

Devotion in Dialogue: Tagore's *Gitanjali* and Meerabai's Translated Poems in Comparative Perspective

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DOI: 10.62823/IJEMMASSS/7.2(IV).7881

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (with attention to the 1912 English self-translation of the 1910 Bengali text) and selected English translations of Meerabai's bhakti poems. It examines devotional vision, poetic voice, gendered subjectivity, figurative language, musicality, and translation strategies shaping modern reception. Using a qualitative comparative textual approach grounded in bhakti aesthetics and reader-response, the study argues that while both corpora orient devotionally toward union with the Divine, Tagore's lyric persona tends toward interiorized, universalist mysticism articulated through supple modernist free verse, whereas Mira's voice is embodied, ecstatic, and vocative—marked by performative repetition and the social defiance of a woman-saint's love. The paper closes by identifying convergences (love-as-surrender, paradox of distance and intimacy, nature as theology) and divergences (authorial self, gender, form, and translational mediation), and proposes directions for further study.

Keywords: *Bhakti, Mysticism, Tagore, Meerabai, Gitanjali, Translation, Gender, Comparative Poetics, Devotional Lyric.*

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* ("Song Offerings") and the corpus of Meerabai (Mira) bhajans occupy iconic yet distinct places in the South Asian devotional imagination. *Gitanjali* helped bring Indian lyric spirituality to a global anglophone readership—earning Tagore the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature—while Mira's songs, composed in Rajasthani/Braj registers and propagated through oral/performative traditions, render the radical intimacy of a woman devotee's love for Krishna. Both bodies of work enact bhakti's core dynamic: yearning, surrender, and a poetics of presence/absence of the Beloved. Yet their poems differ in historical context, authorial position, linguistic medium, formal design, and translational fate.

This paper compares how Tagore and Mira stage devotion: How is the divine addressed? What is the self that speaks? How do form, music, and metaphor make devotion legible across languages and audiences?

Background and Corpus

• Tagore's *Gitanjali*

Originally composed in Bengali (1910) and self-translated/adapted into English (1912), *Gitanjali* presents compact meditations in flexible prose-poetry and free-verse lines. The poems blend Vaishnava devotion, Upanishadic monism, and humanist cosmopolitanism. Tagore's English versions are not literal replicas but creative recastings—tight, lucid, and rhythmically cadenced for a modern readership.

• Meerabai's Poems (in Translation)

Meerabai (c. 16th century) is celebrated as a Rajput princess-turned-saint devoted to Krishna. Her poems survive through oral tradition, manuscripts, and later anthologies; their English lives are

mediated by translators (e.g., A. J. Alston, John Stratton Hawley & Mark Juergensmeyer, Shama Futehally, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, among others). Translations vary from literal to performative renderings, shaping Mira as mystic, rebel, and folk icon.

Note on textual basis: This study reads *Gitanjali* in English (Tagore's self-translation) and a representative selection of widely cited English translations of Mira's poems. Given the multiplicity of Mira's textual witnesses, the analysis treats "Meerabai's translated poems" as a mediated, composite corpus.

Research Objectives

- To compare the devotional subjectivity and theological visions—such as grace, surrender, and immanence/transcendence—in Tagore's *Gitanjali* and translated poems of Meerabai.
- To analyze formal features, including diction, imagery, voice, rhythm, and musicality, and evaluate their impact on devotional expression.
- To examine the role of translation strategies in shaping themes, tone, and reception, alongside the gendered and social dimensions of the poetic voice.
- To develop a comparative framework that can inform pedagogy and guide future literary research.

Research Methodology

- **Design:** Qualitative, comparative textual analysis.

Methods

- **Close reading** of a purposive sample (~30–40 poems; *Gitanjali* items selected across its range; Mira poems from multiple translators to capture variance).
- **Thematic coding** (yearning, surrender, social defiance, presence/absence, nature symbolism, work-as-worship).
- **Stylistic analysis** (pronouns, vocatives, metaphor clusters, repetition, cadence, stanzaic patterns).
- **Paratextual/contextual reading** (prefaces, translator notes) to map translation choices.
- **Comparative framework** (Table 1 below) to synthesize features across texts.

Theoretical lenses

- **Bhakti aesthetics** (rasa theory—especially *śṛṅgāra* and *bhakti-rasa*),
- **Mysticism studies** (apophatic/kataphatic approaches; longing & union),
- **Gender studies** (female voice, authority, and embodiment),
- **Translation studies** (domestication/foreignization; voice & agency).

Historical–Cultural Context

- **Tagore:** Writing within Bengal's late-colonial modernity, Tagore integrates bhakti, Brahmo/Upanishadic currents, and a universalist humanism. The English *Gitanjali* speaks in a modern lyric idiom legible to global readers, often minimizing region-specific idioms in favor of luminous abstraction.
- **Meerabai:** Located in the early modern bhakti efflorescence of North India, Mira's voice challenges gendered constraints and caste hierarchies. Her songs, performed in satsang and temple spaces, recruit repetition, dance, and musical refrain; the performative body is central to meaning.

Comparative Analysis

Devotional Persona and Address

- **Tagore:** The "I" is porous, humble, and contemplative, often addressing a Divine that is simultaneously intimate and vast. The Beloved is "Thou"—a universal Presence encountered in work, nature, silence, and song. The devotional posture is interiorized surrender, often linked to service and ethical openness.
- **Mira:** The "I" is passionately singular and publicly embodied. Address is vocative and insistent ("O Giridhari!" "Hari!"); the Beloved is Krishna as lover/king. The lyric dramatizes social

rupture—Mira leaves conjugal and royal duties for divine love. Desire is unapologetically personal and transgressive, amplifying bhakti's radical equality.

- **Effect:** Tagore's persona often models contemplative inclusion; Mira's persona models ecstatic exclusivity ("Only Krishna matters"), which paradoxically generates inclusive communities of devotees.

Theological Orientation

- **Tagore:** A synthetic monism infuses the poems. God pervades daily labor and nature; distance is a discipline of love, not a metaphysical divide.
- **Mira:** Vaishnava personalism dominates. Krishna's lila frameworks—separation (*viraha*), jealousy, bridal mysticism—shape affect and narrative. The world is the theater of Krishna's play; Mira seeks literal presence.
- **Convergence:** Both enact a pedagogy of humility and dependence on grace; both dramatize *viraha* as the engine of devotion.

Language, Diction, and Imagery

- **Tagore:** Lexicon is spare, translucent; images—boat, shore, flute, sky, flower, light, dust—become metaphysical emblems. Nature is sacramental: "The same stream of life"—a figure of unity and interbeing.
- **Mira:** Language is earthy, idiomatic, and saturated with Krishna-lore: anklets, bangles, monsoon clouds, peacocks, Govardhan, poison cup, family honor. Imagery is embodied (wounds, bracelets breaking, dancing feet), staging devotion as lived risk.

Form, Rhythm, and Musicality

- **Tagore:** English *Gitanjali* favors free verse/prose-poetry with inner cadence, parallelism, and gentle anaphora. The lineation breathes—inviting contemplative pacing.
- **Mira:** In performance and in many translations, poems retain refrain and call-and-response. Repetition, vocatives, and end-rhymes (in some English renderings) keep the song-quality alive. The beat is danceable; the refrain anchors community participation.

Gendered Voice and Social Critique

- **Tagore:** The speaker's gender is not foregrounded; the ethical community is imagined in civic terms—work, service, openness to the other.
- **Mira:** Female desire for God destabilizes patriarchal arrangements. Themes of slander, coercion, and fearless defiance recur. The body is not obstacle but instrument: dancing, wearing Krishna's name, refusing poison—devotion as embodied resistance.

Work, Worldliness, and Renunciation

- **Tagore:** Rejects world-denial; advocates sanctification of ordinary labor—"Leave this chanting and singing... Bring your worship to the fields." The sacred is immanent in the social.
- **Mira:** World-renunciation is relational and selective: she abandons worldly ties that obstruct divine love, but embraces communal singing and the material signs of devotion (garlands, anklets). Renunciation enables public joy.

Translation and Voice

- **Tagore's self-translation:** Authorial control allows compression and a universalist tone; region-specific textures are softened to reach cross-cultural readers. Gains: lucidity, portability. Losses: Bengali musicality and some indigenous idioms.
- **Mira in translation:** Multiple translators yield divergent Miras—mystic saint, folk icon, feminist rebel. Strategies range from literal glosses (retaining names, cultural markers) to freer, performative versions prioritizing songability. Gains: plural access points. Losses: meter/raga nuances, performative immediacy, dialectal flavor.

Reception and Canonization

- **Tagore:** *Gitanjali* becomes a bridge text—modern Indian spirituality for the world stage, informing interfaith and humanist discourses.

- **Mira:** Canonized in bhakti performance, film, dance, and devotional practice; her afterlives emphasize charisma, bravery, and affective intensity.

Close Readings (Illustrative)

- **Tagore (*Gitanjali*):** "Let only that little be left of me / whereby I may name thee my all." Minimalist diction enacts maximal surrender; the voice seeks to be a clear vessel. The theology is of dispossession: becoming small to hold the Infinite. The lineation's pause structure encourages contemplative breath.
- **Mira (in translation):** "I've tied anklets of your name, O Giridhari." A concrete, bodily act (tying anklets) becomes sacramental semiotics—identity is worn, sounded, danced. Devotion is audible and visible; the social world must hear and reckon with it.
- **Tagore (*Gitanjali*):** "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads..." The poem re-situates worship amid "toiling masses." The rhetoric shifts from temple interiority to open fields—work becomes liturgy.
- **Mira (in translation):** "They say I've ruined honor; let them talk." The first-person defiance refuses social surveillance; the poem redeems shame through divine singularity. Theologically, *nāma* (the Name) displaces *nāma* (worldly name/reputation).

Comparative Snapshot

Dimension	Tagore's <i>Gitanjali</i> (Eng.)	Meerabai's Poems (Eng. translations)
Divine image	Universal Presence; often nameless "Thou"	Krishna (personal God, lover, king)
Voice	Contemplative, interior, civic-ethical	Ecstatic, embodied, vocative, defiant
Form	Free verse / prose-poetry, supple cadence	Song structure, refrain, repetition, performance-oriented
Imagery	Light, river, boat, sky, dust, work	Anklets, bangles, monsoon, peacock, Govardhan, poison cup
World stance	Sanctifies labor; immanence	Renounces obstructive ties; public devotion
Gender	Less foregrounded	Central—female desire as authority
Translation	Self-mediated universalism	Many translators; plural Miras
Reception	Global modernist—mystical lyric	Bhakti performance canon; popular devotion

Discussion

Convergences

Both corpora enact:

- **Love as knowledge:** Devotion yields understanding beyond discursive reason.
- **Paradox of presence/absence:** Yearning (*viraha*) intensifies intimacy.
- **Nature as theology:** Rivers, skies, monsoon become theological speech.
- **Ethical surplus:** Devotion spills into compassion, courage, and community.

Divergences

- **Persona:** Tagore's speaker is an Every person; Mira's is unmistakably singular and gendered.
- **Form:** Tagore privileges stillness and internal cadence; Mira privileges chorus, refrain, and dance.
- **Social critique:** Tagore critiques ritualism and class distance; Mira confronts patriarchy and family honor.
- **Translational horizons:** Tagore's English smooths cultural grain for universality; Mira's plural translations foreground or efface locality depending on strategy.

Conclusion

Placing *Gitanjali* beside Mira's translated poems clarifies two complementary arcs of Indian devotional lyric. Tagore turns bhakti inward toward a universalist poetics of light, labor, and listening; Mira turns it outward into embodied, risk-taking love that remakes social space. Translation is not merely

conduit but co-author: Tagore's self-translation curates his modernist mysticism, while translators of Mira continually re-voice her, balancing song and sense, locality and legibility. Together, these works teach that devotion is both contemplative attention and public courage—both breath and dance.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

- **Textual variance:** A critical edition of a single Mira translation set, read alongside recordings of live performance, would sharpen claims about rhythm and meaning.
- **Multilingual triangulation:** Comparing Bengali *Gitanjali*, English self-translation, and Hindi/Braj renderings could track semantic drifts.
- **Performance ethnography:** Fieldwork in satsang/temple spaces would enrich understandings of communal reception.
- **Interart comparisons:** Dance, film, and music adaptations (e.g., bhajans, Rabindra Sangeet) could illuminate how sound and movement carry theology.

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