

UNVEILING ECO-CRITICISM PREDILECTION IN TAGORE'S 'POST MASTER'

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Abstract

The concept of Eco-Criticism is approached in a broad spectrum. Either feminist or worldly approach has a relevance with Eco-humanism, that leads to emotional outburst collated with ecological elements. This paper aims at study of Eco Criticism with the focus on relevance of traits of human with nature.

The study has focused on the novel by Rabindranath Tagore 'Post Master', and analyzed prime characters in the story, in terms of material ecocriticism. Female protagonist is studied through the symbolic lens of feministic ecocriticism and reconsider ecofeminism as eco-humanism. The interpretations of writer with regard to emotions and feelings are often stereotypically labelled, irrespective of any gender implications.

Human and Non-human world; Land and its Advocacy; Water and its forms: feelings and its depth, such outlooks are studied to analyze eco materialism. The novel has the description of environmental segments as a medium to teach the survival together with purgation of emotions.

Coinage of term Eco-materialism is evaluated in the paper of study.

Keywords: Eco-criticism; Eco-feminism; Eco-humanism; Eco-materialism; Environmental segments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism reveals the connection between human nature and the Nature that surrounds it. The term is not about the criticism of various social and philosophical perspectives but it studies the affection of nature with the human to dwell with beauty and serenity. Cheryl Gloyer coined the term of Ecocriticism as the study of Green. The consistent approach to Ecocriticism gained her recognition for contributing the theory of Ecocriticism. The term is about the literature studies of materialistic associations encompassed with the environment. The part of the environment, its portrayal and various other natural elements, together contribute to the study of Green Criticism. Green criticism works on analyzing nature and its relationship with human beings.

The materialistic attractions for human are incognizable but if association is dwelled with nature and humane then a good match is presumed because man has his depth of character to assimilate with nature and woman with her intrinsic behaviour finds similarity with nature, that evokes concept of 'Eco materialism' to familiarise. This concept confronts the social paradigm and cultural as well as ethical norms prevailing in the society.

The relationship of nature and literature is followed by many scholars. The term 'Ecofeminism' is a combination of ecological and feminist studies. It relates to the oppression of women with nature from the social norms. French author Françoise d'Eaubonne, in his book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), has introduced the term 'Ecofeminism'. The empathy of Nature and women goes along biologically, spiritually and emotionally. Ecofeminism, 'Critique Influence Change' book by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies deals with the content of Modern science created destruction of nature by inventing medicines of child abortion.

The term 'Ecocriticism' deals with the deep emotion of loneliness. Nature itself has been dwelling with loneliness ever since. Nature and loneliness are synonyms to a big extent. Being alone in the midst of millions is the qualifying trait of mother Nature which describes seclusion in refined meaning. The wave of serenity is proclaimed solitary and momentarily prospects of the environment. Unescorted feelings of the person need to come out from within to lighten the soul. The soulful thoughts of humans are pertinent to patience and dedication for approaching the goodness of life. Nature on the other hand is consistent with the natural process engulfing all the darkness evolved by the creatures of it.

The paper aims to study the relationship of nature with solitary souls in the shade of humanistic purview. Emotions seldom have gender correlation nor do all entail with physicalism as proposed by eco-materialist theories. The study focused on aspects of humanism concerned with ecological criticism. With this insight, the work *Postmaster* by India's first novel laureate in literature, Rabindranath Tagore is studied to reach the ultimate panorama of life of characters called 'Ratan' and 'Postmaster'. The story is about people from various

social statuses seeking compassion, love, and empathetic gestures but retardation from loneliness persists for one or the other reason. Both the characters were in a relationship of sharing good time and care for each other to survive peacefully but situations were opposing for the post master to resist the employment but Ratan was a trained woman for oppositions from life, she was an orphan, who managed to survive agreeably with the situations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pal, T., & Rath, S. K. (2015). Deliverance of Women and Rabindranath Tagore: The feminist characters of Tagore are raw and seemingly close to secluded with the pace of world. The characters of 'Ratan' and 'Mrinmayi' were illiterate and oppressed by society in Tagore's works. The writer points the education for women to be fashioned among lower class people.

Pal, T., & Rath, S. K. (2015). Deliverance of Women and Rabindranath Tagore: Various life realms of women have been portrayed by Tagore in his short stories. In 'Haimanti', the hollow ethics of society imposed on the sensitive young girl to the extent for her life. Hence social oppression and challenges are considered as more important than a human life. Complication of relationships among men and women are depicted in the story of 'Postmaster'.

Chelliah, S. (2017). Rabindranath Tagore's Insight into the Psychology of Children and Adolescents in His Story World: The study focused on psychology of children and adolescents to dwell with the world with the domination of elderly man and woman, who hardly recognize their emotions to manage with the futility of life to survive.

Mellor, M. (1992). Eco-feminism and eco-socialism: Dilemmas of essentialism and materialism: The book has arguments for the impossibility of thriving the theory of eco feminism and eco materialism to practice till woman and nature shall not be treated as objects of the economic system.

The term 'Ecocriticism' and 'Eco Materialism' are still to study in its pragmatic correspondence. The present study is anchored at the women's plight and psychological insight which has been explored through the story of 'Post Master', and the effort of uniting materialism and feminism to pursue the symbolism tied with nature and human psyche. The reviews are meagre to Ecological studies in relevance of humanism or materialism in the novel of 'Postmaster' by Tagore. The purpose of this paper is to introduce correlation of materialist and feminist prospects of the characters of the novel and come up with novel terms to identify human feelings and connections with nature demanding the gender tendencies.

3. NARRATIVES THAT MATTER WITH THE MATTER

'Nature heals' is not just a phrase to engulf the impact of urban and rural lifestyles. Studies state, "*The Postmaster* highlights the problem of the increasing gap between the village and the city which Tagore saw as a major handicap for India's success as a nation" (Quayum, 2011, p. 143). Human psyche has a great connection with the power of nature. One who takes refuge or is close with nature holds greater capacity to heal and repeat with the emotional upcoming in life. With the short story *The Postmaster*, penned by Tagore, the paper aims to affirm Ecocriticism elements and also points out that nature connects with the feeling irrespective of gender. In the hands of Tagore, it has taken an elated stand as "rich description of Nature" (Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories, 1991, p. 41) takes the charge to imply the plight of the postmaster's and Ratan's heart. Nature appends with loneliness to the postmaster and seams with the sense of longing towards Ratan.

The objective of the study is to analyse the prime characters in the story, the postmaster in terms of material ecocriticism and Ratan through the symbolic lens of feministic ecocriticism and thereby urge to reconsider ecofeminism as eco-humanism. Emotions and feelings are often stereotypically labelled, else they are devoid of gender implications. Ecocriticism is defined by "Cheryll Glotfelty" in the book's introduction as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii)" (Patil, Interface between human beings and nature, 2020, p. 12). Material ecocriticism,

"With passion, beauty, and rigor, Iovino and Opperman urge the contemplation of matter's "narrative" power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. . . . [M]atter itself becomes a text where dynamics of "diffuse" agency and nonlinear causality are inscribed and produced (Material Ecocriticism 79-80)" (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 11)

The "storied matter" that develops in corporeal forms and "discursive formulation" are substances "mesh of meanings, properties and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 2). Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann further explicates that "philosophy, quantum physics, biology, sociology, feminist ideas,

anthropology, archaeology, and cultural studies”, to mention a few, are all part of the “material turn” conversation that spans the “sciences and humanities” studies (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 2). Whereas the term, feminist ecocriticism has been widely accredited as “the complex interplay of environment and culture, and feminist” outlook acts as “a guide for doing so (Buell 2005)” (Vakoch, 2014, p. 11). “Ecofeminism, a neologism, was coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne, a French writer, in 1974 in her path-breaking work *Le Féminisme ou la mort*”; the “yoking together” of “environmental” issues and “feminism” is a fascinating philosophical venture that has befallen recently; when the two autonomous “narratives” (environmental crises and feminism narratives) – came together to present “their politics in the best sense of the term” (Patil, Introduction: Ecofeminism and Indian Novel, 2020, p. 2). According to Warren “the woman/nature analogy” can be described as “the connections- historical, empirical, conceptual, theoretical, symbolic and experiential” (Vakoch, 2014, p. 12). The theory stated gives ample evidence for a call towards eco-humanism.

The story in context, *The Postmaster* is set in rural village, *Ulapur*, Bengal and radiates lush, complex pictures of the natural environment that provide much of the emotional depth, which serves as a source of both melancholy and artistic inspiration. In one of his letters Tagore penned that his mind had been “taken over by *The Postmaster*: the light, the breeze and the movement of leaves on all sides” merged and found their way into writing (Dutta & Robinson, 1997, p. 41).

“Ecological postmodern” philosophers including “Charles Hartshorne, David Ray Griffin, and Charlene Spretnak, among others,” have claimed that the “exponential escalation of the ecological” problem needs a profound epistemological transition from a mechanistic to an “ecocentric” worldview “grounded in Cartesian dualisms with a relational ontology” (Oppermann, 2014, p. 22). In *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, Tagore alludes on *The Postmaster* and notes that there are few types of “happiness in the world” that can compare to the joy of producing “something in which the mind is completely involved in its surroundings” (Dutta & Robinson, 1997, p. 41). His thoughts impeccably resonate with the theme of Eco criticism.

The *Postmaster*’ took over my thoughts. The light, the breeze, and the movement of leaves on all sides combined and entered my writing. There are a few kinds of happiness in the world more fulfilling than the happiness of creating something in which the mind is totally immersed in its surroundings.

The *postmaster*’s sense of imprisonment in the village appears to be symbolised by the terrain, which is frequently wet with rain. Intense emotion and a sense of the sublime are also present in the landscape. While the *postmaster* appears to be moved by nature, it is also nature that drives him out: the ongoing floods in *Ulapur* cause him to become unwell, which leads to his departure from the hamlet.

Ratan on the other hand, is an orphaned 12- or 13-year-old girl who lives in *Ulapur*. In exchange for food, *Ratan* works as a maid for the *Postmaster*. She is a petite young lady who has been abandoned, to be looked after by no one and to have only the *postmaster* as company in the village. She connects with the *Postmaster* and treats him with care and gratitude. When the *Postmaster* speaks to *Ratan* about his family, she begins to connect with them in an imaginary frame and refers to his relatives as her relatives, as she has no relatives left. Since the demise of her father, mother and brother she starts to consider the *Postmaster* to be her last resort.

The primary aim in the distinctive unfolding is to depict the natural and scenic beauty of Indian rustic life, culture and its influence leading to progression.

a. Interconnection: Human and Non-human world

Life is often referred metaphorically to ups and downs like that of the *ghats* that finally reach the river. The motion, meeting still separating land-dwelling and water in terms of world and spirit in nature is quilled with being. Perhaps the most striking “connection between the *ghat* and” sad “leave-taking” is made in *The Postmaster*, yet “there is a difference here between” *Ratan*’s pain and the *postmaster*’s melancholic reactions: her grief is “real” due to longing resultant to “loss and rejection” whereas “his is more metaphysical” spurred due to “alienation rather than grief” (Radice, Introduction, 1991, p. 45).

b. Land and its Advocacy

Material ecocriticism’s basic argument is straightforward: “the world’s material” manifestations “are knots in a vast network of agencies” that may be “read and interpreted as formative narratives, stories” that witness physically developing in “coevolutionary landscapes of forms and discursive formulations” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 1). In the onset of the story the village is called “humble” and the very next line talks about “an indigo-factory” set during the British rule because of which there is a post office reminding the futility of torment on nature for seeking advancement. The post office that stands as a mode of communication and progress itself pins down the expected well-set to low settings. No wonder the *postmaster* who belonged to Calcutta, couldn’t identify with the settings. Land to the *postmaster* resembled desolation:

“His office was in a dark thatched hut; there was a pond next to it, scummed over with weeds, and jungle all around. The breeze was softly warm; there was a smell of sunshine on wet grass and leaves. Earth’s breath – hot with fatigue – seemed to brush against the skin. A persistent bird cried out monotonously somewhere, making repeated and pathetic appeals at Nature’s midday durbar. On the contrary, for *Ratan* it was a matter of

livelihood. She had no luxury nor choice to feel averted, she “did housework for him in return for a little food” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 65).

The decision of the postmaster to go back to his home after much turmoil in his mind and the response which he gave to *Ratan* both connects equally with the image, “the lamp flickered weakly; through a hole in the crumbling thatched roof, rain-water steadily dropped on to an earthenware dish” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 69).

Ratan jolted between the space, situation and her inner emotions: She used to utilise her time with nature and “stretched out under a guava tree, eating unripe guavas” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 67). When the postmaster leaving, she was left again with her own self which she was habituated since child, yet she kept the hope in her burning,

“All she could do was wander near the post office, weeping copiously. Maybe a faint hope lingered in her mind that Dadababu might return; and this was enough to tie her to the spot, prevent her from going far” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 70).

She belongs to those of purest heart who give without expecting and continue to give even after hopeless returns, the story ends with marking such frailty in the mind of *Ratan* who brews over with strength only to be broken again. “In the end it escapes, ripping our veins and draining our heart’s blood; until, regaining consciousness, we rush to fall into snares of delusion all over again” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 70). She resembles earth that gives and heals yet left and neglected in human hands.

c. Water and its forms: feelings and its depth

Lowell Duckert, addresses “the impersonal agency of rain” in *When It Rains*, portraying it as a living “materiality” that defies “the binaries of in/human, in/organic, and climate/culture” in which we see “reality as a system in cascade: networks of in/human things that precipitate (“bring about”) alliances, stories,” and wants through their unpredictable “swerves and collisions” (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, p. 13). Frequent rain and water image metaphorically implied to awash the feelings which were relentless. The postmaster was like “a fish out of water” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 65). He tried to be in the space he was forced in and the images from the environment echoed his mind and attempted to try at least once.

“Truly the only things to look at were the smooth, shiny, rain-washed leaves quivering, the layers of sun-whitened, broken-up clouds left over from the rain. He watched, and felt how it would be to have a close companion here, a human object for the heart’s most intimate affections. Gradually it seemed that the bird was saying precisely this, again and again; that in the afternoon shade and solitude the same meaning was in the rustle of the leaves” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 67).

The change in the mind of the postmaster did not stand long. His feelings and memories drenched along the outpour. His turmoil inside merged and witnessed outside with nature makes him ill.

“During the month of *Srābaṇ*, the rain was continuous. Ditches, pits and channels filled to overflowing with water. The croaking of frogs and the patter of rain went on day and night. It was virtually impossible to get about on foot – one had to go to market by boat” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 67).

Again like water keep changing its shape as per the container it holds, while departing he has a quick reformation though couldn’t act.

“When he was on the boat and it had set sail, when the swollen flood-waters of the river started to heave like the Earth’s brimming tears, the postmaster felt a huge anguish: the image of a simple young village-girl’s grief-stricken face seemed to speak a great inarticulate universal sorrow” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 70).

Rain isn’t just a “metaphor for life” here; it’s alive and well, defined by “her own words as a restless” activity, “a destructive-creative force-presence”, which doesn’t totally correspond to any single body.” (Duckert, 2014, p. 115)

d. Spirits quilled with being

To avert himself from the denouncing space the postmaster attempts to find solace in writing poems immersed in the eco-narrative surrounding of the rustic.

“The bliss of spending one’s life watching the leaves trembling in the trees or the clouds in the sky – that was what the poems expressed. God knew, however, that if a genie out of an Arab tale had come and cut down all the leafy trees overnight, made a road, and blocked out the sky with rows of tall buildings, this half-dead, well-bred young man would have come alive again” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 65).

When it comes to Ratan, though to kill his time the postmaster asked if she could learn to read, she agrees and “starting with the vowels but quickly progressing to the consonants and conjuncts” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 67).

e. Soul Solace Symbolised

The postmaster had been alienated and his sense of not-belonging to the rustic place made him make no friends. He thus used to find *Ratan* as an element to please his soul.

“In the evenings, when smoke curled up from the village cowsheds, crickets grated in the bushes, a band of intoxicated *Baul* singers in a far village sang raucously to drums and cymbals, and even a poet if seated alone on a dark *verandah* might have shuddered a little at the trembling leaves, the postmaster would go inside, light a dim lamp in a corner of the room and call for *Ratan*” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 66).

Whilst *Ratan* would seldom respond on his first call though she “would be waiting at the door for this” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 66) and then she would call back and ask why she was called. Though an orphan she couldn’t but follow the rules laid in the village i.e. to obey her master. He knew that she had no family, yet to soothe his soul he used to talk with her about her family and soon would fall asleep.

“She remembered her little brother: one distant day, during the rainy season, they had stood on the edge of a small pond and played at catching fish with sticks broken off trees – this memory was far more vividly fixed in her mind than many more important things” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 66).

Living in a male dominated and class conscious village it is quite obvious that to travel through such a memory lane for a girl of 13 would never be an easy thing. She gets so connected with the image of the postmaster’s family talks that she refers “to the postmaster’s family” as “her own” and “even formed [an] affectionate imaginary picture of them in her mind” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 66). When ill, the postmaster longs for “his mother or sister” near him thus “soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 68). He is taken good care by *Ratan*, though a small girl, in such a grave situation she for claims from within her feminine care and compassion and showers it for the wellbeing of the postmaster.

“From that moment on she took on the role of a mother, calling the doctor, giving him pills at the right time, staying awake at his bedside all night long, cooking him convalescent meals, and saying a hundred times, Are you feeling a bit better, Dadababu” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 68)?

After he recovered, she again took her normal role of obeying and waiting for orders from her master. Without even acknowledging her efforts, he, after many days, calls her only to inform her that he had written for transfer and that, being rejected, he was planning to leave the place. For her selfless efforts she is given monetary appreciation which she denies and that dismays her master. She informs him not to do any favours but just take her away from the place, which he couldn’t agree to. He leaves:

“Detached by the current of the river, he reflected philosophically that in life there are many separations, many deaths. What point was there in going back? Who belonged to whom in this world” (The Postmaster, 1991, p. 70)?

When observed from an ecological standpoint, these assertions on the artificiality of life and situations reveal the persistent relationship that exists between humans and natural elements; vital for a healthy environment in order to live.

4. DISCUSSION

The natural elements in the story act as a medium to heal and guide to survive with the emotional anguish. “Environmental values” can be seen “articulated in relation to visual modes of consumption that enabled the visitor simultaneously to look at ‘the picture’ and plunge into sensation” (LaRocque, 2012, p. 127). The rustic though on the verge to merge with urban lifestyle is shown stuck in the middle unable to progress. This image coincides with *Ratan* who was shown the light and power of education and then left in the middle stuck between progress and then withdrawal. The swollen river, flickering lamp, rain and muddy water replicate the inner tension that both characters feel. The flowing river, the last ecological element in the story, symbolically portrays the fact that a person or thing comes and goes, but life must go on. Nature acts as a metaphor of conflicting harmony and complexities of sentiments seeking further discussion on the connection of social context, cultural influence and ethical values.

CONCLUSION

Nature always found a deep and impending implication in Tagore's writings. Nature here too is observed as "an active subject" (Merchant, 2003, p. 217). Human eagerness to outspread his dominion in "two infinities, the microcosm and the universe," stems from values constructed by the society and not only from his inherent nature (Horkheimer, 2004, p. 74). In a country like India, which has a deep rooted ethnic connection with nature (worshipped as Gods), the call for connecting with nature yields political, philosophical foundations and vibes immensely with psychological manifestations. *The postmaster* story airs with the above said expressions.

The paper attempts to avow that emotional purgation comes best with ecological elements irrespective or materialistic or feministic pursuit. Therefore, calls for eco-humanism as a study to look into for further probing.

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