presents the act as already done, as a gift of a higher being. I believe that in this way the poem best fits the philosophy of Tagore, who distrusted his own strength and always asked for the intercession of transcendence.

Also, the importance of elements is other key in the poem, according to Bachelard’s theories [10, 11, 12, 13]. The gates are already open to freedom, to an unknown path that can lead to anywhere and exclude the previous statism and deprivation. The initiate therefore contrasts with the “crouched”. It is significant that these people “crouch in their corner” because the corner implies spatial concretion and limitation. The corner, in a symbolic meaning, is the negation of indetermination and infinite possibilities of freedom – departing “everywhere”. In Keriheeb’s words: “iniciación y acurruamiento en el rincón son términos incompatibles por su propia esencia y por definición” [14]. They are indeed defined by opposition to the already free subject: they remain static and slaves of their time and their small treasures. Self-indulging in their possessions, that is why they “count their coins” over and over again, significantly “sitting in the dust”, as a symbol of their unsuccessful attitude. “When my beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door, my king, and come with the ceremony of a king”: those have been the poet’s words some years ago, in *Gitanjali* (1913) [5].

Moreover, those people in the corner seem interested in the subject to join them. Here we are again the paradoxical behavior that threatens freedom: the enslaved people like their condition and do not want to overcome it, but neither do they want others to be released. In fact, the poetic speaker, who has begun the journey, hears voices that try to abort his mission, which aims him to return to the condition of all others.

The attributes of this broad minded being are his “sword” and his “armour”, as a sign of defense and protection respectively. Those attributes are what the subject will need in the face of difficulties or threats that arise during the itinerary that now begins. The sword in particular is, par excellence, one of the weapons of the true initiate, who ventures without fear, leaving the known world and putting into play all his energy or sublimated will—symbolized by the impatience of the horse [15], who is “eager to run”.

According to the following poem, love is the key to understand this liberation desire:

I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his

hands. That is why it is so late and why I have been guilty of such omissions.

They come with their laws and their codes to bind me fast; but I evade them ever, for I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands.

People blame me and call me heedless; I doubt not they are right in their blame.

The market day is over and work is all done for the busy. Those who came to call me in vain have gone back in anger. I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands. [5]

Not accepting “their laws and their codes”, moreover freeing oneself from these bonds, are attitudes that bring the grateful reward of conquering the kingdom, that is to say fully enjoying existence through happiness and love as the best way of giving up.

In another poem the symbology of the sword is developed from a communicative perspective that presents us a “female self”. As in the *Song of Songs—Song of Solomon, Canticles*, or the *Canticle of Canticles*, one of the “scrolls” of the Holy Writings, the last section of the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible—, or also as we can read through the poems of San Juan de la Cruz—and in contrast to other more recent ones [16]—, this protagonization is frequent in the Tagorian work and, in fact, its theme connects with the feminine figurations of the lyrical speaker in the mystical tradition.

I thought I should ask of thee—but I dared not—the rose wreath thou hadst on thy neck. Thus I waited for the morning, when thou didst depart, to find a few fragments on the bed. And like a beggar I searched in the dawn only for a stray petal or two.

Ah me, what is it I find? What token left of thy love? It is no flower, no spices, no vase of perfumed water. It is thy mighty sword, flashing as a flame, heavy as a bolt of thunder. The young light of morning comes through the window and spread itself upon thy bed. The morning bird twitters and asks, ‘Woman, what hast thou got?’ No, it is no flower, nor spices, nor vase of perfumed water—it is thy dreadful sword.

I sit and muse in wonder, what gift is this of thine. I can find no place to hide it. I am ashamed to wear it, frail as I am, and it hurts me when press it to my bosom. Yet shall I bear in my heart this honour of the burden of pain, this gift of thine.

From now there shall be no fear left for me in this world, and thou shalt be victorious in all my strife. Thou hast left death for my companion and I shall crown him with my life. Thy sword is with me to cut asunder my bonds, and there shall be no fear left for me in the world.

From now I leave off all petty decorations. Lord of my heart, no more shall there be for me waiting and weeping in corners, no more coyness and sweetness of demeanour. Thou hast given me thy sword for adornment. No more doll’s decorations for me! [5]

Symbolically explaining it is very important the allusion to the power of the sword, which cuts cleanly, in front of the simple force of the hands, that would produce tears. In a Spanish translation of “My bonds are cut”—quite popular [17]—, the translator, the poetesse Zenobia Camprubí,

interprets: “Están rotas mis ataduras, pagadas mis deudas” [18] (“My bonds are broken, my debts are paid”). Breaking instead cutting implies something ruder, not so clean. That is why, in *Gitanjali*, the sword was beautiful like a celestial treasure, or even more:

Beautiful is thy wristlet, decked with stars and cunningly wrought in myriad-coloured jewels. But more beautiful to me thy sword with its curve of lightning like the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu, perfectly poised in the angry red light of the sunset.

It quivers like the one last response of life in ecstasy of pain at the final stroke of death; it shines like the pure flame of being burning up earthly sense with one fierce flash.

Beautiful is thy wristlet, decked with starry gems; but thy sword, O lord of thunder, is wrought with uttermost beauty, terrible to behold or think of. [5]

### 3. Conclusions

The analyses have shown a certain conception of true freedom by Tagore, always related to transcendence, but not always desired. In the book *The gardener* (1913) the poet uses the metaphor of a caged bird who refuses free one’s call, and even invites it to go into the cage [5]. Birds, children, bonds and chains, swords and freedom, all are representations and poles of the contradictory nature of human beings’ passions.

An innocence, a simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and the leaves seem as near to him as they are near to children, and the changes of the seasons great events as before our thoughts had arisen between them and us. At times I wonder 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 Pelanore. [6]

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