



“THESE STORIES HAVE TREES IN THEM”: EXAMINING SELECTED TAGORE’S WRITINGS

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Abstract: The current times require a serious engagement in conserving nature, it calls for an urgent need particularly with the threat of materialism taking over the human minds. The field of Ecocriticism has re-read and re-interpreted literature to see how nature/environment is depicted. This field of literary theory and criticism has also been targeted as an agency or voice for nature where once again, nature is constructed. The nature-culture divide appears to be widening, even with an array of literature being explored and examined. It is in this context that the proposed study aims to explore one of the Indian texts and examine if any advocacy for nature works to bridge the gap between nature and culture. The study looks at Rabindranath Tagore’s Creative Unity, to observe his teachings on ‘unity’. It intends to contextualise Tagore’s work as a compassionate call to human beings, bringing them out of their inconsequential roles and placing them in a momentous drama in which they are confronted with the elements that link each of their lives to all and to their places within a biotic community. In the course of the analysis, the study delineates certain larger issues such as the necessity of integrating the natural world in the teaching of literature, the problem of constructs, and the notion of literary theory and criticism produced in the East (Indian context). One of the ongoing debates in the field of research in Literature is whether the East has produced any literary theory or criticism of its own. The proposed study attempts to understand the crisis on a larger scale integrating nature, culture and the aspect of knowledge production.

Keywords: Unity, Nature, Culture, Ecocriticism, and Theory

Literature of 'wilderness' and the category of 'nature writing' have been extensively treated in ecocritical studies, where the 'setting' is brought to the 'center' and examined. The representations of nature in literature is re-read, explored and examined; while the recent resurgence of interest within humanities demands for an investigation of the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, particularly in response to environmental crisis. This requires a shift in the ways of thinking about our relationship with our home planet, and also a conscious revision in how we represent, in words and images, the world we live in.

When we consider the relationship of man and nature, forests become the space of encounter between the two. Forests entered into a close relationship with human's work and leisure, providing the bare necessities for humanity and also a space that was not separate or inimical. The definition of 'forest' has undergone multiple changes, and there are about 800 definitions of the term that are collated from around the world. Across the globe, the different environmental and cultural histories have affected peoples' visions of what forests are. Perhaps, one of the reasons why there are many definitions is because they have national and global policy implications. As many definitions would imply, forests are not simply a collection of trees, instead it is a community where organisms interact, a space where different ecosystems are intimately connected with each other.

The different cultural attitudes to forests have vacillated between contrasting images of the natural and supernatural, places of refuge and ambush, of purity and defilement, good and evil. In some cultures, forests are considered as the abode of demons and danger; thus, in many literary narratives, the signalling of something ill or bad is usually set in forests making them dark spaces. Forests are also seen as spaces for one to escape into, not in the manner of

perceiving forests as a relaxation site, but as a thought that terminates the battle of an individual with the village/city life. Forests are also depicted as natural resources, which provided work for many, and simultaneously allowed humans to engage in a symbiotic relationship with nature.

The advent of industries made forests/nature as large resources, and in search of newer raw materials for cheaper prices, voyages and explorations began which eventually led to colonialism. The new long-distance oceanic trades which developed during the fifteenth century accelerated the interests of the wider world in Western Europe in terms of appropriation of raw materials at cheaper rates, and the new lands became a site of study which enabled the development of natural history and the status of science. In parallel, the 'orient' nations became texts for the European colonizer to represent the tropical nature. This led to a difference in the very construction of what 'nature' meant to the Europeans and how differently it was perceived by the rest of the world.

By the mid sixteenth century, Europeans had charted an outline of how the world looked, and they also recognised a different world of flora. This was an important development, since the discipline of medicine invested its interests in studying botanical science. There were attempts made to construct new botanical gardens which would comprise representative specimens from every part of the world. Thereby, gardens became that space of intersection between nature and culture. The gardens, now, acquired a meaning as symbols of an economic power which had a power of affecting the whole biological world. Materialistic attitudes grew intense and marked the onset of the depletion of natural resources.

Today, the need to conserve forests have become a pressing issue, and the solutions one can think of is almost none. It is in this context that the present paper aims to understand human's relationship with nature and its representations in Tagore's essays, "The Religion of

the Forest” and “East and West”, from the collection, *Creative Unity* (1922). Tagore’s argument in “The Religion of the Forest” is that our attempts to establish relations with the world depends either by conquest or by union, either “through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy” (Tagore 2008a: 28). When confronted with this conflict, Tagore says that the appropriation of nature by power leads to dualism in the literal spaces as well as in thinking, while accommodating nature emphasises on unity.

The relationship between literature and environment in India, as Tagore continues to claim, is deeply embedded in our way of life. The ideal teachings of unity run through our classical literature:

The legends related in our epics cluster under the forest shade bearing all through their narrative the message of the forest-dwellers. Our two greatest classical dramas find their background in scenes of the forest hermitage, which are permeated by the association of these sages. (2008a: 29)

This is to elaborate on the fact that the forests are not merely topographical in its significance, it rather represents certain ideals of life, the space becomes symbolic of unity between humans and nature. This is perhaps one of the earliest significant representations of forest in classical literature which emphasises a close proximity between nature and humans.

Tagore’s emphasis is on a spiritual connection with nature, where humans are required to consciously realise that everything in this world is independent, yet in order to sustain, everything has to participate in continuous cycle of dependency. He analyses certain Indian and Western texts to show how nature is represented. The stark differentiation he makes is that nature that gets depicted in the classical Indian literature is represented as an entity that is worshiped. While, nature in some of the Western literature is seen as a “trespasser” (2008a:

31). This may appear to be a very reductionist way of creating a direct binary, but one must not overlook the underlying philosophy of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

There is, perhaps, a fault in merely glorifying 'nature' and not looking at it otherwise. It is obvious that humans asserted their dominance over nature, but Tagore's argument is that this superiority of human over nature did not seem like a threat. This superiority was accommodated from a "comprehensiveness of sympathy, not in the aloofness of absolute distinction" (2008a: 39). His "East and West" while stereotypical positioning the two realms distinctly into binaries, the larger argument that needs to be perceived is that of how "our mind has faculties which are universal, but its habits are insular" (2008b: 43). He sees the approach of the West as one with a shock of passion for power and wealth, and that this passion is the principle force of separation, of conflict.

The intersection of the East and the West became a site of the destruction of moral bonds, rather than a possible creative ideal. Science brought the two realms closer in terms of materialistic progress, but simultaneously widened the gap between the two, mostly parallel with racial difference. The real East, Tagore claims, still remains unexplored in terms of its spiritual knowledge. The merging of the two realms need not emphasise on losing the individuality, rather it is an assertion on training of intellect to gather a collective power and progress compassionately. What predominates unconsciously as a hindrance is the attitude of the West towards the East: "[t]he blindness of contempt is more hopeless than the blindness of ignorance; for contempt kills the light which ignorance merely leaves unignited." (2008b: 48) This may, once again, seem reductionist a claim but we cannot wholly suspend Tagore's creative response. It points out at our callous attitude which eventually makes our knowledge of foreign people grow insensitive, and therefore, easily becomes both unjust and cruel.

The interaction of the two great hemispheres of the globe, in a way, defines our relationship with nature. The dealings between human beings is not seen as individual pursuits, rather a mutual understanding that is aided by entire social groups. In hindsight, it can be seen that this interaction led to an acquisition of a global knowledge of 'nature' as a resource, thus marking the first step in determining the influence of humans on the environment. The accumulation of a global knowledge of the different lands, people and the various other entities of the biotic community accelerated human activities impinging on environment. It is from here that we must begin to reconsider the representation of nature in literature.

It would be interesting to bring into context Aldous Huxley's critique of Wordsworth's representation of nature in his writings. Huxley's "Wordsworth in the Tropics" (1928) presents to us how nature is 'constructed', and the divide that comes within the understanding of nature. The English Romantic writers constructed nature as 'divine and morally uplifting', and as a space that provides relaxation and rejuvenation from tiring industrial work. Huxley's argument is that Wordsworth (or any other Romantic writer), would not have treated nature as a safe-isolated space if he were to observe nature in tropical lands that grow under a "vertical sun" experiencing "equatorial rains". The notion of nature being "*Gemuthlichkeit*" (Huxley 1958: 10), meaning 'friendly', would probably emerge under a temperate sky, but not always. Huxley comments that the Wordsworthian adoration of nature has two defects;

first, ... is that it is only possible in a country where Nature has been nearly or quite enslaved to man. The second is that it is only possible for those who are prepared to falsify their immediate intuitions of Nature. For Nature, even in the temperate zone, is always alien and inhuman, and occasionally diabolic. (1958: 12)

By stating this, Huxley has attempted to strike a balance in the representations of nature. However, the elaborate critique still lacks any attempt to define the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and to negotiate the nature-culture binary.

The Wordsworthian answer of “let Nature be your teacher” is simply committed to papers and not seen in practice. Tagore’s claim runs parallel to this, where he asserts the harmonious blend of the two hemispheres of the globe in order to realise the unity with fellow beings and all that is living on this planet. His learnings from the Upanishads emphasises on the realisation of the truth of unity;

Ishavasyam idam sarvam yat kinch jagatyam jagat.

Yena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gradha kasyasvit dhanam.

(Know all that moves in this moving world as enveloped by God; and find enjoyment through renunciation, not through greed of possession.) (Tagore 2008a: 28, *translation original*)

Though Tagore charts out, perhaps unintentionally, a distinction between the East and the West, he still presents a keen observation of nature as represented in literature produced in the two realms. He attempts to strike a balance between ethics and aesthetics by emphasising on the spiritual union of human and nature. However, in doing so, he too falls into a trap of idealising nature, and thereby widening the gap between nature and culture – one of the critiques that emerged in the second phase of ecocriticism.

In the line of the analysis presented, the question of ‘What is Nature?’ remains partly unanswered. It is in this context that the study attempts to examine whether the knowledge produced by the East has lasting validity. Tagore assumes a dialectical position on nature, his essays do not deny the fact that nature is understood through the prism of human paradigms.

However, his learning does implicitly offer a partial solution in terms of minimising anthropocentrism, that is, our attitudes toward nature is inevitably anthropocentric, but there is a possibility of the merging of the nature-culture divide provided we consciously interact with the environment and re-think ideas about ourselves in terms of holistic development.

The relationship between literature and environment could perhaps be seen as a platform where advocacy for conservation of nature can be attempted. It is in this context that we need to re-read Tagore, or for that matter – to re-read many of our forefathers, not to divinise them or demonise them, instead to read them as our contemporaries and see what their writings have to offer us. By studying the past methods of our relationship with nature, and contemplating on our present engagement, we create a dialogue between the established and the experimental, the past and the present, making connections that bring a greater sense of depth and understanding of the issues and ideas that shape our world.

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