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ECOFEMINISM IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

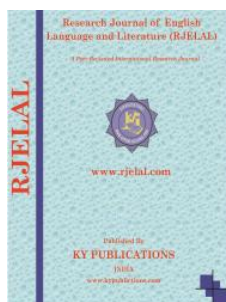
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ABSTRACT

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism, is an interdisciplinary movement which signifies the blend of the fundamental movement in ecology and feminism. Ecofeminism is an ideology that finds the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices concerning to the patriarchal society. Ecofeminism has its roots in literature also. This paper would like to focus on the selected short stories of Rabindranath Tagore (the only Indian to get Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913), who has written nearly one hundred short stories though he is very well known as a poet, novelist, philosopher, painter and essayist. In most of his stories he has presented the treatment of women and their position in society. Through his stories, he tells the world that Indian women are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, religious and kind. He found in the women of his country an immense wealth, their courage against all odds, their power of survival under the worst possible conditions. His short stories and novels are previously analyzed under the light of feminism but now the aim and objective of this paper is to evaluate them through the essence of ecofeminism which is a new term in literature.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, ecofeminism, *Punishment*, *The Dumb Girl*, *The Wife's Letter*

Theoretical Background of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death*. This theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Ecofeminism started to discuss first in the early 1970s in the United States, when a number of women became disappointed with the conventional environmental movement and wanted to create more awareness

among feminists about environmental concerns. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and physical environment, asking how nature is represented in literary works. While ecofeminist literary criticism is similarly concerned with the depiction of nature, it emphasizes how traditional representations often see the land as innocent, female, and ripe for exploitation. (notes-20.11.17) A more recent ecofeminist like Maureen Devine (1992) believes that "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" (p.52)

Literature Review

Rabindranath Tagore's writings are multidimensional, for this reason these writings are analyzed from different points of view. In literature there are thousands of works have been done on his writings. But still now there is enough scope to study on many concepts which have not been touched. In Tagore's writing nature and feminism both are common and well discussed topics. His short stories are often set in rural Bengali villages, where one can easily find the influence of man, nature, specially the treatment of women and their position in society. In many of his short stories nature remains as the background and Tagore considers himself as a member among all natural things. He presents nature as the source of joy, peace, tranquility and also the source of suffering for many female characters in his short stories, who are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, meek, religious and kind. Ecofeminism is a theory developed from various feminist activisms such as, peace movements, labor movements, environmental movement etc. The link between the world of women and the natural environment has been central to the activity and thinking of ecofeminists. Works of ecofeminist like Susan Griffin (1976), Mary Daly (1976), Karen Warren (1987, 1990), Val Plumwood (1993) and others stress the fact that ecology is a feminist issue. Nature is portrayed as women similarly women duties are envisioned as natural. As Rosemary Ruether (1975) believes women should be aware that there is no liberation for them nor any remedy to the ecological destruction in a society whose relationships are based on domination (Ruether, p.204). According to Susan Griffin (1976), "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, and listen as we speak to each other o what we know: the light is in us. (Giffin, 1978, p.227)

In 1987, the American philosopher, Karen Warren wrote an influential article "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections" in which she persuades feminists to turn their attention to

ecological problems and to recognize the connection between environmental degradation, sexism and other forms of social oppression. Ecofeminists are significantly concerned with 'patriarchal conceptual frameworks' which are characterized by hierarchy and by conflicting dualism; male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion, universal/particular, culture/nature and where "the first term is associated with men and is elevated, the second is associated with women and is devalued" (Bianchi, 2012, p.8). A more recent ecofeminist like Maureen Devine (1992) believes that "women is victim not only of individual men, but of patriarchal power structures ... that treat women and the environment as objects and within these power structures both become victims" (p.52). The impact of environmental degradation is imperative on women due to her contiguous connection with nature. Thus, as Bharatender Sheoran (2014) states, "ecofeminism in India has emerged as a vigorous movement parallelizing conversation of environment with improved living standards for women" (p. 388).

From the twentieth century onwards, there are many women writers in India whose literary works have advocated the concept of ecology in relation to women, include Kamala Markandaya, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai. But Rabindranath Tagore as a writer of 19th century declared in Chinnapatra (27th June, 1984) thus: It is one of the joys of story writing that the people I write about can feel my spare time, night and day, become the companion of my solitary spirit, dispel the narrowness of my closed chamber on a rainy day and in my mind's eye, travels the radiant landscape of the Padma shore when the sun shine. (The Essential Tagore, 491) Tagore considered nature as a living entity and realized as a real companion from his very childhood. Tagore confessed in his work Creative Unity thus: I remember, when was a child a row of coconut trees by our garden wall, with their swaying branches beckoned the rising sun on the horizon, gave me companionship as living as I was myself (C.U. p.8). Tagore has more than hundreds of short stories and in many of his short stories reveals the link between human being and nature. Such as *Subha (The Dumb Girl)*, *Shasti (The Punishment)*, *Streer Patra (The*

Wife's Letter) all these stories are significant for using nature. In these stories Tagore used nature to create certain mood of the central characters specially the female characters, how is their relation with nature? How they are treated by the nature? What is the effect of nature on them? Even through these stories Tagore presented how nature has changed the whole atmosphere of the setting of the story.

Objective of this paper

Objective of this paper is to analyze few of Tagore's short stories from Ecofeminist point of view. So, this study will try to present a recent theory ecofeminism in Tagore's short stories which were about hundreds of years back.

Introduction

Tagore being a supreme romantic poet of Bengal, understood women in all their joy and sorrow, hope and despair, their yearnings and their dreams. He had the unique natural genius to read women's minds and he analyzed their strange structure, through his stories. Women in Tagore's days were extremely oppressed by the feudal society. The outdated, cruel, feudal customs enhanced the miseries and tortures of women. Through his stories, Tagore pointed out those injustices. He was never influenced by patriarchal views. That is why he depicted his heroines as more powerful and brighter than man. In some of his stories we find close affinity between human being and nature. Somewhere nature is being tortured like woman and somewhere because of nature women are suffering or somewhere women are presenting like nature, both suffering and revolting. On the basis of these things about nature in Tagore's stories this paper is going to discuss about three of his famous short stories, where women are closely affected by nature, both positively and negatively.

Discussion

Rabindranath Tagore's short story "*Punishment*" or "*Shasti*" ("*The Sentence*") was published in 1893, tells the hard life of Bengali peasants. Tagore here presents the spiritual richness of women in peasant families, though they live in utter poverty, and had to face humiliation

everywhere. The story is about the life of two young brothers Dukhram and Chidam and their wives respectively Radha and Chandora. When the brothers returned home hungry after a day's heavy work, the elder brother Dukhram asked his wife Radha for some food. When only harsh words were returned, Dukhram lost his temper and killed his wife with his chopper. Then Chidam came to rescue his brother. He wished his wife Chandora to own the crime. He told her to tell the court that she had been forced to kill Radha, in self-defense during an argument. Chandora loved her husband dearly but because of this cruel suggestion of her husband she understood about her value to her husband and decided to end her life as a protest against the humiliating proposal. So, in the court she told the judge that she had killed her sister-in-law because she hated her. Chidam understood his mistake, both Chidam and Dukhram wanted to save Chandora's life instead of theirs, but judge was convinced that Chandora has done the murder he sentenced her to be hanged.

The story starts with the gloomy atmosphere in the nature which is very similar to the gloomy atmosphere of the house. Nature is forming here the background of the terrible happening and also creating a tense situation in which the murder would take place. The description is given by William Radice as-

"There was not a breath of wind. Weeds and scrub round the house had shot up after the rain: the heavy scent of damp vegetation, from these and from the water-logged jute- fields, formed a solid wall all around. Frogs croaked from the pond behind the cowshed, and the buzz of crickets filled the leaden sky." (SSS 125)

So, this description is preparing the reader for the tragic event which is coming soon to the family. Two brothers after whole day's heavy work came back home through rough weather by trading muddy village path, hungry, exhausted and after demanding food when the answer was negative senior brother lost his temper and killed his wife Radha, unintentionally with his chopper. It is because of rough weather when all other people go for

collecting crops, they have to go for repairing the roof of landlord's court house. All through the day they didn't get proper food and even at the end of the day they didn't get proper money for their work, that they can buy food for their family members. So, from the very beginning they were hot tempered and they lost it at home in front of their wives. Because of their poverty, social status, environmental situation they are unable to think properly. For this reason, when Ramlochan the pillar of the village suggested Chidam the way of saving his wife by putting the crime on Dukhiram, Chidam said without thinking that "if he lost his wife, he could get another, but if his brother was hanged, he could never replace him". (parabaas-20.11.17) So, Chandora became the victim. Though Chandora had the opportunity to save her life by saying the truth to the judge but through her death she wanted to protest against the deceitful love of her husband. At the end of the story Chandora simply uttered the words: "Your honor, I beg you, please make your ruling. "Do what you like. I've had enough." (parabaas-20.11.17) These simple words convey the depth of the offence and grief in the mind of a simple but strong willed and stable woman.

In another story "Subha" or "The Dumb Girl" We find close affinity between man and nature. In this story Subha the youngest of the three daughters of Banikanath. Her two sisters Sukeshini and Suhashini had been married with the usual cost and difficulty and now the youngest daughter lay like a silent weight upon the heart of her parents. As she was unable to speak, so from her earliest childhood she had understood that God had sent her like a curse to her father's house. So, she tried to withdraw herself from ordinary people to live apart in the company of nature. Subha lived with her parents in a small village called Chandipur. Because of her dumbness, she had no friend except nature, two cows in the household and a lazy fellow named Pratap, son of Gosains, whose main ambition was fishing. When Subha was growing up, her parents were anxious about her marriage and they decided to shift to Calcutta. It was heart-rending for Subhato leave her friends. Subha's marriage was fixed by her parents without disclosing her defect to the bridegroom's party. She cried a lot but her

displeasure and tears made no negative effect on the proposer or her parents. The marriage took place on a day, which promised to bring good luck. The husband's work lay in the west, and shortly after the marriage he took her there. In less than ten days everyone in the locality knew that the girl was dumb. That marriage supplied Subha with everlasting miseries. The last few lines of the story are that-

"Her eyes told them everything, though no one understood her. She looked on every hand, she found no speech, she missed the faces, familiar from birth of those who had understood a dumb girl's language. In her silent heart there sounded an endless, voiceless weeping, which only the searcher of Hearts could hear." (wikisource-20.11.17)

So, the close relation between man and nature is wonderfully depicted in this story. The nature, the stream, the cows are the major characters here. The description is like this-

"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." (wikisource-20.11.17)

So here the small river is compared with the daughter of a middle-class family, who has her own passion, emotion and feeling, with all these instincts she is leading her life without expressing them. So, she kept herself in a narrow bound of the patriarchal society. As the river is going on without doing any harm to anybody, in the same way the daughter of middle-class is leading her life without any ups and downs. The little dumb girl in this story is finding solace in her pain in nature. Nature satisfied her want of speech and spoke for her. The murmur of the brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatman, the crying of the birds, the whisper of the trees mingled and were one with the trembling of her heart. As Dodd f. f. has said "They became one great wave of sound which beat upon her restless soul. They were her real language, in which

she talked with nature" (Dodd 35) So, this murmur and movement of nature were the dumb girl's language. And for this reason, when the great busy world paused in its toil and became silent then there were only dumb nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent.

Subha's other two friends were two cows. They never heard anything from subha's lips but they knew her footfall. They understood her gentle murmuring. Whenever she heard any words that hurts her, she would come to this dumb friend out of due time and would try to find consolation. One night at the time of full moon she came out timidly and she found the lonely nature like her loneliness. Her heart was heavy because now she grew up and her young life beat within her and she could not speak. She found in the lap of the troubled Mother (Nature) a silent troubled daughter. Because to her nature was her mother, who has nothing to do for her except giving consolation. Subha before leaving her dear village bid farewell to the cows, to Pratap and also that night she came out from her room and flung herself on her grassy couch. It was as if She threw her arms about Earth that is her strong silent mother (Nature), and tried to say: "Do not let me leave you, mother. Put your arms about me, As I have put mine about you, and hold me fast." (wikisource-20.11.17) So Subha is the daughter of nature. But both Subha and Nature are dumb, like daughter mother is also helpless. It is like that Subha has been plucked out from the comfortable lap of the mother into unlimited suffering.

"*The Wife's Letter*" is an important short story by Tagore, articulating a woman's struggle and resentment with the way her life unravels. The plot revolves around Mrinal, who is married to an upper-class, patriarchal zamindar household. After marriage Mrinal is mocked for her rustic nature but at the same time her in-law's family is highly aware of her sharp brains. In this story, we get three women and all represented by the signatory of the explosive letter, Mrinal. In her letter, she not only presented her own married life of fifteen years but also the position of her elder sister-in-law and her young sister Bindu. She starts the letter with the traditional reverential address "your Revered Lotus feet" or "Sricharankamaleshu" but ends with

supreme self-assurance as Mrinal signs off with the subscription "Tomadercharantalasroychinno" or "free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal". By signing her own name rather than the descriptive chronological nomenclature attributed to her as "MejoBou", that is wife of the second son, Mrinal is reborn as herself. The concluding line of Mrinal's letter discovered her identity and she became Mrinal from MejoBou- "I too will be saved. I am saved." (ebook-20.11.17)

Apart from Mrinal the other daughter-in-law, the eldest one (BoroBou), who was neither beautiful nor rich. She married into the family only because of her blue-blood. So, she was always conscious of her lack of assets-wealth and beauty. When her unmarried fourteen-year old sister came to live with her after her father's death, she falls in great problem. She tries to prove Bindu not an economic burden by forcing her to do all the strenuous household work. Mrinal's own daughter died soon after birth, so her longing for a child was somewhat compensated by the arrival of Bindu. Mrinal became Bindu's surrogate mother, even Mrinal started fighting for Bindu with the rest of the family. However, Bindu's marriage was arranged and on the very second day of her marriage she discovered her husband was mad and violent. Terrified of her husband Bindu ran away from her in-law's house within three days of her wedding but she has to go back because of the patriarchal norms. Mrinal's Desperate attempt to rescue Bindu also failed. Lastly Bindu had committed suicide by setting herself on fire. At this suicidal news Mrinal says-

"Oh. Peace at last. .

People heard about it and were enraged. They said, it's become a kind of fashion for women to set fire to their clothes and kill themselves.

You all said, Such dramatics! Maybe. But shouldn't we ask why the dramatics take place only with Bengali women's sarees and not with the so-brave Bengali men's dhutis?" (ebook-20.11.17)

All the three women Mrinal, BoroBou and Bindu have loveless family life. Their husbands provide them shelter, security and sustenance. There were

no possibilities of equal partnership in this relationship between power and powerlessness. In the case of Bindu and Mrinal there has been resistance to the appropriation of their power. Bindu commits suicide while Mrinal leaves in order to live.

Mrinal a village girl, has to leave her village in her early age for her marriage when she was only twelve years old. But her in-laws house which was well decorated from outside, was fully unhygienic from inside, which was actually the staying place for women. So, for women in that house there was no love and care. Even there was no open place for breathing freely. So Mrinal who grown up fully in open air, under the blue sky is now in a dungeon like in-law's house. So, like Subha Mrinal was also plucked out from the lap of Mother Nature. But when she left home for a pilgrimage in Puri after Bindu's death she got chance again to meet with open nature, full freedom. She is saying-

"Oh Mejo-Bou, you have nothing to fear! It doesn't take a moment to slough off a Mejo-Bou's shell. I am not scared of your street any longer. In front of me today is the blue ocean, over my head a mass of monsoon cumulonimbus." (ebook-20.11.17) Now she has the courage to announce that she will not return to her husband's house, which never became a home for her, though she lived there for fifteen years. She says-

"But I shall not return to 27 MakhanBaral Lane ever again. I saw what happened to Bindu. I have realized the position women have in this society. I don't want to go through it anymore." (ebook-20.11.17) So, it is nature which gave her intelligence in her early age and again it was nature from where she got the courage of thinking of her freedom which was absent in her husband's house. As at the beginning of story the description of the house is like this-

"There is a small garden at the front of the house, and the outer rooms do not lack for furniture of decoration. The inner rooms are like the reverse of an embroidered pattern; on the inside, there is no hiding the starkness, no grace, no adornment. On

the inside the lights glimmer darkly, the breeze enters like a thief, the refuse never leaves the courtyard. The blemishes on the walls and floors are conspicuous and ineradicable." (parabaas-20.11.17)

Conclusion

In the first story "The Sentence" or "Punishment", because of the effect of nature Chandora has to be punished, which was actually her silent protest against her husband's betrayal. In the second story "The Dumb Girl" or "Subha", Subha separated from her Mother Nature and has to suffer a lot because both Subha and her Mother Nature are dumb. In the third story "Streer Patra" or "The Wife's Letter", Mrinal gets her new identity and freedom in Mother Nature. So, though nature is dumb but it has its own language, principles and effect in each and every human being. In most of Rabindranath Tagore's books, use of nature is very common and its effect in characters is very prominent. In fact, nature is not different to women than men, not even there's any particular relation between nature and women but everywhere women are more affected by both the positive and negative impact of nature. Ecofeminism as an ideology and movement find that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices concerning to the patriarchal society, so all the discussed women in this paper are greatly affected by nature, which presented ecofeminism.

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