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Unearthing Harmony: Tagore's *Red Oleanders* through an Ecofeminist Light

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Abstract:

The paper is an Eco-feministic examination of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* open to the question of how a conception of ecofeminism emerges against the Indian backdrop itself that espouses very different perceptions of ecofeminism from that of the Western view of the same. The paper also focuses on how Tagore's *Red Oleanders* does not project a gender stereotype of only women being close to nature and not men. But transcends the gender duality by following the non-gender-based philosophy where the feminine principles are not limited to women, instead it is viewed as a universal quality related to creativity and activity present in all nature, men and women — thereby becoming a neo-universalism concept very much resonating Tagore's philosophy of oneness.

Keywords: Ecofeminist ethos, Jivan Debata, Neo-Universalism, Harmony, beyond gender.

Introduction to Ecofeminism from an Indian View:

Ecofeminism is a theory and a movement that bridges the gap between ecology and feminism by focusing on humanity-nature dualism as a definitive basis of anti-ecological belief. Different branches of ecofeminism showcase diverse methods for comprehending the connections between women and the environment. These variations also encompass varying viewpoints regarding the character of women's subjugation and the approaches used to confront it. Additionally, these theories are influenced by beliefs about human nature, concepts of

freedom and equality, and epistemological frameworks. In India, one of the most prominent ecofeminists is Vandana Shiva. Her view of ecofeminism resonates with the Indian philosophical concept of Prakriti. While Western ecofeminism considers the dualism of nature/culture and woman/man as a parallel, in Indian Cosmology, "every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity within a unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles and between nature and man, becomes the basis of ecological thought and action in India." (Shiva 39)

Tagore's concepts of nature and woman are intricately connected to his broader philosophical and spiritual outlook. Therefore, it is "impossible to grasp Tagore's ecological vision unless one recognizes the cosmology in which it lives." (Shrivastava 323) He experiences life in a whole larger and more inclusive way and, at the same time commits to the elusive simplicity of everyday sentient. His works are a testimony reflecting the difference between 'what we are' and 'what we merely think we are'. Thus, this Eco-feministic examination of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* opens to question how a conception of ecofeminism emerges against the Indian backdrop itself which espouses very different perceptions of ecofeminism from that of the Western view of the same. This paper also focuses on how through this play Tagore subtly criticizes the patriarchal structure that perpetuates environmental degradation and reveals the fundamental connection between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment, underscoring the principles of ecofeminism and thereby emphasizing the imperative of embracing a universal perspective by recognizing that all beings, whether human or non-human, share a common life energy - the 'Jivan Debata.' That being said, let us first have a brief understanding of what ecofeminism is in the Indian context based on Vandana Shiva's view of ecofeminism.

According to Vandana Shiva, women in India are considered an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and practice. On one hand, nature symbolizes the embodiment of feminine principles and on another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and sustenance. (Shiva 37) The Indian Cosmology says this Universe is an outcome of an interplay of creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration carried out by the ultimate creative principle. All existence has emerged from this primordial energy which is the substratum of the entire creation. The manifestation of this power or energy is called Prakriti or Nature. All the forms of nature and life in nature are the children of this Mother Prakriti who were born out of the creative play of her thought. Hence, she is also called Lalitha, the player of Leela or activity.

(Shiva 38) Out of her own will to become many, with her creative impulse, she creates a diverse living form in nature. Therefore, the multiple life forms like trees, rivers, mountains, animals, and humans are her expression of diversity. However, one must understand that this "creative force and the creative world are not separate and distinct, nor is the created world uniform, static and fragmented. It is diverse, dynamic and inter-related". (Shiva 38) Therefore, ontologically if you see there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, as life in all of its diverse forms has come out of the same origin. This is what Tagore too says in his essay *The Relation of the Individual to the Universe*. According to Tagore, the Indian viewpoint was different, "it included the world with the man as one great truth. India put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal." (Tagore, "Sadhana")

But, according to the Western Cartesian concept, the environment is separate from man, making it "his surrounding not his substance" (Shiva 39) This dualism between man and nature is what Vandana Shiva says "has allowed the subjugation of the latter by man and given rise to a new world-view in which nature is (a) inert and passive; (b) uniform and mechanistic; (c) separable and fragmented within itself; (d) separate from man; (e) inferior, to be dominated and exploited by man." (Shiva 39) Tagore says, dividing man and nature like this is like "dividing the bud and blossom into two separate categories, and putting their grace to the credit of two different and antithetical principles." (Tagore "Sadhana" 4)

Shiva believes that the disconnect between humanity and nature, influenced by the Cartesian view, has shifted our perception of nature from a life-sustaining force to an exploitable resource. This shift has given rise to a developmental paradigm that harms both nature and women, especially in the Third World, marginalizing them in the process. Shiva continues to say that this dichotomized ontology of man dominating woman and nature leads to 'maldevelopment' as it makes the colonizing male the agent and model of development and nature and woman become 'underdeveloped'. This ontology of dichotomization slowly generates an ontology of domination over nature and people thus resulting in reductionism and fragmentation making women marginalized as subjects and nature as objects of knowledge. Such a dichotomized and dominated society is the Yaksha town of *Red Oleanders*.

Red Oleanders - An Indian ecofeminist reading:

Tagore's *Red Oleanders* is an intricate interplay of gender dynamics, power, and environmental degradation. The story is set in an imaginary Orwellian State called Yaksha Town which is primarily a gold mine. The town's socioeconomic power play operates in a hierarchical chain with the king at the topmost position and workers at the bottom. The mining town is controlled and dominated in the name of the King. Though his appearance is unknown to the people, his voice signifies a totalitarian regime that wishes to grab entire sources of gold by making commoners miners. These inhabitants are benumbed and reduced from being a person with a name to a number, mechanically working day and night underground without any leisure. Even if they get a holiday, these miners spend it like a caged bird knocking against the grill. The miners are ruled by the King's minions like the Governor, Deputy Governor, Assistant Governor, Gosain, and the Headman who also share the cruel task with the King. This patriarchal structure is nothing but, a "colonial project" that is "inherently violent and perpetuates this violence" against the voiceless - nature, women, and marginalized. (Rao 129)

In Yaksha Town, the earth is limitlessly destroyed for material riches. Greenery is the ornament of earth, which is eclipsed by the deep mining tunnels in the town. The town doesn't even have any vegetation but just one red oleander tree hidden away amidst a heap of dirt. "The existence of feminine principle is linked with diversity and sharing. Its destruction through homogenization and privatization only leads to the destruction of the diversity and the commons." (Shiva 43) The town's state reflects the shift from "Mater" to just a "matter". This shift of Prakriti to 'natural resources' entails the disruption of nature's processes and cycle and her interconnectedness. (Shiva 40) Not only that, women's productivity in the sustenance of life lies in nature's productivity. The bereavement of Prakriti marks the beginning of marginalization, devaluation, displacement, and ultimate dispensability of women too. (Shiva 40) The Yaksha town stands as a testimony for all showing what would happen if humanity continues to take advantage of nature and nature in all for its selfish deeds. There is no place for kindness, concern, or sharing here. The town is driven by the principle of enslaving the gold thereby enslaving the entire world. This totalitarian system of grabbing and killing only leads the inhabitants including the King to lose trust in all and always live in a constant fear of being overheard by others. They eventually become devoid of being humane and turn insentient towards beauty and change. That is why when Nandini, an emblem of beauty, joy, and life enters the town, many couldn't accept her presence. Some even cursed her by calling her in derogatory words like 'witch' and 'ominous torch'.

Tagore in his 'Interpretation' to *Red Oleanders* explains the arrival of Nandini into the Yaksha town as a stingless butterfly entering a hive of bees. (qtd in A. Chaudhuri) "She becomes a balm for the bruises caused by the power-mongering masculine civilization".(Chakravarty and Chaudhuri xvi) There is always an unexplainable magnetic pull that emanates from Nandini. People tend to get drawn towards her because of her lively presence. Her speech kindles the void hearts of the inhabitants and make them realize the crisis and vicissitude. This sense of loss lingers throughout the entire town. The following dialogue between Nandini and the King reflects this:

Nandini. You have no end of things, yet why always covet?

Voice. All I possess is so much dead weight...My time is spent in knotting the binding rope, but alas, everything else can be kept tied, except joy.

Nandini. It is you who entangle yourself in your own net, then why keep on fretting?

Voice. You will never understand. I, who am a desert, stretch out my hand to you, a tiny blade of grass, and cry: I am parched, I am bare, I am weary. The flaming thirst of this desert licks up one fertile field after another, only to enlarge itself, — it can never annex the life of the frailest of grasses. (Tagore, "Red Oleanders" 149)

Tagore's Nandini symbolizes everything that is missing in the Yaksha town - truth, beauty, goodness, art, compassion, love, hope, and spirituality. She becomes the embodiment of feminine principles. The following dialogue of the Professor justifies this,

Professor: She has for her mantle the green joy of the earth. That is our Nandini. In this Yaksha Town, there are governors, foremen, headmen, tunnel-diggers, scholars like myself; there are policemen, executioners, and undertakers, — altogether a beautiful assortment! Only she is out of her element. Midst the clamour of the market place she is a tuned-up lyre. (Tagore, "Red Oleanders" 561)

However, many inhabitants like Chandra, Gokul, and even the King refuse to believe her. Gokul goes to the extent of hatred where he even wants to burn her alive. Amidst such a patriarchal system, Nandini survives.

Nevertheless, Shiva notes that Third World women are not just simply the victims of the patriarchal system but also possess the power to change it and bring back the lost feminine principle. Nandini not only symbolizes the embodiment of feminine principle but also represents the Third World woman whose voice is the voice of "liberation and transformation which provide(s) new categories of thought and new exploratory directions." (Shiva 45) By simply existing, she starts undermining the dominant autocratic establishment of the Yaksha town. It is the feminine principle that unleashes her from within to fight against the oppressors. The miners, the bureaucrats, the governor, and even the King himself are thrilled by Nandini who threatens to expunge the entire establishment just with her ability to breathe life and harmony into the lives of people. She fearlessly challenges Gosain and holds him accused of fooling people in the name of religion and misusing it for personal gain. She becomes a roaring lioness when she challenges the Governor, "Because I am a woman, you are not afraid of me? God sends His thunderbolt through His messenger, the lightning spark — that bolt I have borne here with me; it will shatter the golden spire of your mastery." (Tagore, "Red Oleanders" 681) She even ridicules science and history for failing to liberate the town's inhabitants. As men of knowledge, people like the Professor and Antiquarian just like their king who hides behind a network, they too hide behind the "network of scholarship".

Until Nandini's entrance into the town, the inhabitants were very timid in seeking justice for themselves. It is Nandini who brings in the light of hope and ushers a new future in the lives of the town dwellers. In Professor's words she comes like an "evening star" that twinkle "in the rich sky of leisure" and the inhabitants are like the "insects in a hole in this solid toil" and when they see her, their "wings grow restless." (Tagore, "Red Oleanders" 51) She influences them one by one to yearn for change. Nandini's fight is against the 'Maldevelopment'. "Maldevelopment" can be seen as a "process by which human society marginalizes the play of feminine principle in nature and in society." (Shiva 46) Ecological breakdown and social inequality are the reason for the sudden dominance in this paradigm where man is put above nature and women. Nandini's unflinching resistance towards all forms of oppression is essential for restoring nature and humanity.

Towards Neo Universalism?

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However, one must note that Tagore's *Red Oleanders* does not project a gender stereotype of only women being close to nature and not men. According to Vandana Shiva, masculine and feminine are not biologically determined traits. She believes that this gender ideology has only created the “dualism and disjunction between male and female”. And not only that it has also stereotyped a “conjunction of activity and creativity with violence and the masculine whereas a "conjunction of passivity with non-violence and the feminine.” (Shiva 49) Finally, within these dichotomized categories they prescribed either masculinization of the world or feminization of the world.

Hence Shiva (1995) suggests that there is one more concept and process of liberation that is "trans-gender". Other than recognizing that masculine and feminine are gendered concepts purely based on ideologically defined categories and challenging them, it is also a non-gender-based philosophy where the feminine principles are not confined to women, instead it is viewed as a universal quality related to creativity and activity present in all nature, men and women. In other words, it promotes the idea that women and men can possess and express various qualities and attributes beyond what society traditionally associates with their gender. That is why regardless of gender in the play it is Nandini along with Ranjan and Bishu represent the eco-sensitive and ecofeminist perspective. People like the Governor, headman, Gosain, Gokul, and even women like Chandra represent the anti-ecofeminist perspective. Tagore's assertion of his stance in this can be seen through his portrayal of the protagonist. Throughout the play, Nandini doesn't believe in this gendering of feminine and masculine principles. That is why she staunchly believes that Ranjan can breathe life into the lifeless souls of the inhabitants. Therefore, the "recovery of the feminine principle is based on inclusiveness. It is a recovery in nature, woman and man of creative forms of being and perceiving." (Shiva 51)

Recovery of feminine principles in nature means "seeing nature as a living organism". (Shiva 51) The flower red oleanders is a living entity in the play. It carries a significant environmental agenda. Nandini wears this red oleander around her neck and arms as a tribute to her beloved Ranjan. However, one must note that symbolically it is the same flower that also acts as a talisman for her guarding her against the omnipotent King. In a way, King is also intimidated by the same. He abhors and allures these flowers at the same time. At times he finds these flowers evil and wants to tear them into pieces and sometimes he wishes Nandini to sprinkle them over his head so that he could die in peace. The red oleanders intensify the inner conflict of the King. The King fights within himself whether to be like Mr. Hyde purely

driven by primal urges, instincts, and immediate gratification of acquiring more and more gold, or be like Dr. Jekyll who is rational and conscious. However, this conflict comes to a resolution with the help of Nandini. Nandini makes the King realize the mistake that he made and, in the end, the King transforms and comes out rebelling against the network thwarting his militia and fighting for the good by joining the forces of Nandini. So, the transformation of the King is not just a transformation but a holistic eco-transformation. In Tagore's words we can say that the King symbolizes

the "man [who] does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him. When he meets the eternal spirit in all objects, then is he emancipated, for he discovers the fullest significance of the world into which he is born; then he finds himself in perfect truth, and his harmony with the all is established."(Tagore, "Sadhana" 5)

In women recovery of femininity is done by seeing her "as productive and active" and in men, it means "relocation of action and activity to create life-enhancing, not life-reducing and life-threatening societies". (Shiva 51) In Yaksha town a bit of sky survives only because of Ranjan, Nandini, and Bishu. When Ranjan is made to work in the tunnels with the other diggers, he fearlessly introduces them to the "diggers dance". Bishu on the other hand joins Nandini in fighting for the good. These two men engage in activities that help create life-enhancing things, unlike the bureaucratic men of the town whose actions were more focused on encouraging 'life-reducing and life-threatening societies' and Nandini becomes a symbolic representation of ecofeminist ethos. Ecofeminism is also a practical movement for societal change and in a way Nandini anticipates a revolutionary spirit of the movement. She echoes the fundamental tenets of ecofeminism. She believes a revolutionary change is very much required to bring in the balance between ecology and humanity. After encountering the dead body of Ranjan lying unattended Nandini runs to it and places a blue feather on his chest declaring that Ranjan's victory starts today. That moment Nandini takes the baton to revolt against this powerful establishment along with other workers of the town. She prepares herself for a final fight. Her victory becomes complete with the King being transformed. Though she later dies, death is not seen as an end but a beginning for what she had started amidst the people. The ripple effect continues with Bishu taking over the baton and fighting for the same cause against the establishment.

Nandini and Ranjan enabled the inhabitants to realize the oneness in all. It made them realize that they were no different from one another. Through Nandini and Ranjan, Tagore is

propagating his philosophy of oneness. For Tagore, there was no universality without spirituality. At the same time, there is no spirituality without universality. According to Kalyan Sen Gupta, Tagore's concept of universalism is spiritual because of two important aspects. The first one is the soteriological aspect. For Tagore, the highest purpose of civilization is not merely living in it and making use of it but transcending selfish acts and realizing one's true self through the vision of oneness. Tagore's vision of oneness is about realizing that the entire universe is pervaded and permeated by the same life source who is also the reason for the creation to happen in the first place - the Jiban Debata. The second aspect is the aesthetic dimension. In one of his lyrics, Tagore writes,

“Step out of yourself, and stand outside

You will hear within you the music of the entire universe.” (qtd in. Sengupta 12)

In stepping out of one's narrow self-one does not simply experience the whole but would experience a 'symphonic whole'. This symphonic whole is experienced when one feels this oneness with all in this world, in humanity and nature. Harmony becomes the central thought of his thinking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders* serves as a profound exploration of the philosophy of oneness and the liberation of the human spirit. The play challenges gender stereotypes and advocates for the transcendence of rigid dualities between masculine and feminine. Instead, it presents the idea of a "trans-gender" philosophy, where the qualities associated with the feminine principle are seen as universal attributes present in all of nature and humanity thereby proving how ecofeminism transcends its boundaries and becomes an umbrella term that “combines the androcentric man-woman dualism thereby focusing on the shared "logic of domination" (Warren 129) and oppression, thus creating a "unified praxis to end all forms of domination"(qtd in Archambault 19) and becomes a neo-universalism concept.

Nandini's role as a catalyst for change and her ability to awaken the inhabitants of Yaksha town to the interconnectedness of all life showcases Tagore's philosophy of oneness. This philosophy is deeply spiritual, emphasizing the realization of one's true self through inclusivity in diversity and acknowledging that the entire universe is permeated by the same life force, the “Jiban Debata.” The red oleanders in the play serve as a powerful symbol, representing the dynamic and evolving nature of emancipation and liberation. Just as Nandini, Bishu, Ranjan, and especially the King undergo transformation and rebellion against the

established order, they all become manifestations of the red oleanders in human form. Tagore's concept of liberation is not a one-size-fits-all model; it is a multifaceted journey with different flavours and paths for each individual.

Ultimately, *Red Oleanders* portrays life beyond death and the victory of unity and spirituality in the face of a fragmented world. It calls upon us to transcend narrow self-interest, embrace the philosophy of oneness, and work together to create a harmonious and life-enhancing world, just as the red oleanders symbolize the symphonic whole that encompasses all of existence. Tagore's universalism, deeply spiritual and aesthetic, underscores the interconnectedness of all life and the profound beauty that can emerge when we realize our oneness with the universe. Tagore fulfilled his social responsibility of being a writer: to question, challenge, and guide his readers in a society full of truths and mistruths.

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