

Love of Creation and Mysticism in Tagore's *Gitanjali* and *Stray Birds*

Paula Hayes
Strayer University, USA

Abstract

This paper is concerned with examining two of Tagore's collections of poems, *Gitanjali* and *Stray Birds*, from the perspective of the poet's love of nature and of God. The paper seeks to find a religious explanation for Tagore's perpetual praise of the natural world, a praise that he was able to connect dynamically to his love of God. The explanation given is that Tagore's repetition of nature motifs and his ability to link these motifs to a harmonious pursuit of the divine is rooted in an appreciation for cosmogony of the *Rig Veda*. The paper ends by addressing briefly how Tagore's naturalism, rooted in a tradition extending back to sacred text, leads the poet to a mystical expression of personality through his poems.

[**Keywords:** Naturalism in Poetry; Theism; Rig Veda; Mysticism]

Cosmogony as the Core of Tagore's Religious Expression in Poetry

Often when a poet is labeled as a naturalist writer, the poet's concerns are thought to be similar to the tenets of Romanticism. Poets such as Wordsworth, Whitman, and Yeats, to name only three, wrote of nature as a means of expressing symbolically the inner workings of the self—nature motifs in Romantic poets are emblems of larger realities, subjective realities. While Tagore's preoccupation with nature throughout his poems does share certain characteristics with the Romantic poets, such as the desire to express subjective realities, it is the claim here, by this author, that we should read Tagore's love of and concern with nature as part of a greater tradition of Indian literature that begins with the cosmogony of the *Rig Veda*.ⁱ

It appears that at the heart of Tagore's poetry there is a deep seated respect for the *Rig Veda's* creation myths. Tagore's father, Debendranath, even inspired a Bengali translation of the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* as sacred text is only one of four main books comprising the *Vedas*, comprised of over a mere 1,000 or more hymns. We may think of these liturgical poems, extending back to circa 800-600 B.C.E, as reflecting the transitions and flux inherent to an oral culture. One of the primary reasons for recognizing the *naturalism* of the *Rig Veda* is to help western readers of Tagore understand that when Tagore writes of natureⁱⁱ—of birds, trees, a singular blade of grass, a sunset, sunrise, a boat ride, a fading view of the water—while because all of these external objects belonging to the natural world may make Tagore appear much like western Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth or Yeats, Tagore's mission is actually quite different. In Tagore, what is expressed is a thoughtful *relationship of poet to sacred text, of poet to the mythical or cosmological origins of the world*. It is doubtful that the

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same function can be found in the more secularized naturalism of the Romantic cause of western poets.

In Tagore, love of nature equates at one level to love of God; for, in recognizing the worth of the natural world, one is giving assent to the fact that there is a God who created it. For instance, Tagore writes in *Stray Birds* in stanza 311, the following, “The smell of the west earth in the rain rises like a great change of praise from the voiceless multitude of insignificant.”ⁱⁱⁱ Only a poet in love with nature could write these lines; for, the lines recall the hymns and the recitations, and the incantations of sacred text. Or consider as well, stanza 309 in *Stray Birds*, where Tagore writes, “To-night there is a stir among the palm leaves, a swell in the sea, Full Moon, like the heart throb of the world. From what unknown sky hast thou carried in thy silence the aching secret of love?”^{iv} The lines echo the concept from the creation hymns wherein the sacred text posits that no one knows how creation came to be because no one witnessed it except for the creator God itself, and who can truly know this God but to seek him? As if this were not enough, also in *Stray Birds*, we read Tagore’s development of this concept as he writes, “God comes to me in the dusk of my evening with the flowers from my past kept fresh in his basket” (stanza 314).^v This is the mind of a religious poet at work, not a Romantic poet.

In the *Rig Veda* there is much attention given to the following primeval forces, out of which existence comes into being, and through which the unknown God of creation works. These primeval forces are—non-entity, non-being, the absence of the physical sky, nothingness, the depth of nothingness, the absence of death and life as corollaries, the absence of the distinction between seasons or times of day, the absence of the corollaries of night and day. These primeval voids which are at once forces that must be acted upon by a creator God are then transformed by God’s power into material substances. The *Rig Veda* recounts how glorious the feat is of the creator God’s powerful ability to move the primeval voids to material forms, bringing a material existence and physical world into being out of what was before an absence of non-being, bringing even the construct of *time* into existence.^{vi}

In *Gitanjali*, Tagore uses language that conjures remembrance of creation’s gift of time. In the poem, “Endless Time,” Tagore reminds us that time is not our own. The metaphysics of time does not belong to humanity solely, but rather has been entrusted to humanity by the creator God. Tagore writes, “Time is endless in thy hands, my lord./There is non to count thy minutes” (lines 1-2).^{vii} In the same poem, Tagore goes on to say, “Days and nights pass and ages bloom and fade like/flowers./Thou knowest how to wait” (lines 3-5).^{viii} The poet’s point is obvious—the comparison of time to the fragility and aching beauty of a flower is a reminder to his readers that time is just as fragile. Humanity knows time only in part—through finite perceptions of waiting, while God knows time through its whole, through eternity. Neither time nor flowers, not the hours or the days, are entirely man and woman’s to have; rather, they are God’s to have. We

are not to waste time, though, but to recognize the succession of the creation of worlds, the movement of the transient and the finite through the stages of history and the cycles of generations—"Thy centuries follow each other perfecting a small wild flower./We have no time to lose,/and having no time we must scramble for a chance./We are too poor to be late" (lines 6-10).^{ix}

Tagore's love for the *Rig Veda* is part of the foundation from which he was able to create the features of sensuality and joy of theistic belief. Religiously, the *Rig Veda* represents a point of origin for the development of Hinduism, but it is also a remarkably fleshy, carnal text, full of desire to know and participate in the natural world. Such a depiction is not desultory; it merely points out that the *Rig Veda* is concerned with manipulation of the natural world (of nature itself).^x The text is consumed with larger than life figures; gods are duplicitous, strong willed, at times uncontrollable beings. The nature of the gods can be difficult to access; on the one hand, the gods stand apart from nature, partially of transcendent form, while on the other hand they are morphed beings who can merge their identities with nature.^{xi}

The *Rig Veda* teaches a vast appreciation for the physical life, to revere and stand in awe of the abundance and variety of natural forms, as well as accept (with a form of resignation that is *not* pessimist) the forces of nature. One of the broader lessons of the *Rig Veda* is to seek one's place within the order of natural phenomena as opposed to struggling to overcome and transcend this order; not even the gods are permitted to fully transcend the phenomenal world of nature, so it is certainly not expected that humans will be able to do so. And for some this may even be considered a vast relief; for, one way of interpreting this lesson that the *Rig Veda* teaches is that it means the religious seeker's concern should be with improving the world that forms the here-and-now, rather than focusing all hopes upon otherworldliness.^{xii} Arguably, Tagore interprets generously *Vedic* literature as leading toward an *appreciation* (not denial, rejection, or even transcendence) of phenomenal existence. The guide for this appreciation is wisdom and reason which are divinely given.

In *Gitanjali*, one of the poems that most expresses the gift of wisdom is "Brink of Eternity." In it, Tagore draws a comparison between a material house that is tiny and cramped, with that of a spiritual house, a mansion belonging to God Himself. But throughout this extended comparison, Tagore weaves into the imagery gentle reminders of the creator God's ability to make for us, humanity, a home out of the sky and the natural world. In the *Rig Veda*, even the sky did not exist prior to God fashioning and forming it.^{xiii} Tagore writes, "In desperate hope I go and seek for her/in all the corners of my room;/I find her not" (lines 1-3).^{xiv} The "her" Tagore references is eternity itself. He goes on to write, "My house is small/and what was once has gone from it can never be regained" (lines 4-5).^{xv} In other words, the body of the poet is like a small house, incapable of housing eternity. Only the spiritual house, the spiritual realm of God can house eternity. Tagore makes this clear when he says, "But infinite is thy mansion, my lord,/and

seeking her I have come to thy door/I stand under the golden canopy of this evening sky/and I lift my eager eyes to thy face” (lines 6-9).^{xvi} Nature, the evening sky, becomes the physical, material sign to the poet of the unseen spiritual grace of God. The poem rounds out by another image that too reminds the reader of the importance of creation—“oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean,/plunge it into the deepest fullness./Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch/in the allness of the universe” (lines 13-16).^{xvii}

As a text, *Gitanjali*, focuses upon how divine revelation should lead the seeker to a highly developed sense of reason. Tagore’s spirituality, though it could be characterized as mystical, is not a mysticism of irrationality. Tagore’s version of ecstatic worship is so thoroughly meditative that it leads toward cultivation of reason, and asserts that one of the highest lights of divine love is reaching a condition of the mind wherein reason is permitted reign. He writes in the poem, “Purity,” “I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my/thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of/reason in my mind” (lines 4-7).^{xviii}

The *Rig Veda* also teaches that the gift of life is the treasure of creation. Out of this appreciation comes Tagore’s generous appraisal of what a religion of pluralism may mean, even as he theistically appears to worship one God (and his spiritual poems should be read as one of the various forms by which Tagore offered praise and worship for the divine). Tagore’s interpretation of the pluralism contained in Hindu sacred literature is that it led to awareness to tear down restrictions between people, whether social caste divisions or forms of social oppression and alienation based upon gender. In *Stray Birds*, Tagore writes, “In death the many becomes one; in life the one becomes many” (stanza 84)^{xix} and “In darkness the One appears as uniform; in the light the One appears as manifold” (stanza 90).^{xx} What can be gathered from this myth is that the world and the physical body are closely related; the sense of separateness and alienation humanity experiences from nature (and even from belief in a divine creator) is the result of illusions or false constructions.

This seems to imply that genuine insight or “truth” removes feelings of alienation, isolation, and longing to be part of a larger whole. One of the implications of the *Rig Veda*’s creation myth is that once humanity enters into mystical revelation what will be discerned is the connectedness between humanity and natural phenomena. Earlier in the creation myth, existence is described as breaking forth and emerging from darkness, a space akin to that of an abyss, and from pure emptiness; “There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?”^{xxi}

In *Stray Birds*, Tagore compares the poet to the God of creation, likening the power of the poet to bring into existence new words through language to the

power of the creator to bring into existence the worlds fashioned through time. The poet draws more than inspiration from watching and observing the seasons—the poet sees within God's creation the paradigm for perceiving the inherent stability within the contradiction of change. Seasons change but we know that there is consistency to the pattern.

Taking together stanzas 75-77 in *Stray Birds*, Tagore writes, “We read the world wrong and say/that it deceives us/The poet wind is out over the sea and the forest to seek how own voice/Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.”^{xxii} Reinterpreting the concept of *maya*, illusion or deception, Tagore liberally transforms *maya* into the falsities of a misperception of the innate nature of humankind—we are not innately evil, he is saying. Rather, we come from the Kingdom of God itself, and as children we intuit this revelation. As adults, we hide and shut ourselves off from such knowledge; for he writes, “The grass seeks her crowd in the earth/The tree seeks his solitude of the sky” but “Man barricades against himself” (stanzas 78-79).^{xxiii} The grass and trees are wiser than “man” because they seek their glorious place within the earth, within the phenomenal world of change; but humanity seeks to turn against the phenomenal world, to desire to ignore it, mistreat it, abuse it, forget it, pretend its not there, and transcend it. In Tagore's religious philosophy, it is God and God alone who has the right to hide. Humanity does not possess that right, though humanity tries to hide from the divine. But so long as humanity hides from the divine, humanity will feel disconnected and bring upon itself death. When God, on the other hand, hides there comes His hiding with a desire to be sought after and found by His creation. So Tagore enlightens us with the lines, “This longing is for the one who is/felt in the dark, but not seen in the day” (stanza 87).^{xxiv} The darkness of creation as depicted in the *Rig Veda* is transformed into the darkness of God's hiding and the longing of the seeker to find God—a longing that is counterbalanced by the longing of God to be known.

Again, Tagore redevelops the *Rig Veda*'s creation myth's motif of darkness by writing in *Stray Birds*, “In darkness the One appears as uniform; in the light the One appears as manifold” (stanza 90).^{xxv} Counteracting the primeval darkness of the creator God is the “flame” or “light” of the seeker's unquenchable thirst to become known by this God and to know of it. Tagore speaks of this when he says, “One sad voice has its nest among/the ruins of the years./It sings to me in the night,--‘I loved you.’”^{xxvi} And the reader of Tagore sees this desire for participation within the realm of the divine in the lines, “The flaming fire warns me off by/its own glow./Save me from ashes the dying embers hidden under ashes” (stanza 145)^{xxvii} and when he says, “I have my stars in the sky,/But oh for my little lamp in my house./The dust of the dead words clings to thee./Wash thy soul with silence” (stanzas 146-7).^{xxviii} Creation again appears in the lines, “The world has opened its heart of light in the morning./Come out, my heart, with thy love to meet it” (stanza 149).^{xxix}

The image or motif of the lamp that burns is repeated in *Stray Birds* continuously. For instance in the lines, “The lamp of meeting burns long; it goes out in a moment at the parting” and when he writes, “One word keep for me in they silence, O World, when I am dead, ‘I have loved.’” (stanzas 277-278).^{xxx} The sense of longing produces in the poet a feeling akin to what in German literary criticism and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as the *unheimlich*, or a feeling or sensation of the uncanny, of separation from what should otherwise really be known as familiar. When a feeling of the *unheimlich* is produced there is a sense of aesthetic distance experienced between the subjective state of longing to unite and gain intimate knowledge of the objective, external condition of what is felt to be held apart from the subject. Such a feeling is expressed in *Stray Birds* when Tagore writes, “My heart is homesick to-day for the/one sweet hour across the sea of time” (stanza 244).^{xxx} Even the earth itself participates in the longing, “The night’s silence, like a deep lamp,/is burning with the light of its milky way” (stanza 251).^{xxxii} The motif of the lamps is also compared to the false light of empty religion. This can be observed easily in the lines, “They light their own lamps and sign/their own words in their temples./But the birds sing thy name in thine own morning light,--for thy name is joy” (stanza 285).^{xxxiii}

Tagore reminds us that after the flame of longing is fulfilled what we are left with is silence—“Lead me in the centre of thy silence/to fill my heart with songs” (stanza 286).^{xxxiv} Reaching a level of silence implies the poet has consequently attained God-given peace. Tagore goes on to write, “Put out the lamp when thou wishest./I shall know thy darkness and shall love it” (stanza 289).^{xxxv} This line alludes to the darkness of the mystery shrouding creation. Then Tagore adds, “When I stand before thee at the /day’s end thou shalt see my scars and/know that I had my wounds and also/my healing” (stanza 290).^{xxxvi} Thus, the poet reaches a level of self-assurance and confidence that he will find his God. He ends it by saying, “Some day I shall sing to thee in the/sunrise of some other world,/ ‘I have seen thee before in the light of the earth, in the love of man’” (stanza 291),^{xxxvii} indicating that from darkness into light he will one day move.

Mysticism and Personality

The scholar, intellectual thinker, and India’s second President (1962-1967), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan once wrote back in the 1940s, “Spiritual experience starts with the assumption that this world is unsatisfactory and human nature as it is, is *unideal*” (19). Radhakrishnan went on to write, “The destiny of man is not, however, to escape from this imperfection, but to use it as an urge for improvement” (19). Hence, spiritual experience is about finding the connection between the divine and the real world of society. Radhakrishnan’s statement (though it was not written intentionally about Tagore) can be applied easily to the way in which Tagore’s poems express the nature of a spiritual journey.

Also seemingly inherent to Tagore's poems is a remarkable sense of how the mystical need not destroy the personal, including the most personal dimensions of self, be that the personality. There is a misnomer that mysticism in a religion equates to an annihilation of the personality, but this is not always the case. In the early part of the twentieth century, the religious studies and philosophy scholar A.S. Woodburne, identified what he termed as two kinds of mysticism, that of impersonal mysticism and then that of personal mysticism. Woodburne noted that too often Indian mysticism is lumped into the category of impersonal mysticism; however, this is not entirely an accurate designation. As Woodburne wrote, "The idea of God is the pivotal doctrine in any religion...If one understands what a people thinks about God, he will be to formulate a pretty clear conception of their thoughts about man, evil, salvation, and the future life" (52). Tagore's poetry abundantly demonstrates the variety of personal mysticism, and so we may also find ourselves asking—what was Tagore's view of God? For Tagore, God is ever-present, hiding but desirous of being found.

As the scholar of religious studies, John Wright Buckman, also once wrote, "The mystical experience, broadly interpreted, leads by its very nature to the heart of personality" and that "Not only does the mystical experience awaken and develop selfhood, it opens the channels to other selves and makes possible the truest and deepest personal communion" (610). It is toward this variety of mysticism Tagore aspired; the only mysticism Tagore wished to participate in was the kind that could bring him to a higher self, a self more conscious of God's continual revelation through creation, manifested in nature and witnessed in nature's temporary, fading glory.

I will close with a quick examination of Tagore's poem in *Gitanjali*, "Where Shadows Chases Light," because this poem expresses the poet's steadfast desire to attune the higher self to finding God.^{xxxviii} On the surface of the poem, it is about the poet standing on a corner watching the rain come down. It is a gentle summer rain, and the poet tells how he is greeted by "messengers" who offer him good wishes. The poet speaks of sitting all day, from sunrise to sunset, at the foot of his door, watching the rain and waiting on the arrival of someone, perhaps a dear friend, or perhaps waiting on no one at all, but only the sense of a presence. Typical of all Tagore poems, though, is the intrinsic need of the poem's language to ask the reader to dig deeply beneath the surface and ferret out the line's spiritual message. The poet's solitude in the poem is his mystical path that teaches him how to tend to his higher self—the part of the personality, that reaches from mind, consciousness, thought patterns, down to the soul, the atman, the breath of life, to find communion with the divine. Tagore writes, "This is my delight/thus to wait and watch at the wayside/where shadow chases light/and the rain comes in the wake of summer" (lines 1-4).^{xxxix} He goes on to say, "From dawn to dusk I sit here before my door,/and I know that of a sudden/the happy moment will arrive when I shall see" (lines 9-11).^{xl} What the poet is awaiting is knowledge and insight of mystical truth, of the presence of

God. But interestingly Tagore does not proclaim at the poem's end to have reached the culmination of his mystical pursuit; rather, he remains throughout this poem, as he does in most of his poems, someone still on the journey, still waiting on the summit, though not at the summit of mystical heights yet. For he says, "In the meanwhile I smile and I sing all alone./In the meanwhile the air is filling with the perfume of/promise" (lines 12-14).^{xli}

Notes

ⁱ For my research, I am using the following the edition. *The Rig Veda*. Trans. Wendy Doniger. New York: Penguin Books, 1981. A word, here, about why I chose the Doniger translation. There are many beautiful translations in English, one of the favorites of which is Ralph T. H. Griffin's translation (1896). However, I used Doniger's 1981 Penguin edition because of the arrangement of the material; she has created a way of reading the text according to thematic grouping of materials (which for the purpose of matching thematic concerns with the poet Tagore I found to be a useful and appropriate heuristic tool).

My main point of departure concerning *The Rig Veda* as sacred text and its influence upon the poet Tagore begins with *The Rig Veda's* Creation Hymn (10.129 or pg. 25). In the Creation Hymn, there are a series of questions posed that indicates that the knowledge of creation is so vast and superior to any other form of knowledge that the human mind cannot completely fathom it. The depth of creation's meaning is so great that it too cannot be fathomed. Thus, the reader is left with a feeling of humility at the thought of creation. In 10.129.6 or pg. 25, it is asked if there was a witness to creation and the understanding is that there was no human witness. I connect to the deep mystery of creation to Tagore's fascination with certain motifs and themes, such as darkness, the abyss, light, the power of water as a life force, nighttime as a reminder of the primeval darkness that preceded creation and through which creation moved, and day as the reminder of the power of the Creator's ability to cut through the void of non-being and bring being into existence.

ⁱⁱ For an understanding of *The Rig Veda's* treatment of nature, see 10.81-2 (pg. 35) where the bounty of nature is praised, for example, in the lines, "What was the base, what sort of raw matter was there, and precisely how was it done, when the All-Maker, casting his eye on all, created the earth and revealed the sky in its glory?" The line gives praise to the Creator, but it also establishes the worthiness and sacrosanct essence of the natural world. It indicates that the natural world is to be regarded with pleasure and awe.

ⁱⁱⁱ For my research, I am using the following edition. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Stray Birds*. New York: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1917. See *Stray Birds*, pg. 80.

^{iv} *Stray Birds*, pg. 80

^v *Stray Birds* pg. 81

^{vi} For an understanding of *The Rig Veda's* treatment of the nature of existence, of being and non-being, see 10.129 .2 (pg. 25). "There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond." This section affirms the creation of "being." The section likewise indicates that time comes into existence by way of death and immortality, ways that humanity tracks the heartbeat of time.

vii For my research, I am using the following edition. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali*. New York: BookSurge Classics, 2003. To read the entire poem, "Endless Time," see *Gitanjali*, pg. 50.

viii *Gitanjali*, pg. 50.

ix *Gitanjali*, pg. 50.

x While there are numerous instances where there are passages in *The Rig Veda* to support the idea of sacrifice existing as one means of humanity attempting to control or manipulate the natural world (thereby, recognizing the natural world as possessing a force far greater than that of humankind and so deserving of respect), a pivotal example is that of the hymn of Agni (god or deity associated with fire) and of the ritualistic dimensions of sacrifice. The priest seeks out Agni to bless and take his sacrifice. The hymns associated with Agni indicate the need for severe reverence of the natural world. This can be found in 1.1 (pg. 99).

xi For an understanding of *The Rig Veda's* treatment of the transcendence of the gods' power and influence upon human speech, especially inspired speech, consider the passage in 1.92.9 (pg. 180), wherein the goddess of the dawn is described, "Gazing out over all creatures, the goddess shines from the distance facing straight towards every eye. Awakening into motion everything that lives, she has found the speech of every inspired poet."

xii For an understanding of *The Rig Veda's* treatment of the here-and-now see 10.58.5-6 (pg. 57). In the following passage, there is a prayer, hymn, or incantation (depending upon the language and definition one prefers) to help a spirit or soul on the brink of death to continue living. The passage seems to belie, not a fear of death per se, but rather a preference for life on earth and indicates the continual need for humanity to cherish temporal life and not seek too quickly a life after death. This is indicated in the lines, "If your spirit has gone to the billowy ocean far away, we turn it back to you here to dwell and to live. If your spirit has gone to the flowing streams of light far away, we turn it back to you here to dwell and to live."

xiii For an understanding of *The Rig Veda's* treatment of the nature of the sky see 1.160.5 (pg. 203). There it reads, "Sky and earth, you might air whose praises we have sung..."

xiv For the entire poem, "Brink of Eternity," see *Gitanjali*, pg. 52.

xv *Gitanjali*, pg. 52.

xvi *Gitanjali*, pg. 52.

xvii *Gitanjali*, pg. 52.

xviii For the entire poem of "Purity," see *Gitanjali*, pg. 3

xix *Stray Birds*, pg. 22.

xx *Stray Birds*, pg. 23.

xxi This quote is taken from *The Rig Veda*, 10.129.1 or pg. 25.

xxii *Stray Birds*, pg. 20.

xxiii *Stray Birds*, pgs. 20-21.

xxiv *Stray Birds*, pg. 22

xxv *Stray Birds*, pg. 23.

xxvi *Stray Birds*, pg. 38.

xxvii *Stray Birds*, pg. 38.

xxviii *Stray Birds*, pgs. 38-9.

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- xxix *Stray Birds*, pg. 39.
- xxx *Stray Birds*, pgs. 72.
- xxxi *Stray Birds*, pg. 64.
- xxxii *Stray Birds*, pg. 65.
- xxxiii *Stray Birds*, pg. 74.
- xxxiv *Stray Birds*, pg. 74
- xxxv *Stray Birds*, pg. 75.
- xxxvi *Stray Birds*, pg. 75.
- xxxvii *Stray Birds*, pg. 75.
- xxxviii To read the entire poem, "Where Shadow Chases Light," see *Gitanjali*, pg. 29.
- xxxix *Gitanjali*, pg. 29.
- xl *Gitanjali*, pg. 29.
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Paula Hayes teaches college level English and works administratively in higher education at Strayer University, Thousand Oaks Campus, Tennessee, USA. Email: Paula.Hayes@strayer.edu
