

The 'Green' Tagore: A Reading of "The Message of the Forest"

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Abstract:

In the lecture "The Message of the Forest" delivered in Bangalore on the occasion of the Festival of Fine Arts and published in May 1919, Tagore heaps immense importance in understanding the past culture and heritage as well as to analyze the very 'past' as a concept and a significant part of time frame which has the incredible potentiality to construct the future. According to Tagore to achieve the inner consciousness and Eternal Truth 'self-discipline' is the 'highest path' and 'self-renunciation' is the 'greatest treasure' and 'renunciation' becomes the only way to 'restoration'. Tagore proffers before his readers the path of 'universalism' not the path of 'commercialism' or 'nationalism' for 'self-conquest' in the spiritually dilapidated present age. To resituate and relocate Tagore in the 'green' literary canon of ecocritical readings and writings one have to dig deep into author's rigorous learning of ancient Vedic and Upanishadic literature. Tagore traces the origin of the message of the forest in the scriptures like the *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, and in the preaching of the ebullient spiritual figures like Lord Buddha, Nanak, Kabir. Tagore also warns his readers and all humanity that if they do not regard the message of the forest to unite souls above all differences then they have to be in distress endlessly.

Index Terms: Tagore, Ecocriticism, Green Studies, Nature, Kalidasa

Introduction:

The poetical genius of Rabindranath Tagore's versatility is reflected through every genre of literature such as novel, drama, poetic play, dramatic poetry, short story, essay, letter, memoir etc. And even in the form of music and painting. In the essay named "The Message of the Forest" Tagore's critical acumen and aesthetic astuteness are refulgently executed in tracing the impressions and influence of rich Indian tradition, scriptures, diverse geographical territory in literature as well as in its inhabitants' lifestyle. To resituate and relocate Tagore in the 'green' literary canon of ecocritical readings and writings one have to dig deep into author's rigorous learning of ancient Vedic and Upanishadic literature.¹

In the lecture "The Message of the Forest" delivered in Bangalore on the occasion of the Festival of Fine Arts and published in May 1919, Tagore heaps immense importance in understanding the past culture and heritage as well as to analyze the very 'past' as a concept and a significant part of time frame which has the incredible potentiality to construct the future: "The past not only contains, in its depths, the unrealized future, but in part realized future itself." (508) He invests value on past innate desire in constructing the future of a society's existence. By giving importance to the memory, golden age of the past Tagore wants to re-establish the present with indomitable zest and indefatigable aspiration. A writer is always influenced by his/her surrounding nature internally and externally. Tagore heaps up glory on the forests which garner a distinctive place in the mind and heart of the people as an 'environmental territory' and also act as a 'memory': "... the environment, in which we see the past of India, is the forest, the memory of which permeates our classical literature and still haunts our minds." (509) Tagore with his astonishing critical acumen traces the value of forest as a memory in our ancient literature and its tremendous impact in our

present day culture and civilization. In Indian civilization forests are viewed as 'sacred', a place of sanctity and holiness not merely a secluded topographical entity.

Nature in Literature:

In this essay Tagore not only focuses on the Indian environment and its influence on its literature but also demonstrates on Northern Europe's sea-centric Nature. Sea becomes a symbol of perilous fate and a challenge to the lives and livelihood of the men on the land.² Here the Man is always in constant war with Nature to survive the onslaughts of Nature; to use Tennysonian conceptualisation, Nature is red in tooth and claw. The picture of Man and the Sea is riddled with defiance, resistance and of waging war. Tagore diligently depicts two sides of Nature in the form of European Sea and Indian Forest. Tagore muses over the 'living relation' between ancient Indian forest and its men:

But in the level tracts of *Aryavarta* men found no barrier between their lives and the Grand Life that permeates the Universe. The forest gave them shelter and shade, fruit and flower, fodder and fuel; it entered into a close living relation with their work and leisure and necessity, and in this way made it easy for them to know their own lives as associated with the larger life. (510)

By infusing themselves with the spirit of 'all-pervading consciousness and joy of universal life', the ancient men found out the Supreme Truth that emanates from the Supreme Life. It will not be a rigid statement to assert that the relation between Man and Nature in India was not of alienation but of amalgamation, not of division but of divine nature.

In vitalizing the role of forest in ancient Indian literature Tagore takes recourse to our great Sanskrit playwright and poet Kalidasa and major figures in the field of Sanskrit such as Sudraka and Banabhatta. Tagore valorizes the role of hermitage in bringing man and nature close together and also in helping man to internalize the ethics of forest. In most of the ancient Indian drama the two places – hermitage and king's palace were dominant: "In Kalidasa's drama *Shakuntala* ... the hermitage, which dominates the play, overshadowing even the king's palace, has the same idea running through, - the recognition of the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike." (512) Tagore also mentions the aesthetic prowess of Banabhatta in depicting the aura of hermitage in *Kadambari*. In *Kadambari* the hermitage world becomes a place of free flowing souls of man and animals and their unadulterated relation with nature. Tagore rightly conveys: "The hermitage shines out, in all our ancient literature, as the place where the chasm between man and the rest of creation has been bridged." (512) Tagore makes a remarkable distinction between the role of Nature in the drama of other countries and in the drama of ancient Indian literature. Nature is not a 'trespasser' or an accidental background but by giving examples of the dramas like *Mrichchakatika*, *Shakuntala*, *Uttara-Rama-Charita* Tagore observes: "... Nature stands on her own right, proving that she has her great function, to impart the peace of the eternal to the human passions and to mitigate their violent agitations which often come from the instability of spiritual lameness." (512)

Kalidasa and Nature:

This essay explicates on Kalidasa's most of the works except the play *Vikramabharshiyam*. Kalidasa's whole body of work – the three plays – *Abhijanashakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramabharshiyam*, two *Mahakavyas* or epics- *Kumarasambhavam*, *Raghuvamsham*, Two *Khandakavyas* or lyrics – *Ritusamharam*, *Meghadutam* are replete with the magnanimity, immensity and spirituality of Nature which fill the mind of the readers with the serenity of beatitude beauty of Nature. *Ritusamhara*, one of the two lyrics composed by Kalidasa invites its readers to dwell in the resplendent virtues of six dramatically diversified Indian seasons which envelop and encapsulate the environment with their grandeur and gloom, splendour and solemnity. Tagore labels *Ritusamhara* as 'a work of Kalidasa's immaturity', 'song of youthful love' with the 'notes of human passion'. Despite criticizing it for not attaining sublimity of reticence Tagore expounds ceaselessly on Nature's solemn Beauty which is the stem of this work:

But the tune of these voluptuous outbreaks, being set to the varied harmony of Nature's symphony, loses its delirious shrillness in the expanse of the open sky. The moon-beams of the summer evening, resonant with the murmuring flow of fountains, add to it their own melody; in its rhythm sways the *Kadamba* grove, glistening in the first cool rain of the season; and the south breezes waft into its heart the wistfulness of the scent of the mango flowers. (513)

The minute mellifluous critical analysis enlivens the world of Kalidasa's work with a restrained energy. In *Meghadutam* Kalidasa portrays a piece of cloud as a messenger of the lover. Kalidasa invests life in an inanimate object through his penetrative poetic faculties. The readers also traverse the lands with the hills and rivers like Amarkuta, Vindhya, Narmada etc. which the poet depicts with detailed description. The sorrow Yaksha is reflected in each and every object of Nature. Tagore rightly examines the *Khandakavya*:

In the *Meghaduta*, the exiled Yaksha is not shut up within himself in his grief. The very agony of his separation from his loved one serves to scatter his heart over the woods and streams, enriched by the prodigality of the rains. And so the casual longing of a love-sick individual has become part of the symphony of the universe. And this is the outcome of the spirit of teaching which springs from the ancient forest. (527)

By analyzing the poem Tagore delves deep into the issue of man's inextricable relation with Nature in his doleful days. The nature always speaking to us with their own language but we have to be patient observant to learn its language and thereby we can get a trustworthy friend by our side to indulge in our mournful as well as mirthful days.

Tagore mulls over the two *Mahakavyas* of Kalidasa – *Raghuvamsham*, *Kumarasambhavam* with his immaculate critical sensibility. Tagore points out the valorous life of Raghu had its fount in the serene self-abnegation of hermitage life. The essayist aptly implies the 'role of the forest' in this *kavya* :

The poem is not ushered with the pomp and circumstance befitting the history of a great kingly line. King Dilip, with his consort, Queen Sudakshina, has entered upon the life of the forest. The great monarch is busy tending the cattle of the hermitage. Thus opens the *Raghuvamsha* amidst scenes of simplicity and self-denial. (515-6)

Here Kalidasa wants to convey the message that 'the truth of life' exudes the eternal energy which is related with the sanctitude of forest life and spiritually emaciated, outwardly gaudy atmosphere of palace life is constructed by 'heaps of things' which is devoid of life. The duality of 'self-denial' and 'self-aggrandizement', the life of 'renunciation' and the life of wealth, luxury, and 'enjoyment' invade all of Kalidasa's works. Tagore heaps praises upon *Kumarasambhava* for reflecting a fathomless idea which is worthy of all time and proffers before its readers the 'message' that 'the cause of weakness lies in the inner life of the soul' (514). Madana, the god of desire wanted to unite Shiva with his amorous arrow but the spell was identified by the great sage Shiva. Parvati gained her love by self-sacrifice and denial. Immersing oneself in the fire of self-renunciation can enable one to be emerged out as a hero. Nature reigns supreme in the life of Shiva and Parvati as the former is the dweller of mountain and the latter the very daughter of it. In his thought inducing book *The Geography of Kalidasa* (1963) H.C. Chakladar rightly comments that in *Kumarasambhava* the Himalayas is 'to him not merely lifeless and inert mass of rocks, but a veritable god' (19). According to Chakladar, Kalidasa possessed an accurate and detailed knowledge regarding the physical and natural aspects of his own country. Chakladar very clearly mentions that in most of his works like *Ritusamhara*, *Raghuvamsham*, *Meghadutam* Kalidasa mentioned the hill named Vindhya.

Kalidasa ponders over the non-ending duel between ribaldry and renunciation, accumulation and abnegation in most of his plays. His minor play *Malavikagnimitram* shows the contrastive dichotomy of human nature through the symbolic names of the king and the queen – Agnimitra ('the friend of fire') represents passion and burning desire and Dharini (the Earth) represents 'fortitude and forbearance'. Tagore very significantly demonstrates the ideals that guided the lives of Agnimitra and Dharini:

In this play the conflict of ideals is between the king and the queen, - between Agnimitra and Dharini, between the insolent offence against all that is good and true, and the unlimited peace of forgiveness that dwells deep in the self-sacrifice of love. (517)

Treading on the path of Kalidasa, Tagore also wants to convey the 'message' that self-sacrificial love is like a purifying fire which emboldens our Eternal Self and the lustful love is like destructive, nibbling fire which destroys our Eternal Self altogether.

In his most celebrated and widely discussed play *Abhijnanashakuntalam* Kalidasa portrays the hermitage of Kanva sage with all the glories of unadulterated pure life of self-restraint. Tranquillity envelops the entire forest. Here again Tagore delineates the "contrast of the pompous heartlessness of the king's court and the natural purity of the hermitage, the contrast of the arrogance displaying itself upon the hollow eminence of convention, and the simplicity standing upon the attitude of truth" (518). This drama opens with a symbolic hunting scene which conveys to the viewers as well as readers the spirit of a king towards a forest animal and 'the spirit of the forest retreat, where all creatures find their protection of love' (519). Tagore digs out the immense effect of the two hermitages in the two diverse phases of the life of the heroine of the drama Shakuntala. The first hermitage of Kanva sage bestows on Shakuntala the vivacity of youthfulness and her camaraderie with the surrounding Nature and its animals. The bonding between 'woman and nature' gets life in the words of Tagore and Shakuntala's caring, nurturing nature is captured with acclaimed astuteness:

In the first, we see the daughter of the hermitage watching in delight the union of the sweet flowering creeper with the mango tree round which it has twined; or busy rearing motherless young deer with handfuls of grass-seed, and picking the spear-grass out from their tender mouths, soothing the pricks with healing oil. This hermitage serves to make simple, natural and beautiful the love of the king for the hermit girl. (521-2)

The second hermitage on the peak of the Hemakuta mountain serves as a place of solace, solitude, compassion in the life of the forlorn matured mother Shakuntala. Kalidasa aptly portrays the forest life with the hues of glory and gloom, playfulness and penance, sensuality and solemnity.

In Kalidasa's another drama *Vikramabharshiyam*, which is not described by Tagore in this essay, the forest emerges out as the searching place of the lovelorn king Pururava for his beloved Urvashi. It symbolizes the constant search of human beings for their much coveted but unattainable thing. Forest is a place as well as a space which guide our inherent sensibilities to mould the principles of our life. The all encompassing intelligence of Kalidasa and his ability to portray nature with the veracity of delayed description of mountains, rivers, valleys, forests, birds, animals, creepers and what not. Critics have mentioned that the enthralling images of nature reign in all of his works.³

In this work Tagore venerates the exemplary forest life of ancient India which is the 'heart of light' for the then socio-political life. It acted as an abode of peace, solace and an exclusive place with inclusive principles of life where men used to go to find their truthful self and to identify themselves with the Eternal sublime spirit of the cosmos. Tagore pragmatically examines the role of the *tapovana* in the ancient Indian social life and compares it to the vital organ of our body- the heart. He exults over the teaching of the forest in laudable terms:

Our tapovana was just such a vital centre of our social body. In it throbbed the rhythm of our life's ebb and flow: it gave truth to our thoughts, right impulse to our feelings, and guiding force to our work. We distinctly see, from the works of our poet, that the teaching of the forest was not towards the inertia of passivity, but towards true heroism and victory. It was not towards suppression of action, but its purification, towards giving it freedom of life by removing obstructions. (520-1)

Tagore with his astounding astuteness and penetrative critical faculties explicates on the life of the forest as a place to attain the acme of self-realization and vigorously venerates the ancient Indian forest life as the source of energy, purity to drive and to thrive our social life.

Forest in Literature:

The forest is integral part of both of Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In these two epics also the duality regarding the principles, ideals guiding forces of palace life and the forest life is sagaciously dealt with adroit analytical bent. In this lecture Tagore takes recourse to Bhavavuti's *Uttara-Rama-Charita* to prop up the issue of forest life which was integrated and mingled in the lives of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. They traversed many forests and could sympathize with the woodlands, hills, rivers, animals, birds and with every elements of Nature: "When Rama first took his abode in the Chitrakuta peak, that delightful *Chitrakuta*, by the *Mayavati* river, with its easy slopes for landing, he forgot all the pain of leaving his home in the capital at the sight of these woodlands, alive with beast and bird." (524) Needless to say, the forest offered a space before the couple to be connected with each other and also to the 'universe of life'. The hermitage of the Dandaka forest is described with the halo of sacrificial fires and it is enveloped by the 'Spirit of the infinite'. Sita's abduction was a loss to the forest as she was the very embodiment of the 'ineffable tenderness of human love'. In Lanka also Sita found solace under the Ashoka tree not in a decorous pompous palace. Forest taught them the essential teaching of life that how to 'live' a life. Analyzing Indian and Western drama regarding the influence of forest, Tagore significantly remarks:

Strangely enough, in Shakespeare's dramas, like those of Kalidasa, we find a secret vein of complaint against the artificial life of the king's court, the life of ungrateful treachery and falsehood. And almost everywhere, in his dramas, forest scenes have been introduced in connection with some working of the life of unscrupulous ambition. (524)

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* the court scene and the forest scene are emblematic in their respective significances. Along with other dramas Tagore explicates on *Macbeth*'s 'barren heath' as a 'personification of Nature's malignant forces' and he points out that *King Lear* demonstrates the 'fury of a father's love' turned into curses by the ingratitude born of the 'unnatural life of the court', that finds its symbol in the 'storm of the heath'.⁴

In this very lecture of Tagore, he not only emphasizes on the ancient forest life but recounts Indian concept and views about Nature. Indians venerate and revere the mountains and rivers of their land. Indians always felt with their five senses the treasures of Nature be it observing the light of the sun and the moon, smelling the fragrances of the flowers, tasting rich fruits and vegetables, listening the mellifluous music of melodious birds or sensing the cool breeze with all their faculties. But unfortunately the posterity of ethically erect Rishis of ancient India have forgotten worship demands a 'duty of service'. But if we really believe in the 'divine presence' in the 'water and the air we have reverently to keep them clean and pure and healthful.' (528) Tagore repeatedly focuses on energizing the power of soul to retain our sensibility towards the earth. Not elaborate 'outward practices' but 'inner illumination of consciousness' would lead us to the path of true worship.

Conclusion:

The forest life taught Indians throughout the ages the all-pervading Truth that dwells in every inanimate and animate object of the universe. Unquestionable reverence and worship towards *Panchavuta* - Earth, Air, Water, Fire, Space of ancient Vedic Life made the sages of ancient age spiritually strong.⁵ Keeping aside his erudite elucidation Tagore delivers the 'eternal message of the forest' which is '... to free our consciousness from the accumulations of desire, to win our immortality, by breaking through the sheath of self, the self which belongs to death.' (515) The message is evocative, simple and pure like a refrain. According to Tagore to achieve the inner consciousness and Eternal Truth 'self-discipline' is the 'highest path' and 'self-renunciation' is the 'greatest treasure' and 'renunciation' becomes the only way to 'restoration'. Tagore proffers before his readers the path of 'universalism' not the path of 'commercialism' or 'nationalism' foe 'self-conquest' in the spiritually dilapidated present age. Tagore traces the origin of the message of the forest in the scriptures like the *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, and in the preaching of the ebullient spiritual figures like Lord Buddha, Nanak, Kabir. Tagore also warns his readers and all humanity that if they

do not regard the message of the forest to unite souls above all differences then they have to be in distress endlessly.

Notes:

1. In the title of this article there is an obvious echo of Gabriel Egan's masterpiece *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006) which critically, theoretically and ideologically examines Nature's effect on the socio-political scenario in the plays and time of William Shakespeare.
2. The plot of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1903) comes easily to our mind.
3. "How supremely beautiful is this earth", - exclaims Kalidasa through the hero of his greatest work. He looks at the earth with the eyes of a poet ... and every object on its face is to him 'a thing of beauty' and 'a joy for ever' ... In almost everyone of his verses there is a beautiful image taken from nature. (Chakladar 7)
4. Robert Pogue Harrison in his critically acclaimed essay "The Forest of Literature" comments on the symbolic nature of the heath in *Macbeth*: "This landscape is the heath, or waste place, where the three witches communicate their prophecies to Macbeth. The barren wasteland remains the place of origin, for all the crimes that Macbeth will commit against his fellow men ..." (Coupe 214)
5. Ranjay Pratap Singh in the essay titled "Environment and Vedic Literature" observes: Indian folk culture does not attach human sentiments only to earth, water, air, sky, fire, sun, etc., but also extends them to rivers, ponds, hills, animals, trees, and plants as well. This is a continuing tradition. Ancient Vedic sages have given a human shape to earth and all these are its integral parts. (Srivastava 110)

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