

# Shades of Autumn: A Close Reading of the Autumnal Verses of Rabindranath, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Hood and Jibanananda

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## Abstract

The beauty and serenity of the autumnal landscape has intrigued poets across time, countries and cultures. Their literary expressions project different shades of autumn. This essay will attempt to explain the exposition of the spirit of autumn in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and explore how far it is comparable to the autumnal verses of William Blake, P. B. Shelley, John Keats, Thomas Hood and the Modernist Bengali poet of the 1930s, Jibanananda Das. Though among the English Romantic poets Blake and Keats represent autumn as a celebration of plenty, the season as a harbinger of winter encapsulates the theme of poverty and a mystic melancholia as well, which is expressed through the poems of P. B. Shelley, Thomas Hood and Jibanananda Das. This article, with its emphasis on Tagore's prose and poetic works on this particular season, compares and contrasts his views with the western perspective and finally tries to establish a link among these poets, all of who have envisioned autumn as a passing phase in Nature's continuous process of decay and renewal.

[**Keywords:** Autumn, seasonal poems, sharat, Jibanananda, Blake, Shelley, Keats]

In Bengal autumn arrives in bright hues of blue, green and gold. As the monsoon withdraws its tearful canopy of clouds, autumn starts extending its bounties in the azure sky, in the golden harvest, in the cool breeze and in the over-brimmed ponds and rivers. The misty blue mornings, the evenings in red and gold and the silent nights, fragrant with *shiuli* blossoms enthrall the hearts. The arrival of the season in Bengal is connotative of festivity as *Durga*, the goddess of power and glory and *Lakshmi*, the goddess of prosperity are hailed in autumn and late in this season *Dewali*, the festival of light is observed in most parts of India. These autumnal festivities are followed by *Nabanna* that is the celebration of the new harvest in rural Bengal. In many of Rabindranath's poems and songs the season is manifested through the abundance of ripe crops in the fields that is 'the golden gift of Autumn for Mother Earth' ('Nihshesh', *Senjuti*, 571) The festive spirit of autumn initiates a holiday mood in human mind, an expression of that has been recorded in one of his seasonal poems in the poetic drama *Nataraj*, where 'Autumn' gives 'a home-leaving call in a holidaying note'. Moved by the call of Autumn's lute, the swan flutters its wings for a long flight:

Autumn gives a home-leaving call in a holidaying note—  
He flutters the wings of swan and makes it fly afar.  
As the *shiuli*-bud blooms on its stem, he calls it back,

The call of the road enchants it and it drops on the dust... (*Nataraj*, 639)

The languorous fleeting clouds sail across the sky, the river flows in torrents, the wind flirts among the cornfield. Within human heart they announce the arrival of a stranger that is 'Autumn':

Today Autumn cast a spell on the clear sunshine,  
The Earth heard the ringing of the holiday-bell.  
The holiday-note murmured in the rippling laughter of the *kash* bushes  
The holiday-note has brought the stranger-friend at the door of my heart.  
(*Nataraj*, 640)

However, in his lyrical drama *Sharadotsav* or 'The Fest of Autumn' (Sept. 1908), this holiday mood of the autumnal setting is intercepted by the workaday motif introduced by the child-protagonist *Upananda*, who projects the theme of 'debt-paying' through abstaining from holiday funs. In this play the figure of the ascetic (*Sanyasi*) represents the priest of autumn who invokes the season and introduces its spirit through autumnal songs. In this context it is important to note that most of Tagore's autumnal songs are based on the notes of Indian morning *ragas* that help to create the ambience of the season's ascetic spirit that is represented through the lyrics. In this play the season is visualized as a child in appearance but an ascetic at heart. Besides foregrounding the theme of festive celebration, the play calls for a look within, deep into the inner-world of the mind for contemplation, which is also the message behind autumn's gifts to mankind. It is as if the season itself participates in the Earth's annual 'debt-paying' to the sun through bounties of corn and water. This metaphor of a self-expressive 'debt-paying' generates a melancholy mood in autumn's overall richness that is also prevalent in the western perception of autumn as documented by the late eighteenth century English poet William Blake (1757-1827) and the Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) in their respective odes to the season.

Blake's 'To Autumn' (c.1777) in three stanzas, begins with the apostrophe: "O Autumn! laden with fruit..." that echoes the first line of Keats's 'To Autumn' (19 Sept., 1819): "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." Throughout the poem Blake refers to the pastoral songs of autumn and thus anticipating the third stanza of Keats's ode:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,— (Keats, 324)

In a letter to his friend J. H. Reynolds (dated 21 Sept. 1819) Keats described the sensuous charms of the season that inspired him to write this particular 'ode':

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never lik'd the stubble fields so much as now—Aye better than chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm—this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it. (Keats, 493)

It is mainly the warmth and ripeness of autumnal Nature that fascinated Keats. Though Blake's expression "and stained/ With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit/ Beneath my shady roof" (Blake, 2) is more sensuous and forceful than Keats's subtler voice "to load and bless/ With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;" (Keats, 324), the archetypal image of autumn's 'golden load' prevails both in Blake's and Keats's odes that associates their perception of the season with that of Rabindranath across cultures and thus tempting the reader into going for an analogical study of these poems.

When it comes to the point of poetic representation and personification, it appears that Blake has visualized Autumn as a 'jolly' youth who sings and plays a pipe like Pan, whereas Keats's Autumn is represented as a peasant woman, engaged in agrarian activities as the synesthetic images record:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; ...  
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
 Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
 Or by a cyder-press, with a patient look,  
 Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours. (Keats, 324)

A similar image also haunts Rabindranath's poetic imagination, who in the initial song of the *Prakriti* section of *Gitanjali* (seasonal songs in the collection of songs written by him), *visvaveenarobe visvajana mohichhe*, describes the spirit of autumn as *Sharadalakshmi*, the white-attired goddess, whose glory is revealed through the pleasant, rain-bathed landscape and whose smile is reflected in the clear, blue sky and in the full-moon nights, lulled by the chorus of hedge-crickets. (Song 1, *Prakriti*, 329-30) The rich, mellow manifestation of the season in Nature correlates with the serene essence of the season latent within the poet's mind as it is represented in his autumnal songs. In songs 151 (*sharata-alor kamalabone*) and 157 (*hridoye chhile jege*), the season is visualized as an abstract and pristine feminine beauty, who appears through the fleeting shadows of cirrus clouds that resemble the fluttering of her dewy veil, in the golden sunbeams that serve as her ringing bangles and in the breeze among the *shiuli* bower that carries the scent of her loose hair:

Within she sways the heart, outside, she enthral the world—  
 Today she has spread her gaze across the azure sky. (*Prakriti*, 376)

In the essay *Sharat* (c. 1915-16) Rabindranath explains in a similar vein how autumn in the West comes hiding her face beneath the veil of mist as opposed to the autumn in Bengal that lowers her fair face to the Earth removing the veil of clouds (*Sharat*, 777). Besides serving as a stimulus to his poetic sensibilities, the season was also partly instrumental in the development of Rabindranath's nationalistic dream. Rabindranath visualized the bounties of autumn in Bengal as

a manifestation of Mother India. In the poem *Sharat* from *Kalpana* (c. 1900-01) he draws an analogy between the season and the patron goddess of the land whom he refers to as *Matah Banga* (the Motherland):

Ah, what a graceful image of thee  
I've seen in the autumn morn!  
O my Motherland, your dusky form is  
Shimmering in a bright halo. (*Kalpana*, 712)

This poetically inspired nationalism is carried on throughout the poem, through a rich variety of images depicting the overflowing rivers and cornfields, the clear sky, the cool dewdrops and the new harvest that is regarded as the call of the Motherland to its people. All these traits of seasonal prosperity are ascribed to the image of the Nation itself. In this unique 'Ode to Autumn' the praise of the season merges into the poet's admiration for his country and thereby endowing the seasonal lyric with a patriotic shade:

The wreath of *shiuli* around the Mother's neck  
Has filled the Earth with its scent.  
Her veil is embedded with gauzy clouds—  
As white as cream.  
With the coronet of the golden sun,  
Graced by the beauty of green and gold,  
With floral trimmings at her feet  
There stands our Mother adorned.  
The entire Earth is smiling at the plenty of  
Light, dewdrops, blossoms and corn. (*Kalpana*, 713)

Thus in the poem the representation of the Nation as a maternal construct is substantiated by the bountiful harvest of the season and this atmosphere of fruitfulness appropriately corresponds with the poet's dream of a prosperous Motherland.

Apart from Rabindranath, the other Bengali poet, whose expressions convey the mellow charms of late autumn in the finest way, is Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). He, in his sonnet sequence *Ruposhi Bangla* ('The Beauteous Bengal') (1932), portrays Bengal's fertile landscape in late autumn as a melancholy feminine beauty that is manifested in the subtle movements of the wings amidst the grass, in the serene, misty evenings, in the pleasant morning air, fragrant with the scent of ripe harvest, in the world of *Behula*, *Lahana*, *Sanaka*, *Kankabati*, *Shankhamala* and *Kanchanmala*, the dead princesses from Bengal's rich resource of orally transmitted fairytales and legends. Such allusions to the cultural nuances of a bygone era (medieval Bengal) intensify the pathos of the autumnal setting. This tradition of visualizing autumn as a woman alludes to the Greco-Roman mythology as well, where the Roman corn-goddess Ceres was identified with Greek Earth-deity Demeter ('Mother-Earth'), who represented the fertile and cultivated soil and presided over harvest and all the agricultural

labours. Her long robe, her veil, her coronet of the ears of corn and her fair hair matching the hue of the ripened grain were symbolic of the autumnal profusion.

Though among the English Romantic poets Blake and Keats represent autumn as a celebration of plenty, the season as a harbinger of winter encapsulates the theme of poverty as well. In the western countries autumn is manifested through the ripening and shedding of leaves from the trees in bright shades of brown, red, orange and yellow that identifies the season as 'fall'. Fall, as the connotative of maturity and end, appears in Romantic poet P. B. Shelley's (1792-1822) 'Autumn: A Dirge' and in 'Ode: Autumn' by a minor literary figure of the nineteenth century, Thomas Hood (1799-1845). Keats's 'season of mists' reappears as 'misty morn' in Hood's poem. In the first stanza autumn is visualized as an aged male figure whose 'coronet of golden corn' conveys the archetypal image of the season and yet who is 'Shaking his languid locks all dewy bright/ With tangled gossamer that fell by night' (Hood, 261) It is interesting that, in this poem, from the fourth stanza onwards autumn is personified as a lonely woman, as 'the Autumn melancholy', who wears 'a coronal of flowers faded', a season of 'shadowy despair', trapped in her 'cloudy prison' that is her soul (Hood, 262-3). And thus he projects the decadent aspect of the season, which associates it with death, decay and coldness. Hood's Autumn with her 'coronal of flowers faded' represents the mourning Demeter at the loss of her daughter Persephone (the Spring-Maiden) whose disappearance into the Hades (the Underworld) denoted in Greek seasonal myth, the arrival of autumn on the Earth followed by winter. In ancient Greece the solemn festival of the *Greater Eleusinia* was observed in every five years in autumn (in the month of September) where the disappearance of Persephone was mourned (Guirand, 155). Hood, in his poem, is attracted by the summer and identifies it with prosperity, but his representation of summer is reminiscent of Keats's portrayal of autumn's bounty in the first two stanzas of 'To Autumn':

The ants have brimm'd their garner with ripe grain,  
And honey-bees have stor'd  
The sweets of Summer in their luscious cells; (Hood, 262)

Whereas, Keats observes:

And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells. (Keats, 324)

Hood's lament: "Where are the songs of Summer?" (Hood, 261) also echoes Keats's "Where are the songs of Spring?" But the latter observes: "Think not of them/ Thou hast thy music too." (Keats, 324) and in his eye autumn's own charm exceeds that of spring. The image of a loose haired autumn haunts the imagination of Hood, Keats and Rabindranath. While for Keats, Autumn's hair is 'soft-lifted by the winnowing wind' and Hood observes 'the languid downfall of her

hair', Rabindranath perceives the scent of her loose hair in the fragrant *shiuli* blooms.

In Shelley's 'Autumn: A Dirge' (1820), the bleakness of nature is amply expressed through the image of the 'bare boughs', fading flowers, rain and storm as they arrange the grave of the dying year. The predominant colours of the poem are white, black and gray (Shelley, 212). According to the western literary tradition autumn is considered as the archetype of tragedy. Both Shelley and Thomas Hood focus on this graver aspect of the season. It is not Shelley's 'Autumn: A Dirge', but his 'Ode to the West Wind' (1819) that becomes a point of reference for Rabindranath as he compares his own perception of the season with that of the English poet. In the essay *Sharat* he visualizes 'Ode to the West Wind' as a representation of death, decay and a stage of perpetual melancholia, an idea that is substantiated by Shelley own address to the West Wind; "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, ... thou dirge of the dying year!" (Shelley, 206-7) Taking the cue from Shelley Rabindranath interprets the spirit of English autumn as suffering from the West Wind's destructive force. He views the autumnal song of the English poet as a song of loss, where the moment of arrival contains within itself the note of departure, where the refrain lies in the motifs of journey and farewell (*Sharat*, 777). Thus according to him, in the western perspective the very existence of the season is emphasized by the preparation of death and in that sense, even the prosperity of Nature in autumn appears to be quite ephemeral to the western poet. Rabindranath visualizes the spirit of autumn in Bengal as a child, endowed with all the charms of his novelty and freshness, as if it is just being born out of the moist womb of monsoon and is laughing on the lap of its foster mother Earth: "His body is young, the fragrance of the morning's *shiulis* resemble the scent of that young body. (*Sharat*, 775) For the poet, the hue of autumn is the hue of life that is not anything out of the rainbow, but the shade which is still quite raw, tender and fresh and is reflected in the molten gold of the sun, in the luminous blue of the sky, in the tender green of the blades of grass, and in bare human body. It is with this colour of life that the season stimulates our vitality (*Sharat*, 775). Vitality cannot remain stagnant and hence looking at the autumn's sunshine, the mind wants to move on (*Sharat*, 776). This motif of wayfaring has a greater exposition in Rabindranath's short story, *Megh O Roudra* ('The Cloud and the Sunshine'-c. 1894), which is set in autumn and where the scholarly hero *Shashibhushan*, through leaving his village and his adolescent friend *Giribala*, complements the ascetic tone of the setting. In this story *Giribala*, with her moody antics resembles the play of sun and shade in the autumnal sky. Autumn thus appears as a significant temporal setting in many of Rabindranath's short stories, most of which are set in rural Bengal where the poet spent a considerable part of his life (1890-1901) for the administration of the family estate in Shilaidaha (now in Bangladesh). It was during these sojourns, that he perceived from close proximity along the banks of river Padma, the lush autumnal landscape in the cosy ambience of rural Bengal,

which itself is quite transient as it is subject to the constant process of erosion and sedimentation due to the river's erratic course.

In *Sharat* Rabindranath highlights the childlike spirit of autumn through the image of the autumnal sky. The moody sky in autumn is a combination of brief showers and sunshine that is as short-lived as a child's laughter and tears and this transient character is captured in song 152 of *Gitabitan (tomar mohanrupe ke roy bhule)*:

Who is seduced by your enchanting look?  
 Don't we know how death dances at your feet?  
 What blaze shows tearing the veil of the autumnal sunshine?  
 You have brought the storm in your loose hair.  
 A quiver runs through the air,  
 The ripe corns shiver in the fields.  
 We know, your worship will be performed through lamentation  
 On the shore of the world's Sea-of-Tears. (*Prakriti*, 376)

The poet also regards the autumnal harvest of paddy and sugarcane as abundant yet transient. He considers this transience as a part of autumn's charm that generates melancholy in the momentary celebration of ripeness on the Earth (*Sharat*, 776). His expression is reminiscent of Keats's address to autumn as the season of "mellow fruitfulness". Incidentally, the cult of Adonis in Phoenician mythology and that of Tammuz in Assyro-Babylonian mythology both deal with agricultural myths about these two corn-gods and vegetation spirits who perished at the prime of their youth "like the ear of corn, which the reaper's scythe cuts-off in the glory of its yellow ripeness" (Guirand, 61) and thereby symbolizing the ephemeral nature of the autumnal harvest. Thus for Rabindranath the season becomes a transitional phase between arrival and departure of Nature's plenty and hence its smile is mingled with the tears of dewdrops. In Bengali tradition, mankind's welcome notes (*Agomoni*) to goddess Durga merges into the note of her farewell (*Vijaya*), just as the image of Shiva bears the smile of the crescent moon in his locks that is overflowing with the fountain of tears. According to Rabindranath it is this apprehension of loss and departure at the moment of obtaining that unites the eastern perception of autumn with that of the West. (*Sharat*, 776)

Even in the poems of Jibanananda the representative beauty of Bengal in late autumn (*Hemanta*) is characterized by a melancholy wavering of the images between ripeness and decay, between celebration and loss. The beauty of Bengal is inherent within its moist, green nature, within its plaintive sagas of love and loss and in its history of chivalry. The serene blue evenings, the sweet scent of ripe corns, the pungent smell of the weeds crushed under the feet of a boy, the lonely feather of a swan floating on the surface of the cool pond, the subtle movement of the fishes underwater, the dewy blades of grass, the cool scent arising from the moist hand of an adolescent girl—all are represented in

successive sonnets through recurrent richly synesthetic images that generate an air of intimate quietude into the poems. The golden glow of the late autumn-afternoons that gradually melts into the dull gray of misty evenings becomes the prevalent temporal pointer to these poems. The serene seasonal setting emphasizes the melancholy mood of the sonnet sequence where he has narrated the tale of an intense love for his country threatened by the premonition of death, a stance that gives his work a patriotic flavour, which is analogous to Rabindranath's representation of the Nation as a maternal construct:

Either life or death will screen the eye—and  
 This grass of Bengal will be on my breast...  
 As *Hemanta* arrives in *Gaur* Bengal  
 As the *hijal* leaves are shed on the pale courtyard,  
 In a *Karthik* afternoon, as the swan leaves  
 The tired pool, I stretch on this grass... (Jibanananda, 18)

Recurrent references to seasonal birds, owls, kites, and insects capture the transient but rich beauty of late autumn in rural Bengal

I'll fall asleep someday in your starry night...  
 As the orange stem of *shafali* drops down  
 On the grass in some mellow autumn—  
 How far will soar the *shalik* and *khanjana*—  
 How much will be the sunshine—  
 I'll feel them all in my death-delirium. (Jibanananda, 22)

It is through the sonnets of *Ruposhi Bangla* that the poet undergoes a creative journey of self-discovery and he desires to remain in a posthumous existence as the latent force of vitality in nature's cycle, to the courses of rivers, in the germination of corns, in the flights of insects and birds, in the nubile charms of pubescent boys and girls. He wants to come back 'as the morning crow to the land of the new harvest of late autumn. (Jibanananda, 24) He is anxious:

Lest I wither away someday in the blue mist of *Hemanta*,  
 As the paddies will be shed with their drooping eyelids  
 In the fields of Bengal...  
 As the yellow leaves will be mingling  
 With the brown ones in the courtyard...(Jibanananda, 25)

In the same way the quiet full-moon nights of autumn with their swarms of twinkling fireflies become symbolic of transience. With death standing as a sentry before his eyes, the poet wishes to have the last glimpse of the waning moon, of the stubble plains and wishes to inhale the scent of the dewdrops (Jibanananda, 29). Thus for him, the autumnal atmosphere becomes a metaphor for the celebration of life on the verge of death:

The dusk descends—a calm silence prevails everywhere;  
 Holding a straw in its beaks, a *shalik* glides quietly;  
 A cart moves slowly along the dusty walk;

The courtyard is filled with heavy heaps of golden straw;  
All doves of the world are cooing in the *hijal*-wood;  
All fairness of the world is spread along the grass;  
All loves of the world are there in our minds;  
The sky is strewn as peace among the skies. (Jibanananda, 68)

This expression is strongly reminiscent of the concluding stanza of Keats's 'To Autumn' where he represents the natural sounds of the season as the quintessential music of Autumn:

While the barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn...  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from the hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and Now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (Keats, 325)

Keats, who was on the verge of his death by consumption, was trying to solve in this poem, the problems between eternity and mutability by representing autumn as a part of the seasonal cycle and thus projecting it as a component in the continuous cycle of death, decay and renewal in Nature. This affirmative belief is conveyed through the final image of the "gathering swallows twitter in the skies", which he presents as a symbol of indomitable vitality. According to Rabindranath, since autumn is a part of the seasonal cycle, it leaves a hint of revival even in its departure. The refrains of the *Agamoni* (the welcome notes) are anticipated even in the desolate notes of farewell in *Vijaya* and thus both are accommodated within the festive sphere of autumn (*Sharat*, 777). As for Blake, he imagines how Autumn "fled from our sight: but left his golden load" (Blake, 2) that is also a message about the sign of life dormant in the seeds. Towards the end of his 'Ode to the West Wind' Shelley too like Keats, views the season as a part of Nature's unending process of change, because he represents the West Wind not only as a harbinger of winter and death, but also as a dynamic cleansing force pointing at a renewal, just as his concluding remark affirms:

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (Shelley, 209)

Even in Hood's 'ode' the juxtaposition of the 'coronet of golden corn' with pearls of dewdrops and the memory of the summer of plenty together convey a message of possibility and revival latent within the subsequent changes of seasons. Thus it appears that all these poets—Rabindranath, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Hood and Jibanananda—underline the sense of loss and melancholia underlying the mellow ripeness of Nature in autumn and thereby they ultimately attempt to strike a balance between the contrasting themes of poverty and plenitude latent in human existence. In this way Rabindranath's autumn of tender vitality, Blake's autumn of golden prosperity, Keats's autumn of subtle sensuousness and Jibanananda's autumn of languorous melancholia join the

energetic West Wind of Shelley's imagination and Hood's autumn of mutability, in a dialogue of multiple perspectives to affirm the theme of revival in the Nature's everlasting process.

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