



The poetics of the boundless self: Rumi and Tagore on longing, love, and transformation

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Abstract

This essay compares Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi's *Masnavi* and *Dīvān-e Shams* with Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener*, but it asks a narrower question than the one usually put to these two poets. The question isn't whether they share a common mysticism. It's what longing does to the structure of the self that feels it. Read as a process rather than a mood, longing moves through four recurring stages in both poets — longing, encounter, expansion, and a return to or expansion of relation — and in neither case does it end in the erasure of self that “mysticism” is often assumed to require. Rumi's *fana* loosens the boundaries of the ego before *baqa* carries a transformed self back into the world. Tagore's devotional self is relational from the start and expands toward the infinite without giving up its particularity. Read alongside, though not through, Emmanuel Levinas's account of metaphysical desire, the two trajectories converge on a structurally comparable model of selfhood: a self-enlarged by relation rather than closed off by possession. I call this outcome boundlessness-in-relation.

Keywords: Rumi, Tagore, longing, *fana* and *baqa*, Jivan Devata, selfhood

Introduction

Rumi and Tagore are probably the two most widely translated devotional poets of the past century, and both of them open their major work with the same instrument. Rumi begins the *Masnavi* with a reed cut from its bed and made to cry out. In Reynold Nicholson's corrected translation, the reed's complaint is a tale of loss: “Listen to this reed, how it makes complaint, telling a tale of separation” (Rumi, *Masnavi* 1.1). Tagore begins *Gitanjali* with a related image pointed the other way. “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure,” his speaker tells the divine, describing himself as “this little flute of a reed” carried over hills and dales and breathed into until it sings (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 1).

It's tempting to read that coincidence as proof of a shared mystical inheritance. A fair amount of existing scholarship on Rumi and Tagore does exactly that, treating both poets as regional variations on one perennial theme of divine love. I want to resist that reading. Rumi's reed speaks through separation; its voice is a wound. Tagore's flute becomes an instrument by being emptied and refilled, its capacity growing instead of closing. The two images share a grammar, an instrument constituted by what exceeds it, but they don't share an argument.

The question this essay asks is how Rumi and Tagore turn longing from an experience of absence into a reconfiguration of selfhood, and why that reconfiguration sends Rumi back toward relation while it sends Tagore outward into an expansion that never really leaves relation to begin with. Longing in both poets works less like a topic than a mechanism: it does something to the boundaries of the self that feels it. I'll call the result boundlessness: not the disappearance of the self, which neither poet's texts actually support, but the expansion of the self's relational capacity past its previous limits. That's a comparative-critical term I'm proposing for this essay, not a word native to the Sufi or Vaishnava-Baul vocabularies either poet draws on, and the distinction matters for what follows.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Rumi's account of selfhood tends to organize itself around the paired concepts of *fana* and *baqa*. Gerhard Böwering's entry on the two terms for the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* treats them as functionally interdependent: *fana* names the mystic's passing away from the attributes of the ego, *baqa* the subsistence that follows it, and the two are not really separable events (722). Amina Kausar Khan's 2017 ^[6] University of Glasgow thesis, *On Becoming Naught*, goes further and reads *fana* and *baqa* as Rumi's own “heuristic method,” arguing that the *Masnavi* moves progressively across its six books toward higher states of annihilation and subsistence (Khan). This essay narrows that reading to the *Dīvān-e Shams* and two episodes from the *Masnavi*, and asks a more specific question: what kind of self does the process leave behind?

Tagore scholarship runs a parallel debate, but it's centered on relation rather than annihilation. Kumkum Bhattacharya's account of Tagore's Jivan Devata, the “Lord of Life” who recurs across his devotional poetry, surveys three competing readings of the figure: a name for the poetic muse, a form of sublimated religious feeling, or a genuinely reciprocal relationship between the self and its own creative energy. Bhattacharya doesn't settle on one of these. I think that instability is worth treating as a feature of Tagore's poetics rather than a loose end in the scholarship about it, and I come back to the point later. Ujjaini Chakrabarty's study of Tagore's early *Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī*, written when Tagore was sixteen under a pseudonym borrowed from an invented medieval poet, reads the sequence as a genuine apprenticeship in Vaishnava *padavali* convention rather than a youthful exercise: the poems move Radha through the tradition's stages of longing, separation, and eventual reunion in spirit, and *viraha*, separation, is the dominant note of the genre as a whole (42–59). That apprenticeship is the devotional-lyric background *Gitanjali* later redirects.

Direct comparisons of Rumi and Tagore exist, but they tend toward atmosphere more than argument: shared musicality, a common Persian-Indian devotional sensibility, or the general claim that both poets sing of divine love. None of that scholarship tracks longing as a process with a discernible structure, or asks what that structure implies about the self it produces. That's the gap this essay is trying to fill.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This is a typological comparison, not a genealogical one: nothing here claims that Rumi and Tagore are historically connected. Earl Miner's *Comparative Poetics* makes the case for exactly this kind of intercultural reading: literary traditions, he argues, can be compared on terms internal to each rather than filtered through a single inherited, usually Western and mimetic, theory of literature (Miner). The affective-expressive orientation Miner associates with much non-Western poetry, organized around the feeling it produces in speaker and audience rather than around accurate imitation of an external world, describes the Persian ghazal tradition and the Bengali devotional lyric well enough to license setting them side by side.

Emmanuel Levinas's concept of metaphysical desire does real work in what follows, but I want to be careful about how much weight it carries. Drew Dalton's study of Levinas describes this kind of desire as aimed not at a determinate lack but at what exceeds satisfaction altogether, a desire that intensifies rather than resolves as it nears its object (Dalton). That distinction is useful for asking a specific question of both poets: does their longing aim at fusion, or does it stay oriented, even at its most intense, toward something it doesn't absorb? Levinas doesn't get to settle that question for either poet, though. Rumi's and Tagore's own idioms sometimes fit the distinction and sometimes strain against it, particularly where Sufi language of union or Vaishnava language of merger presses toward something closer to fusion than Levinas's framework expects. He functions here as an interlocutor the texts can push back against, not a judge handing down what they mean.

Mediation is the last thing worth being honest about up front. Rumi is read here through Reynold Nicholson's translations rather than Coleman Barks's popular versions; Abolfazl Horri's study of what he calls the "domestication" of Barks's American Rumi documents a consistent pattern of stripping Persian and Islamic context from the originals (Horri). Tagore, meanwhile, is read through his own English self-translations. Those texts have their own publication history. W. B. Yeats had an editorial hand in the 1913 *Gitanjali*, which makes them mediated literary objects in their own right, not transparent stand-ins for the Bengali originals.

Rumi: Longing and the Boundless Beloved

Rumi's account of longing begins with the reed cut from its bed. Its cry stands for every soul cut off from its origin; Rumi never says what, specifically, the reed has lost, only that the loss is the condition of its voice. Separation here isn't a problem to solve before the real spiritual work starts. It is the start. The reed sings because it was cut, not despite it.

The *Masnavi*'s tale of Moses and the shepherd, in Book II, complicates a self that thinks it already knows how longing for God should sound. Moses overhears a shepherd praying

in blunt, physical terms, offering to comb God's hair, mend his shoes, bring him milk, and corrects him sharply. The shepherd, ashamed, wanders off into the desert. God then rebukes Moses for driving away a sincere lover over a matter of form rather than heart (Rumi, *Masnavi*, bk. 2). Moses isn't asked to abandon his theology. He's asked to notice that the boundary he's been policing, between correct and incorrect address to the divine, isn't where God actually drew the line. Read as an encounter, the tale exposes a self whose categories turn out to be smaller than what they were built to hold.

The *Dīvān-e Shams* pushes further than either of these. Where the *Masnavi* tells stories about other people, the *Dīvān* speaks in the voice of a lover for whom the line between self and Beloved has gone porous, the poems repeatedly collapsing the distinction between Rumi's own voice and that of Shams-e Tabrizi, the wandering dervish whose friendship set off Rumi's mature poetry (Rumi, *Divan*). Scholars of the *Dīvān* read this collapse as a productive analogue to the later Sufi concept of *fanā fi'l-shaykh*, annihilation in the person of the spiritual guide. The *Dīvān* doesn't map a systematic initiatory curriculum; its ghazals simply keep locating the Beloved's face in what should be Rumi's own field of vision. By this point, the speaker has more or less stopped being reliably distinguishable from what it loves.

That isn't where the system stops, though. *Fana*, the passing-away of the ego-bound self, is conventionally paired in Sufi thought with *baqa*, its subsistence or return, and Böwering treats the two as interdependent rather than strictly sequential (722). *Baqa* isn't a second stage that kicks in once the danger of *fana* has passed. It's closer to what *fana*'s transformation looks like once it's finished. So the self that comes back isn't the bounded self Moses brought to his encounter with the shepherd. It's a self whose boundary with the Beloved has loosened for good, carried back into the world instead of left behind in it.

Tagore: Longing and the Boundless Relational Self

Tagore's longing has a documented apprenticeship. At sixteen, writing under the invented persona of a medieval poet named Bhānusingha, he composed a sequence of lyrics in Radha's voice, working inside the conventions of Vaishnava *padavali* poetry, a tradition that stages love between devotee and divine through a defined sequence running from the first stirrings of attraction through separation, or *viraha*, to eventual reunion in spirit. Chakrabarty traces how closely these poems follow that convention's own sequence of stages, and identifies *viraha* as the note Tagore had already learned to sound well before *Gitanjali* gave his longing a more explicitly devotional object (42–59). *Gitanjali* doesn't invent Tagore's longing. It redirects a longing he already knew how to write.

That redirection shows up clearly in *Gitanjali*'s eleventh poem, which stages an encounter with a boundary Tagore's speaker had assumed was fixed. "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!" the poem begins, rejecting the "lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut" as the wrong place to look. God, the poem insists, is with the tiller breaking the hard ground and the path-maker breaking stones (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 11). The claim runs stronger than the fairly ordinary devotional point that ritual is inferior to labor. It says the worshipper has drawn the boundary around where the sacred is allowed to appear in entirely the wrong

place. The poem's closing line makes the relational stakes explicit: the divine hasn't withdrawn from creation into enclosed, holy places, because "he is bound with us all for ever" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 11). That's the language of permanent company, not absorption, and it isn't confined to this one poem. In a talk called "Samanjasya," Tagore praised Vaishnava spirituality for its nerve in proposing that "God has bound himself to the living being," a claim he called the very ground on which existence rests (qtd. in Chakrabarty 53). *Gitanjali* 11 is that theological claim turned into an image of dust and stone.

Gitanjali's first poem is where the clearest textual ground for "boundless self" sits, and it deserves to anchor this section rather than serve as one example among several. "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure," the poem opens, describing the self as a "frail vessel" emptied and refilled without end, a "little flute of a reed" carried and played until "my little heart loses its limits in joy" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 1). What keeps this from being a conventional image of divine abundance is that it won't let endlessness cancel smallness: the same poem that calls the self-endless also insists its infinite gifts arrive only "on these very small hands of mine" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 1). The poem holds both claims at once, in the same breath, as its actual account of what longing does to a self. This is expansion that doesn't evacuate the particular self doing the expanding. The vessel stays frail even after it stops having a fixed capacity.

Tagore's most sustained name for the presence this expansion answers to is Jivan Devata, the "Lord of Life" who recurs through his poetry as a figure that's neither fully external to the self nor simply internal to it. Bhattacharya's survey of the scholarship on the figure finds no settled reading — muse, sublimated feeling, reciprocal relationship — and I'd rather take that lack of settlement as evidence than as a problem still waiting on a solution. A figure this resistant to being pinned down as either an external absolute or an internal projection is a figure whose whole job is to keep the self in relation without letting that relation collapse into either fusion or distance. Tagore's poetic language doesn't choose intimacy over transcendence, or the other way around. It holds both, poem after poem, and Jivan Devata is what keeps the tension from resolving.

Comparative Synthesis

Set the two readings side by side and they don't run through identical stages so much as four recurring movements: longing, encounter, expansion, and a fourth movement of return or relation. Both poets stage the self's longing, meet it against something that exceeds the self's existing categories, and expand a boundary the self hadn't realized it had. What the expanded self does next is where they part ways, and that divergence matters as much as the parallel does.

Rumi moves from boundary-dissolution toward relation. The reed's cry starts from separation. The Moses-and-shepherd tale destabilizes a self too sure of its own categories. The *Dīvān*'s ghazals, read through the analogue of *fanā fi'l-shaykh*, stage a self whose boundary with the Beloved goes porous almost to the point of indistinguishability. *Baqā* then returns that self to the world, transformed but not erased, its boundary with the Beloved loosened for good rather than restored to where it started. Bounded self, dissolving self, self-recomposed in relation: that's the order Rumi's poetry runs in.

Tagore runs the sequence the other way. His devotional self is relational before longing ever intensifies it, formed, as the Bhānusingha poems show, inside a *viraha* convention that's dyadic by definition, and addressed in *Gitanjali* to a Jivan Devata whose critical reception won't let it collapse into either an external absolute or an internal projection. Longing doesn't introduce relation into Tagore's poetics. It expands a relation that was already there. *Gitanjali* 1's endless self, still holding "these very small hands," and *Gitanjali* 11's God who is "bound with us all for ever," are the same claim said twice: expansion doesn't cost the self its particularity, or the divine its company.

This is where Levinas earns his keep as an interlocutor rather than an explanation. His distinction between a desire that seeks to close its own distance through possession and a desire that intensifies precisely by staying open to what exceeds it fits Tagore's longing with real precision. Nothing in *Gitanjali* asks for the gap between the "very small hands" and the infinite gifts they receive to actually close. Rumi is harder for the distinction to hold. At their most intense, the *Dīvān*'s ghazals describe something closer to fusion than Levinas's framework comfortably accommodates: a self that has, at least provisionally, stopped being distinguishable from the Beloved it addresses. I'd rather let that tension stand than soften what the *Dīvān* actually claims. Rumi's poetics presses harder on Levinas's model than Tagore's does, and *baqā* is arguably the mechanism by which Rumi's system pulls back from full fusion toward something closer to Levinas's sustained, non-closing relation. *Fana* tests the limit of non-possessive desire. *Baqā* is what restores it.

Rumi and Tagore don't arrive at the same destination by different roads; that formulation would flatten a difference worth keeping. What they arrive at is a structurally comparable, not identical, conception of selfhood: in both, a self-enlarged through relation rather than closed off by possession, reached by trajectories running in opposite directions. One begins bounded and ends relational after passing through dissolution. The other begins relational and ends boundless without passing through dissolution at all. Longing, on this reading, isn't a symptom of lack waiting on a cure. It's the mechanism by which both poets rebuild the self as a self-in-relation, and the fact that they rebuild it from opposite starting points is itself evidence that the outcome isn't an accident of either poet's specific theology. It looks more like two answers to the same problem: what happens to a self that wants something it can't possess.

Discussion and Significance

Earlier comparative treatments have already made the case that Rumi and Tagore share a mystical vocabulary of love, and made it well enough. The contribution here is narrower: longing, examined as a process instead of a theme, produces comparable structures of selfhood out of incompatible starting theologies. That claim can actually be tested against the poems in a way a purely thematic comparison can't, and Tagore's own corpus supplies a useful test. The sixth poem of *The Gardener* stages a caged bird and a free bird falling in love across the bars that separate them, and it never resolves: "their love is intense with longing, but they never can fly wing to wing" (Tagore, *Gardener* 6). Longing stays bounded here. It doesn't expand into anything. Read next to *Gitanjali* 1, the caged-bird poem suggests Tagore's own poetics understood boundlessness as something particular poems achieve, not something longing delivers

automatically. That should strengthen the argument rather than complicate it: *Gitanjali*'s expanded self is a poetic outcome worth explaining, not a guarantee.

Limitations

This comparison is typological, not historical. It doesn't claim Tagore read Rumi, or that any direct line connects the two corpora. It also works from a small, deliberately chosen sample, three primary texts per poet, picked for argumentative clarity rather than coverage, and a wider study could test the same four movements against more of the *Dīvān* and against Tagore's Bengali originals rather than his English self-translations. Because both poets appear here in translation, the claims in this essay are claims about their English reception as much as about the originals themselves.

Conclusion

Go back to the two instruments this essay opened with. Rumi's reed sings because it was cut from its source. The wound is the condition of the voice, and only once that wound has done its work, once *fana* has loosened the self past its own edges, does *baqa* carry a transformed self back into relation. Tagore's flute was never cut from anything. It becomes musical by being emptied and filled, over and over, its capacity for relation growing without the self it belongs to ever losing its very small hands. Neither poet's longing ends where "mysticism" is usually assumed to end, in the disappearance of the one who longs. Both end somewhere more specific, and more useful for how devotional poetry gets read: in a self that has become boundless without ceasing to be a self, because it never stopped being in relation to what it loves.

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