



## AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SELECTED POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper proposes to analyse Rabindranath Tagore's poetry from the standpoint of ecocriticism. As a matter of fact, the terms ecospiritualism, deep ecology, anthropocentrism fit nicely in the texture of his poetry. In a way, the poet advocates the idea that of the presence of Almighty can be felt by being close to nature as possible. But, once human being is in the midst of nature he might be tempted to exploit or dominate it for his materialistic purpose. So, one must go to nature not with a mind to change or influence it, but rather influenced with its natural surroundings. One must try to be one with nature rather than looking it as a separate entity. Tagore's poetry focuses the need for human beings to live in harmony with nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecospiritualism, Symbiosis, Deep ecology, Environmentalism

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Rabindranath Tagore was born in the aristocratic family in Calcutta. His family had an intellectual aura about it. Nature, for them, was as one of the purest and the most beautiful creation among others in the universe. Tagore was no exception in his appreciation and observation of nature. His father, Debendranath Tagore was a great wanderer whose love was the 'Himalayas'. He was a kind of ancient 'Rishi' a title unofficially conferred on him by his fellowmen.

Tagore loved nature, but it was nature which, for him, was close to the habitations of men. His rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces; they flow by meadows and pastures. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His fellow-men are a necessity to him. Even so, it remains noteworthy that we hear very little of mountains in his verse,

but rains and rivers, trees and clouds and moonlight and dawn are very much spoken of.

From the above account of Tagore's love of nature, it is more than clear that he was not only deeply involved in the world of nature, but was also highly concerned about its purity and maintaining its beauty in totality. Hence, the present paper proposes to analyse his poetry from the standpoint of eco-criticism. The study will see Tagore's poetry from a point of view which will determine the ecological concerns in his poetry. The present study will not be confined to mere presentation of the beautiful aspect of nature, but it will also bring forth Tagore's deep concerns about the presentation of its purity. In other words, as he was a staunch believer of God, he thought that the best way to continue to have faith in God would be to make an earnest effort to preserve nature or to let the nature to be in its natural form.

Tagore's poems on nature are replete with his innate bent of romanticism. He is attracted by the sights, sounds and colours objects of nature. In his love for nature, there is a mark of mysticism. His nature poetry reminds us of Keats, Shelly, Tennyson, and Wordsworth. Undoubtedly, with the kind of a rapport that Tagore established with nature, he was able to achieve oneness with it. He had become so engrossed in the activities of nature that the other concerns of the world became subservient to him. Thus, the exploration of nature became the main motto of his life. By hearing the mystical and mysterious sound of the flowing water, and even the blowing of the wind seem to give him some kind of a message which has the spirit of Godliness in it. For instance, in *Gitanjali*, the poet juxtaposes two contrary situations while talking about the playing on a flute by some villager. He is surprised how Krishna was able to produce a celestial sound by playing on a flute made of a simple 'reed'.

As the paper aims at analyzing Tagore's poetry from the point of view of eco-criticism, it is imperative to define, in some detail, the term 'Eco-criticism'. The word eco-criticism first appeared in William Rueckert's essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism" in 1978. At present, eco-criticism is accepted as a theory worldwide. It is said to be the study of the relationship between literature and environment. Its practitioners explore the human attitudes towards the environment as expressed in nature writing. It is a broad genre that is known by many names like "Green Culture Studies," "Eco-poetics," and "Environmental Literary Criticism."

Thus, eco-criticism is the latest trend in the field of critical theory which studies the relationship between the literature and physical environment which is why it deserves more observations and discovery. Up to now, the critical studies have been human-centric, but eco-critical studies are nature-centric. Therefore, the critical studies have taken paradigm-shift with the emergence of a new critical angle popularly known as eco-criticism. After all the world is habited not only by human beings, but by the thousands of creatures that live in nature. And human being is heavily dependent upon nature in various ways. In particular, the mere breathing

becomes possible when he takes oxygen and oxygen is exhaled by trees. But, owing to the cut-throat competition in the guise of culture, man does not hesitate even to destroy the green trees. In other words, eco-critical studies have broadened the circumference of criticism by including the vital aspect of nature and environment into it.

A renowned critic on eco-criticism Greg Gerrard is one of the noted exponents of eco-critical study. He has categorized in detail the study of nature and environment with the following sub-titles: pollution, wilderness, pastoral, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, earth. In his book *Ecocriticism*, he throws detail light on the above mentioned title as a part of his scheme to include nature also into the field of criticism which was not done before. Describing about 'deep ecology' under the subtitle "Positions" he states:

Deep ecology is the most influential beyond academic circles, inspiring many activists in organizations such as Friends of the Earth, Earth First! And Sea Shepherd. . . . Deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. The shift from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values is the core of the radicalism attributed to deep ecology. . . . (23-24)

Many creative writers responded to the environment in so many ways: some depict the divine beauty of nature whereas some depict the harsher or dark aspects of nature and there are some others that become philosophic in their description of nature. Eco-critics do not share a single theoretical perspective, but they are concerned with certain recurrent issues like anthropocentrism, environmentalism, deep ecology, pastorals, and wilderness. One more critic in the field of eco-criticism Michael Branch in the introduction to *The ISLE Reader, 1993-2003* writes, "We believe that every literary work can be read from a "green" perspective, and that linguistic,

conceptual, and analytical frameworks developed in any nonliterary discipline may be incorporated into an ecocritical reading.” (xix)

The book which proved instrumental in getting eco-criticism accepted as a literary theory is *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. In this book Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. He regards eco-criticism like Marxism and feminism—an activist methodology that can initiate activist movements to change human consciousness to make it caring for nature. The *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)*, an organization formed in 1922, has played the most important role in popularizing eco-criticism all over the world and strengthening the philosophical foundation of this theory by publishing research articles on environmental issues in its famous journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. In this perspective, Tagore’s literature advocates a close relationship between nature and human being, as for Tagore, nature is a living soul.

In the song 80 of *Gitanjali*, the poet talks about the futility of human life by referring to a roaming cloud in the sky. The poet says, “I am like a remnant of a cloud uselessly roaming in the sky” (58). He further says, “Thy touch has not yet melted my vapour, making me one with thy light, and thus I count months and years separated from thee” (58). Very clearly, here the poet is referring to his separation from his Creator the God and the separation becomes intolerable to him, not finding this worldly life comfortable, he turns to nature.

Moreover, in these lines, man has been compared with the cloud that roams about in the sky here, and there or without any particular direction. So the poet prays to God to give him strength enough to become purposeful in life, given the belief that God is real and everything else in the life is temporal. The poet is not happy with this world where, despite all the progress and advancement, man reaches nowhere. So, he passionately wishes to get reunited with his Creator.

But once sent to this world in the form of a human being, the poet wants his worldly life to be colourful and full of joy with the help of spiritual ideas. For this, he needs full grace of God, and although because of attachment to this world while living in it for a moment he might feel little emotional about it, once the call comes from the God he will lose no time in accepting the judgment of God. Rather he will be happy when his end comes to be able to meet the Creator for whom his heart has been longing for.

Therefore, what the poet wants to convey is that the best way to feel close to the Creator is to be the admirer of nature, but observe deeply that the ultimate purpose of man is not to get stuck with the beauty of nature. The nature itself is a ‘Creation’ of that power which is responsible for the creation of the poet himself. So the poet is convinced not to admire the nature, but to go on to wish for the union with that Creator who must be even more charming or rather the most beautiful thing so; why not to enjoy the most beautiful rather than only the ‘beautiful’ (nature). Thus, in the last lines, he says, “I shall melt and vanish away in the dark, or it may be in a smile of the white morning, in a coolness of purity transparent” (58). The poet turns to nature, but his ultimate destination is to seek the reunion with God which is what makes him restless here and which is why, he wants to go to the real home, even though the beautiful nature stands in his way. But, being a kind of an unconscious ecologist he talks nicely about nature, but his ideas go to the Creator of this nature itself who must be even better, and more charming than the nature of the world.

There is another example of Tagore’s deep ecology in song 103: “Like a rain- cloud of July hung low with its burden of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee” (71).

The poet visualizes the fine rainy clouds, dense and deep, as a manifestation of God’s presence. According to the poet, God is real, but invisible. But, the atmosphere created by the rain clouds is the reflection of God’s presence. In other words, the nature is the visible aspect of God, so regarding this nature in the form of clouds as a manifestation of God. He wishes to salute the nature itself. Again he

says, "Like a flock of homesick cranes flying and day back to their mountain nests let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee"(72). Here, the poet visualizes the flight of the cranes to their homes as a flight to the eternal home of the God. In short, the poet feels that this human life is like a journey or a voyage which is done through various parts of enchanting nature but the nature is only a medium to reach the real home. The journey is complete only when the man reaches its home at last, he comes across a colourful and charming nature, but his firm belief does not make him stay there and he happily reaches his ultimate home.

*The Gardener* is one of the finest poetry collections of Rabindranath Tagore. In the song 6, the poet depicts about two birds living in two different conditions: one living in the forest, the second one in a cage. Obviously, the bird living in the forest loves freedom as she flies in the forest which has no boundary, while the other tame bird lives a controlled life. In the beginning, this bird must have certainly felt uncomfortable living in a cage. But, gradually she gets habituated to the caged life. Her discomfort turns into comfort as the time goes by.

One day the free bird meets the caged bird and asks her to come to the forest so that they could fly together freely. The following dialogue between the two birds can help us understand their different life styles on account of their conditions:

The free bird cries, "O! my love let us fly to the wood.

The cage bird whispers, "come heither let us both live in the cage.

Says the free bird, "Among bars where is there room to spread one's wings?"

The dialogues between the two birds tell the whole story of the temperaments of the two birds. On the one hand, the free bird has no hesitation in 'crying out' her opinion, the cage bird just 'whispers' her views. If the word crying is suggestive of freedom, then, the word whisper carries the tone of slavery and dependence. It also speaks volumes about the fearful and timid upbringing of the cage bird. But, the fact of matter is that both the birds are justified in supporting their life styles. The free bird naturally

goes for freedom where only the sky is limit. On the other side, the statement of the cage bird that she cannot fly in a free air as she feels powerless is also justifiable as she has been living a tamed life. There is another example of intense dialogue with simple words in which the difference of both the birds is noticeable:

The free bird cries, "It cannot be, I fear the closed doors of the cage."

The cage bird whispers, "Alas! My wings are powerless and dead."

In view of above discussion, comes the question of culture. In the process of progress and civilization, culture plays a very significant role. But in the process, it has destroyed nature in various ways. William Rueckert says, "Culture is one of our great achievements wherever we have gone-has often fed like a great predator and parasite upon nature and never entered into a reciprocating energy-transfer, into a recycling relationship with biosphere" (Glotfelty, 199). Culture is something which is cultivated after a long habitual practice. From this point of view, for the cage bird, the cage and its surroundings become a reality and starts living according to the conditions set by the cage. So far as, the free bird is concerned, it has developed its culture in free atmosphere where there is no barrier whatsoever.

The big question that the caged bird puts before the world is that the birds are naturally freedom loving creatures. And, therefore, any attempt on the part of human being to tame, to cage them with the help of the human conditions is detrimental to the existence of creatures like birds which feel comfortable only in the lap of nature. Once captivated or caged they lose their natural life and not only live an artificial life but also lose their natural splendor. For instance:

The free bird cries, "My darling, sing the songs of the woodlands."

The cage bird says, "Sit by my side, I'll teach you the speech of the learned."

The forest bird cries, "No, ah no! Songs can never be taught."

The cage bird says, "Alas for me, I know not the songs of the woodlands."

Here, the caged bird has forgotten to sing the songs of nature. The free bird knows that the songs of nature can never be taught. It is, instead, a part of their nature. The tamed bird has lost its natural song and learnt the language spoken by the human beings. Moreover, the objects of nature, that is, rivers, mountains and birds etc., are basically created by the creator for their own sake, and not for the human beings. From this point of view, the birds, or for that matter, the other animals are not meant to be domesticated. Even they are created to live in free atmosphere of nature. So, if human being tries to tame them, they are bound to lose their original nature, which is against natural upbringing of the creatures. It is given to them only by nature. These are the reasons that leave the cage bird 'lifeless' or 'powerless,' so to say, the birds are meant to fly. Flying is life to them. So, if caged, they cannot fly. Thus, the cage bird is the result of man's anthropocentric approach which is strongly opposed by the poet in the form of the helplessness of the cage bird. Here, the human beings always want to look nature from their perspective. Eco-critical perspective enables the human being to view everything from nature's point of view.

In the song 57, the poet describes the world as flower. Apparently, when a flower is plucked the hand gets pricked and the pain remains even after the flower withers away. He says:

I PLUCKED you flower, O world!  
I pressed it to my heart and the thorn  
pricked.  
When the days waned and it darkened, I  
found that  
the flower had faded, but the pain  
remained.

In these lines the poet unmistakably talks about human aggression against nature. The flowers are not meant to be plucked. Clearly plucking of the flower shows man's intrusion into the life of nature. As a part of the natural process, the flowers will bloom and wither when the growth is complete. But, by plucking the flower the man in a way stops the natural growth of the flower. Moreover, in the process of plucking, man himself also gets injured, and the pain of the injury continues with him much after the moment when the flower was plucked.

Therefore, there is a clear message on part of the poet to remain away from nature in terms of plucking or destroying the objects of nature just for the sake of pleasure. In this way, the lines prove to be a strong example of 'deep ecology' unwittingly set by the poet. The poet further says:

More flower will come to you with perfume  
and pride, O world!  
But my time for flower-gathering is over,  
and  
through the dark night I have not my rose,  
only the pain remains.

In the above lines, the flower-gatherer is disappointed that he has not been able to gather not even a single flower (rose) because his flower-gathering time is over. He must have come to the end of the day in his flower-gathering effort. On the one hand, the poet is convinced about the fact that the nature must not be overused for human purposes, but on the other hand, the flower-gatherer has nothing to do with the aesthetic or spiritual aspect of the flower. For him, flowers are a source of livelihood. So, he has no option but to pluck the flowers to sell them in order to keep living. But, the main point of worry is that whatever the reasons and compulsions of the man may be, he has no right whatsoever to disturb the nature.

*Fruit Gathering* is another collection of poems that presents Tagore's deep love for nature, in which he mixes his own feeling with description of various beautiful landscapes, creating delightful juxtapositions. The poet is so much fascinated by the different objects of nature that he has no hesitation in remaining illiterate in his attempt of spending more time in the lap of nature, rather than wasting his time in studying 'books', or getting bookish knowledge. For him, the bookish knowledge or the theoretical knowledge has no significance as compared to the knowledge and experience gathered by being in the midst of nature. Relating the experience of a flower-gatherer, who is apparently illiterate the poet says that he does not feel humiliated at all on his being illiterate. He very humbly leaves the so-called wise man to his fate who is happy that he has been blessed with the bigger book that is nature. In the song 4 the poet speaks out:

I woke and found his letter with the morning.  
I do not know what it says, for I cannot read.  
I shall leave the wise man alone with his  
book, I  
shall not trouble him, for who knows if he can  
read what the letter says.  
Let me hold it to my forehead and press it to  
my heart  
when the night grows still and stars come out  
one by one  
I will spread it on my lap and stay silent.  
The rustling leaves will read it aloud to me,  
the  
rushing stream will chant it, and the seven  
wise stars will sing it to me from the sky.

The above quoted line of the poem unambiguously reflects poet's deep alignment and attachment to nature. In one word, there could be no better example of 'deep ecology' as reflected in the lines, as far as eco-critical angle is concerned.

But, at the same time, he also loses no time in pointing out the harm done to nature by man in the name of progress and prosperity. Roads and buildings are symbols of prosperity. And, this is a fact as far as progress and development are concerned. But, the poet has other ideas. For him, the inner progress is paramount as against the materialistic progress, indicated by construction of roads and buildings. But, for the poet, 'roads' and 'ways' are different things. Roads are symbols of man made efforts, which carry to a particular distance. In other words, the roads or pathways take man to certain and thereby a limited distance. But, 'the way' in the eyes of the poet is indicative of and 'unseen point' up to which the poet wants to reach by the power of his imagination. The following lines from the song 6 are a powerful evidence of poet's above mentioned belief. He states:

Where roads are made I lose my way.  
In the wide water, in the blue sky there is  
no line of a track.  
The pathway is hidden by the birds' wings,  
by the star-fires, by the flowers of the  
wayfaring seasons.  
And I ask my heart if its blood carries the  
wisdom of unseen way.

The 'unseen way' mentioned at the end of the poem talks about poet's deep attachment with nature, in so far as he wishes to walk on an 'unseen way' which goes through nature only. In other words, the ways of nature are limitless and without distance. This means that the poet's concerns are spiritual rather than materialistic. And, for the purpose, nature becomes the nicest and most dependable medium.

Moreover, the one more remarkable point that the poet talks about in the above lines is the hindrance on the way of poet's journey in the form of obstructions created by the cut out wings of the birds and the plucked flowers, that have gathered on pathways, as a result of which it becomes difficult to find the further path. Apparently, the dead wings and the withered flowers are a result of human being's desire for so-called progress. In the song 80, Tagore clearly says that one should not interfere with the activities of nature. He says that:

No: it is not yours to open buds into  
blossoms.  
Shake the bud, strike it; it is beyond your  
power to make it blossom.  
Your touch soils it, you tear its petal to pieces  
and strew them in the dust.  
But no colours appear, and perfume.  
Ah! it not for you to open the bud into a  
blossom.

Here, the poet wants the man not to disturb the nature or the different objects of nature like flowers plants etc. by trying to make a physical contact with them. By temperament man is aesthetic he has a sense of beauty; it is this attitude which also observes beauty in nature. All the objects of nature look so beautiful and attractive to him, so much so that he sort of wants to possess that beautiful thing, for which he instinctively either plucks them or tries to set them right by tearing some of its portions so that it might look more attractive. But, in the process, the object like flower falls down and becomes withered and loses its charm as well.

Therefore, the poet in the above lines sends a clear message that nature should be enjoyed from a distance so that its original shape and beauty remains intact. Here, the poet is unconsciously warning the anthropocentric

approach of human beings. Human beings do not know how to interact with nature. They 'shake the bud' and 'strike it' because they feel that they are the masters of this universe, as well as they are viewed as opposed and superior to nature and free to exploit natural resources and animal species for their own propose.

The part of nature or nature as a whole must be used in the minimum possible way, so that the worldly progress or the civilization may go further but, at the same time, the purity or the genuineness of nature must also not be disturbed, that is, there must be a kind of balance between the worldly progress and the sincere wish to maintain the genuine dimension of nature. In other words, for the enhancement of the civilization, construction and destruction are necessary and in the progress nature is certainly going to be disturbed to some extent in the form of cutting tress, dam construction and the like. But this must be done in such a way that the look of nature is not polluted.

So it is quite obvious that Tagore was very much aware of the fact that in the progress of development and progress, the nature will be used, but he was also in the favour of nature to be used for development, and not for exploitation. Thus, the wholesomeness of nature could be preserved, so that the world continues to get the fresh air and a kind of solace from the nature. The creation of Shantiniketan is a testimony of Tagore's above mentioned belief and attitude. This is all because of the fact that Tagore always regarded nature as living thing.

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