



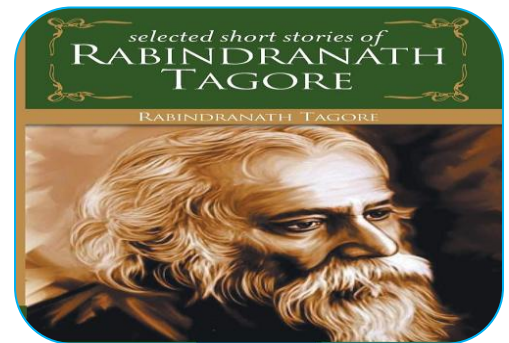
ECOFEMINISM IN SELECTED ESSAYS AND SHORT STORIES OF TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism advocates that exploiting nature has severe impacts on women than men. While Radical Ecofeminism deals with patriarchy and using women as objects over which men have authority, Cultural Ecofeminism advocates that women are more intricately related to nature owing to their gender roles and biology. In this article the author excavates elements of Ecofeminism in Tagore's short stories and essays. Tagore vividly brings out how exploiting nature render both physical and emotional torture (at times even death) to women in his essays and short stories. We see that while Tagore adheres to the idea of Cultural Ecofeminism relative to Radical Ecofeminism in his essays, his stories depict the opposite idea.



KEYWORDS: *Ecofeminism, Cultural Ecofeminism, Radical Ecofeminism, Rabindranath Tagore.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women and nature are intricately linked to each other. This has been the buzz word among feminists ever since the French author Françoise d' Eaubonne came up with her book 'Le Féminisme ou la Mort' (Feminism or Death) in 1974. Ecofeminist theory asserts an egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no single dominant group. Ruether (1975) asserts women to be aware that there is neither liberation for them nor any remedy to the ecological destruction where relationships are based on domination. Ecofeminism vehemently criticizes patriarchy. According to Devine (1992) "woman is victim not only of individual men, but of patriarchal power structure that treat women and the environment as objects, and within these power structures both become victims.

Ecology is often deemed as a feminist issue (see, Griffin (1976), Daly (1976), Plumwood (1993)). Nature is assumed to be feminine. A quote from Griffin (1976) in this context is valuable, "I know I made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made from this earth, as her dreams came from this earth...you are earth too".

Tagore in his writings has voiced a similar concern, particularly in his short stories and essays. He was a multifaceted writer who forayed into all aspects of Sociology, Ecology, Economics and particularly Feminism. He has always asserted that both nature and women are pious and both need to be given due respect. In his writings one can trace many elements of Ecofeminism. This essay attempts to venture into the world of his stories and essays and select a few masterpieces where we can discover Tagore as an Ecofeminist.

Ecofeminism has been classified into many streams, and in this article we isolate two such branches: Cultural and Radical Ecofeminism. Cultural or Spiritual Ecofeminism has been popularized by authors such as Starhawk, Riane Eisler, and Carol J. Adams. They call this an “Earth-based spirituality, which recognizes that the Earth is alive and that we are an interconnected community”. Cultural Ecofeminists claim that women have a more personal and intimate relation with nature because of their gender roles and their biology. Radical Ecofeminism on the other hand contend that the dominant patriarchal society equates nature and women in order to degrade them. To that end, Radical Ecofeminism builds on the assertion that women and nature are commodifiable by men, since men are bestowed with the prowess and authority over women and environment. Tagore’s writings have elements of both the two branches. We shall now delve into them.

2. TAGORE’S CONCERN FOR ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL ECOFEMINISM AS REFLECTED IN HIS ESSAYS

Tagore was a nature lover. His stint as a zamindar in Shilaidaha and Shahazadpur brought him extremely close to nature. Set on banks of Padma, his stay at Shilaidaha helped him observe the close and deep association of village life with nature, where he discovered the profound dependence of lives and livelihood of women on environmental and natural resources. In a plethora of his essays, he has reiterated that exploitation of nature in the hands men has had derogatory impact on women.

Tagore in his essays like ‘Aranyadebota’ (Forest Deity), ‘Upekkhita Polli’ (The Disregarded Village), ‘Polliseba’ (Service to Village) and ‘PalliPrakriti’ (Village and Nature) portrayed nature and Earth as a feminine entity. He likened nature and Earth to a mother, who is primarily occupied in nourishing and fostering her children. A mother however, is often ill-treated and disregarded by her children, and Tagore used this analogy to explain the destruction of environment at the hands of civilization. In his essay ‘The Robbery of Soil’, he prognosticates that “Mother Earth has enough for the healthy appetite of her children and something extra, for rare cases of abnormality. But she has not nearly sufficient for the sudden growth of a whole world of spoiled and pampered children.”

Tagore depicts the story of man’s destruction of Mother Earth in the following words, “when man became a city dweller, he lost his affection for the forest- his first friend who brought him hospitality from the heaven. He ruthlessly attacked the woodlands to indiscriminately build a brick dwelling. The Green-Forest-Goddess came with blessings and bounties. But by ignoring her man invited doom on civilization” (author’s translation). Thus, we witness Tagore to brand nature and forests as feminine entities, a convention common among Cultural Ecofeminists

Tagore further quotes that “at the heart of the tug-of-war between nature and human civilization is man’s tendency to override the simple rules of human nature, which has been made possible by his physical strength and intellect” (author’s translation). He also laments that “after this apparent victory malice comes to his mind” (author’s translation). He reiterates the omen that “the earth can tolerate exploitation of environment only up to a limit. Thereafter, dawns the hour of destruction” (author’s translation).

Tagore subscribed to the concept of Cultural Ecofeminism in his essays more than Radical Ecofeminism. He clearly delineates the more intimate liaison of women with nature due to their gender roles which forms the basis of Cultural Ecofeminism. Tagore was a worshiper of nature. His christening and contents of essays like ‘Bhumilakshmi’ (Soil as Laxmi Goddess) and ‘Upekkhita Palli’ (The Disregarded Village) tags soil, village and nature as feminine entities and elevates them to the stature of goddess. His sanctification of environment is another facet of Cultural Ecofeminism.

Tagore was awfully aware of the dependence of women on environment through his casual observations of village life and nature, the severe burden imposed on womenfolk of the villages could not escape the bard’s attention. This is reflected in his essays. For example, in ‘Jolotsorgo (Dedication to Water),’ he has lamented that “...the paucity of water manifests in a loss of motherhood of our nation, and this causes immense suffering to women. I have myself witnessed during my stay at the banks of Padma that women have to trudge four or five miles every single day on scalding sand, with the sun scorching over their heads, in order to fetch some pails of water” (author’s translation). Tagore puts the

blame on civilization for inappropriately appropriating water from underground resources that result in depletion of water and culminates into torments of women. Thus, way back in 1926, when Tagore penned this essay, we find one of the earliest evidences of exploitation of women through destruction of natural resources in the light of Cultural Ecofeminism.

Radical Ecofeminism is sparsely reflected in Tagore's essays. Radical Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies attribute patriarchy and science as value-free systems. Tagore in his essay 'The Disregarded Village' laments in a similar tone, "...the present civilization has emerged triumphant by allying itself with science and machines, in which case the premeditated-ravenous-profit making desires of civilization prevails over the compassionate virtues of human soul" (author's translation). Perhaps, this is the only time when Tagore subscribes to Radical Ecofeminism in his essays.

3. ECOFEMINISM IN TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES: RADICAL AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS

Primarily set amidst a rural backdrop, the tales of Galpaguchchha (Collection of Short Stories of Tagore) bring to the fore many characters who are truly "children of nature" (Ghosal, 2018). The present article shall elucidate how the dislocation of certain female characters from the lap of nature causes crisis in their entities and moreover, how snapping of ties between nature and some male protagonists (who are also nature's children) cause sufferings to female characters of these stories. Tagore in his short stories focuses on mental suffering of women, rather than physical toil caused by exploitation of nature. These stories are reflection of patriarchy and hence, his short stories belong more to the genre of Radical Ecofeminism than Cultural Ecofeminism.

The first character that we shall pick is Subhasini from his story 'Subha'. Tagore christens a dumb girl as Subhasini, which means a girl who speaks sweet and good, only to hint irony. Subha is the finest example of nature's child. She could voice her expression through nature only. Being bereft of voice, her only friends are nature and two cows. Tagore portrays Subha's entity by comparing her to a river flowing through the Bengal, in the following words "...it's river, small for a river of Bengal, kept to its narrow bounds like a daughter of the middle class. This busy streak of water never overflowed its banks, but went about its duties as though it were a member of every family in the village beside it" (Suma, 2019). Tagore uses the allegory of an uncelebrated and unsung river to depict Subha, who despite having her own passion, emotion and feeling, is leading an expressionless life. So, she kept herself in a narrow bound of the patriarchal society.

Subha succumbs to patriarchal force when her parents marry her off in Kolkata, concealing the fact that she is dumb. Before leaving her village, Subha stealthily sneaks out of her home to the banks of the adjacent river in darkness of night and clamors to Mother Earth not to snap her ties with Subha. She pleads to nature, though silently, to extend her comforting arms and hold her close in an inseparable embrace. Post marriage, she leads a life of despise, silent suffering and identity less existence as her husband remarries. In this story, both Subha and nature are dumb. It is as if Subha has been plucked out from the comforting lap of the Mother Nature into unlimited suffering. Tagore adheres to Radical Ecofeminism in this story by drawing an allegory between nature and woman and moreover allowing patriarchal forces to degrade Subha. Radical Ecofeminism builds on the assertion that one must study patriarchal domination with an eye toward ending the associations between women and nature, which Tagore practices in this story. He allows men to establish order over Subha and ultimately, allows them to degrade her.

The next in line is Ratan from the short story 'Postmaster'. Ratan is an orphan-village-girl who works as a helper and maid to the postmaster of Ulapur village. The postmaster hails from urban-Calcutta, and therefore the dichotomy between rural and urban lifestyles appears stark and discomfoting to him. He finds it difficult to adjust to village life which is simple and closer to nature. Ratan however, is another nature's child. Tagore depicts her as one who not only understands the beauties and vagaries of nature, but also knows how to cope with them, unlike postmaster. However, she alike Subha is timid. However, this story is bereft of patriarchal forces that could have exploited Ratan. On the contrary, the postmaster remains affectionate and caring to Ratan. However, the only subtle patriarchal effort exerted by postmaster is to 'transform' or rather 'upgrade' Ratan by making

her literate. The author consciously calls the effort patriarchal as the postmaster believes that he has an authority over Ratan and her well-being in his concern. What comes as an irony is that, the postmaster wishes for 'someone special' in his life after watching the beautiful clouds play wanton in the monsoon sky, and then immediately remembers Ratan and calls her inside (as she is his only solace and refuge in Ulapur) to announce that he would now make Ratan literate. This fine-drawn unfolding of events hint at a conscious effort on the part of the postmaster to make Ratan 'suitable' for him.

But tragedy unfolds in Ratan's life when the postmaster chooses to resign from his duty due to his inability to adjust to village life. The readers realize the injustice meted out to Ratan in a drive by the patriarchal postmaster to ameliorate her lot. Though the readers sympathize with the postmaster, they cannot but empathize with Ratan, who even voices her desire to leave Ulapur for Calcutta just to be with postmaster, though in vain. Tagore brilliantly exposes the complex man-woman relationship in a Radical Ecofeministic set-up, where patriarchal force devastates Ratan emotionally and leaves her forlorn, though unintentionally. Though, there is barely an iota of patriarchal domination of the sort envisaged in the writings of Radical Ecofeminists, the domination depicted here is emotional in nature and could have been easily avoided by the good-natured postmaster if he had not 'used' Ratan as a source of keeping himself occupied during his leisure. Perhaps, a formal lord-servant relation could have salvaged Ratan. Tagore therefore, brings in a whole new dimension to the theories of patriarchal exploitation in the realm of Ecofeminism.

'Shasti' (The Punishment) is a class-apart story where Tagore depicts patriarchal domination of the cruelest order. Chandora, who happens to be Chhidam's wife, is approached by the latter with the inhumane imploration to take upon the responsibility of his sister-in-law's murder at the hands of his brother, Dukhiram on her shoulder. Chandora obliges, but not out of sheer love or dedication for her husband, but to silently protest against his insidious love for her. Without a modicum of melodrama, Tagore sanctifies Chandora in the last line of his story. At the time of sending her to gallows, when asked by the jail authority if she would like to meet any of her family members, particularly her husband, she sarcastically utters "maran!", i.e. seeing her husband at the ultimate hour of her life is even worse than death. Unlike Subha or Ratan, Chandora protests against the patriarchal practice that advocates women to be mere commodities owned by men.

Radha, Dukhiram's wife is yet another victim of patriarchy in the story. She was zapped for furiously retorting to her husband. Dukhiram asks Radha to serve him food. But Radha is unable to cook any as Dukhiram did not provide her with any grains. Both Dukhiram and Radha are victims of poverty. Tagore in his story once again buys the idea of Radical Ecofeminism where gender roles are depicted to be different between men and women. Radha audaciously questions Dukhiram if she should venture out to earn money, which costs her, her life. What Tagore hints at is that, if a poor and powerless housewife like Radha should prostitute herself in order to feed her husband. Progressive Tagore appears to be extremely patriarchal and conservative in this treatment of Radha. Radha and Chandora are both strong characters who lose lives being victims of patriarchy. In this story Radical Ecofeminism is highlighted in the way by which the brothers establish order over their wives. Nature plays a crucial role as the vagaries of nature prevent the brothers from harvesting crops and leaves them bereft of grains. Though nature is not exploited in this story, the feminine attribute of subservience is exploited by male characters, bestowing elements of Radical Ecofeminism. However, this is the only instance where the female characters suffer both mentally and physically in our analysis.

Bolai is male protagonist of the story 'Bolai'. He is a nature-lover. He is misfit in the company of his peer group and nature happens to be his true escort. He loves flowers and plants. When a Simul (a type of cotton) tree suddenly starts to grow in the middle of a road, his uncle wants to have it uprooted. Bolai pleads hard with his aunty who loves him immensely. She convinces her husband to let the tree flourish. However, when Bolai leaves for his higher education, his uncle uproots the tree. This pains and ails Bolai's aunt. The story ends with the snapping of the mother-son relation between Bolai and his aunt due to his uncle's ruthlessness. In this story, Tagore relegates female character to the side. But once again, we find evidence of suffering of a woman due to exploitation of nature by men. This story has elements of both Cultural and Radical Ecofeminism. Radical as Bolai's aunt suffers due patriarchy and

Cultural as she is made the custodian and care-giver of the Simul tree by Bolai, and being intricately more attached to environment than her husband. The tree symbolizes Bolai himself during his absence and felling the tree implies the loss of a son to a mother. Tagore alludes to the role of family nurturer in the character of Bolai's aunt which is an attribute of Cultural Ecofeminism. Tagore in this story encourages society to be more sensitive to the sanctity and degradation of the environment, something which Ecofeminists advocate fervently.

'Chhuti' (The Final Adieu) and 'Atithi' (The Guest) are two other stories where Tagore once again make the male protagonists the hero of his stories and relegate their mothers as silent sufferers due to the patriarchal endeavour to detach their nature-loving sons from Mother Earth. Tarapada in Atithi breaks open the shackles of family bondage and leaves home at a very young age to lead a bohemian life, but intricately attached to nature. Once he takes refuge in a certain zamindar Motilal Babu's house and earns the love and affection of all the family members. Motilal Babu's daughter Charusashi, though jealous of Tarapada initially, ultimately surrenders her heart to him. Motilal Babu and his wife too, wanted to solemnize the nuptial rites between Tarapada and Charusashi. But aware of Tarapada's nature they keep the plan classified and discretely invite Tarapada's mother to the wedding. But Tarapada was as free as nature and would obey no bondage. Thus, he is on the run once again. Tarapada's mother and Charukeshi both suffer in silence.

Confining Tarapada in a conjugal relation would imply containing the natural forces of nature. Tarapada is a manifestation of nature itself. Therefore the desire of patriarchy to immure Tarapada in connubial relation cost his mother and Charukeshi dear. Radical Ecofeminism is subtle here. Both the female characters suffer due to the patriarchal practice to wed of a daughter to an eligible groom, irrespective of what the bride and groom want. This story is masterpiece if read in the light that men too can become victims of patriarchy which in turn causes women to suffer heavily. Patriarchy spreads its pangs in 'Atithi' in its desire to confine nature in the garb of Tarapada.

Fatik of Chhuti is dislocated from his village to his maternal uncle's house in Calcutta. He awfully misses the bounties of nature abundant in his village and gets claustrophobic in the urban atmosphere. In fact, he receives no care, love or affection from his cousins, maternal aunt or his friends in Calcutta. Ultimately, he succumbs to fever and losses his life. This story once again portrays the fact those who are close to nature should be allowed to remain so. The suffering of Fatik's mother who has to bear the loss of her son and further witness him die right in front of her eyes can be deciphered in the light of the theories of Cultural Ecofeminism. In this case Fatik's mother is intricately attached to nature through her son Fatik, who when removed from his base ultimately succumbs to death, bringing her the worst grief and pain of life.

While Athiti and Chhuti have more elements of Radical Ecofeminism due to the operation of patriarchal motives to establish mastery over nature (portrayed through the characters of Tarapada and Fatik), they also have fine elements of Cultural Ecofeminism. Tarapada and Fatik's mother become intricately attached to nature through their sons and get convulsed due to their death. However, the elements of the latter form are kept subtle in the text.

Tagore in these short stories ventures into human heart. He wonderfully depicts how female protagonists are haplessly living at the mercy of male characters, and the how the latter's intent to establish command over nature and environment bring down punishment in the former's lives. Tagore was not aware of Ecofeminism and its elements when he penned his literary creations, since these are much recent developments. However, his works comprise a universe from where Ecofeminists can trace out elements of their interests.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article we selected some masterpieces from a whole gamut of classic essays and stories by Tagore where we can discover Tagore as an Ecofeminists-not always in the colloquial tradition, but in his own unique style. While Tagore in his essays have preferred to remain closer to the ideas of Cultural Ecofeminism relative to Radical Ecofeminism, in his short stories positioned himself at the other end of the spectrum. Tagore lucidly and vividly brings out the silent physical and emotional

sufferings of his female protagonists that result due to men's tendency to establish authority over their lives and environment. Both patriarchy and intimate relation of women with nature has been established in these selected writings. Different and varied shades of Ecofeminism have been dealt with in his writings at large and many of these have been reflected in this article.

This article can be extended in the domain of dramas, poems, songs and novels- something the author reserves as topic for future research endeavour.

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