



A STUDY ON THE ECOFEMINIST 'MALE' IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *THE HOME-COMING*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is one of the significant concepts that have rapidly gained importance in the present world. This noteworthy concept basically focuses on the inseparable connection between women and nature, and how the devaluation of nature and abuse of women have always gone hand in hand. Nature has always been portrayed as feminine, and thus women are considered very close to nature. However, it is impossible to completely deny that 'man' also can feel an interconnection with nature. Due to the fear of revealing his weaknesses that can compromise his masculinity, he always considers himself the 'rational agent'—defensive of the fact that no one can live ignoring or being oblivious of 'nature.' The interconnection between man and nature is usually kept away from representation even by writers because man is always considered violent, destructive, and oppressive. The present study focuses on expressing the relation that a 'man' feels with nature, with reference to Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated short-story *The Home-Coming*. Tagore, a Nobel Prize winner, has penned fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and short stories, mostly in Bengali. He has also translated most of his writings, making a notable contribution to Indian English literature. *The Home-Coming* deals with a teenage boy, Phatik Chakravorti, who is described as homesick, disobedient, lazy, wild, and a perpetual nuisance. Phatik makes the readers feel the continuous agonies he has to undergo as an adolescent, how nature gives him that little joy amidst all the physical and mental tortures, and helps him forget all the pain in life.

Keywords: Nature, Ecofeminism, Masculinity, Society

Introduction

Literature is one of the path bearers in the study of the socio-cultural background and the other contexts of a nation in addition to their influence upon the people living in it. From ancient times, feminism and gender issues have borne a significant position in literature; among several concepts and theories in these broad areas, 'ecofeminism' is gaining importance in recent times

because of the increase in the (ab)use of science and technology, which, in turn, leads to the destruction of 'nature.'

The concept of ecofeminism depicts ideas and philosophies linking ecology with feminism. There has been an invisible relationship between gender and nature, which keeps on varying from time to time, but is always present. Ecofeminists believe that there can be no liberation for women

and solution to the ecological crisis within a society unless domination is removed from various describing relationships, as the destruction of 'nature' and oppression of 'women' go hand-in-hand. According to noted literary figure Bronwyn James,

"Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner." (James 8)

Geetika Khanduja, in her paper *Prakriti and Shakti: An Ecofeminist Perspective*, vividly presents the reason that connects women and nature. She states,

"Ecofeminism demands a radical critique of the categories of nature and culture together with an affirmation of the degraded partner in all the patriarchal dualities. Feminine qualities such as co-operation, nurturing, being supportive, nonviolence and sensuality are especially appropriate for creating an environmentally aware society. Because of women's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than men." (Khanduja, 106)

The basic idea of ecofeminism is defined by Maria Mies in the preface of the acclaimed book *Ecofeminism*, co-authored by Vandana Shiva,

"We also understood that women all over the world, since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like 'nature,' devoid of rationality, their bodies functioning in the same instinctive way as other mammals. Like nature they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man. The tools for this are science, technology and violence." (xxiii)

It is a well-believed fact that women are more nurturing compared to men. However, it is quite unjustified to portray that only women are the ones caring for nature. Across the world, there are several examples of men making quite an extensible contribution to conserving nature and the environment. Richard Twine, in his paper, 'Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism,' comments,

"I feel that there is an absence of writing on the relationship between masculinity and nature..." (Twine 1)

So, the present paper aims at portraying the interconnections between 'men' and 'nature' with reference to Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated short story, 'The Home-Coming.' Here, the researcher tries to analyze and discuss plot, the characterization and the theme/s of 'The Home-Coming,' and attempts to show that Phatik, the protagonist, tries to resolve the troubles in his life through his connection with 'nature.' Although it wasn't possible on his part to get relieved from all of his pain, he was able to comfort himself and forget all the agonies that surrounded him, for a certain period. Tagore brings out all the complexities as well as tensions that occur when a teenage boy is left alienated in a city, away from his village and family, in a very touching way. It reveals the boy's plight away from his house and soothing 'nature' in a concrete jungle.

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home-Coming*

Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned literary novelist, poet, and humanitarian, was the first Indian to receive Nobel Prize for Literature for his literary work 'Gitanjali.' Being one of the pioneers of Bengal and Indian renaissance, Tagore's writings revolve around themes related to both Indian and Western learning traditions. Although he started his literary career in Bengali, he later went on to translate most of his own writings in English. Tagore's works have glimpses of love for the world and nature as he himself believed,

"For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment; it is truth; it is the joy that is at the root of all creation. It is the white light of pure consciousness that emanates from Brahma. So, to be one with this sarvānubhūh, this all-feeling being who is in the external sky, as well as in our inner soul, we must attain to that summit of consciousness, which is love: Who could have breathed or moved if the sky were not filled with joy, with love? It is through the heightening of our consciousness into love,

and extending it all over the world, that we can attain Brahma-vihāra, communion with this infinite joy." (Tagore TRL 41)

The Home-Coming (originally, *Chutti*) begins with Phatik being described as a ringleader among the village boys. He lived in the village with his mother and his younger brother, Makhan, as his father had passed away. His mother would often get furious on his mischievous deeds over his brother. Once, Phatik, along with his friends, planned to shift a heavy log lying near the river, waiting to be shaped into a mast for a boat. In the meantime, Makhan arrived and sat over the log that made Phatik very angry. Unable to withdraw Makhan from the log became a threat to his prestige and adolescent ego, and thus, Phatik and his friends pull the log with all the strength, hurting Makhan in the process.

"And, sure enough, Makhan rose from Mother Earth blind as Fate and screaming like the Furies." (Tagore SSS 39)

Phatik's fear of his mother was clearly visible when he ".....sat down on the edge of a sunken barge on the river bank, and began to chew a piece of grass." (Tagore SSS 38) This act of Phatik portrays his closeness to nature and his behaviour as a calf chewing and swallowing everything (including his insecurities, fear, and ego). After reaching home, Makhan narrates the entire incident in front of his mother, annoying her to the extreme. She slaps Phatik. From this point on, Phatik's fate was about to change, and more pains were awaiting his way. His uncle, Bishamber, "a middle-aged man, with grey hair and dark moustache" offered to take Phatik to Calcutta and educate him with his three boys. Phatik's mother felt an immense relief, immediately agreeing to the proposal.

Once they reached Calcutta, Phatik's aunt was by no means pleased.

"She found her own three boys quite enough to manage without taking any one else. And to bring a village lad of fourteen into their midst was terribly upsetting." (Tagore SSS 41)

As mentioned by Chelliah,

"Phatik felt like a fish out of water in the stifling atmosphere of his aunt's house. His tortured soul was full of anguish, as he realised that he was an unwelcome guest." (Chelliah 146)

After reaching Calcutta, Phatik became "very much like a stray dog that has lost his master." (Tagore SSS 41)

"To live in a strange house with strange people is little short of torture, while the height of bliss is to receive the kind looks of women, and never to be slighted by them." (Tagore SSS 41)

Phatik longed to go back to the open country and his mother's arms. Phatik dreamt of his village home every night.

"He remembered the glorious meadow where he used to fly his kite all day long; the broad river-banks where he would wander about the livelong day singing and shouting for joy; the narrow brook where he could go and dive and swim at any time he liked." (Tagore SSS 42)

Tagore has very precisely presented Phatik's oneness with nature and the sense of freedom he feels through the description of his village.

"The shy, nervous, lean, uncouth and ugly boy's" silent cry of the innermost heart for the mother is represented as "the lowing of a calf in the twilight;-this love, which was almost an animal instinct, agitated." (Tagore SSS 42)

Phatik's longing for his village grew to such a level that he ran away from Bishamber's home in spite of having a deadly attack of malaria fever. When Bishamber took help from the police and found Phatik, his pain was visible from the words,

"Uncle, I was just going home; but they dragged me back again." (Tagore SSS 44)

Phatik's continuous queries to his uncle about the holidays added to his craving for home and the open country, away from all the troubles and embarrassments. In the end, when his mother

arrived like a storm and began to lament, Phatik's restless movements stopped. He gasped,

"Mother the holidays have come." (Tagore SSS 45)

His last sentence clearly makes the reader feel the level of intimacy that Phatik had with 'nature,' and how much he longs to be amidst those open meadows back in his village. It brings an addition to the thoughts of ecofeminists that, at times, even men might feel the same interconnection with nature, which usually gets unnoticed. The reasons behind it are the ideas and thought processes of various societal traditions. In his book *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory*, Seidler mentions that men,

"...are threatened by what our bodies might reveal to us, for they might reveal a weakness that can compromise our masculinity." (Seidler 18)

Seidler also adds,

"As men, we learn to live a lie. We learn to live as if we are 'rational agents' in the sense that we live as if we live beyond nature. We learn to live as if our emotional lives do not exist, at least as far as the 'public world' is concerned, for this is where these identities are most securely lived out." (Seidler 19)

In the notable paper *Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism*, Twine highlights the ideas of one of the noted ecofeminists of contemporary times, Val Plumwood, as,

"She believes what is required is an understanding of a more complex dominator identity which she terms as *master identity*. This term it can be argued allows us to think out the importance of other categories alongside gender. Just as we cannot reduce all oppressions to class, we can neither reduce all to gender." (Twine 4)

Ecofeminism can be read from different perspectives and dimensions, such as, gender, race, and class; it "not only explores many bonds between nature and women but also connects all, all marginal entities together." (Bala 192)

Conclusion

It is necessary to break down all the barriers created by men, such as religion, class, gender, race, and caste. Humans must feel the connection with nature, as Mother Earth provides us with all the comfort, both physical and mental. Science and technology, concrete jungles, and the speedy world might help us replace everything, from food to water, perhaps even feelings, but all of that will be artificial. Nature would definitely survive anything, but we, the human civilization, are on the verge of being wiped out from the planet. Like Phatik, who kept on craving his open country, his precious times spent while playing with friends in the riverside, and the glorious meadows, one day, the entire world would long for peace amidst nature. As mentioned by Khanduja,

"It is high time that the ecofeminist concerns come to the fore and are addressed through proper policy action lest we lose connection with nature. This belongingness with the ecology in the very foundation of life and is the inherent characteristic of the life in its elemental form." (Khanduja, 112)

With the current pandemic scenario, the ill effects can be already seen, so time is ripe for humans to restore the regenerative capacities of nature and focus on developing a sustainable world.

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