

## RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S RED OLEANDERS: A POST-COLONIAL INTERPRETATION WITH ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate, is a modern Indian Dramatist who has dealt with different social, cultural and environmental concerns in his works. As modernist, Tagore has supported the beauty and love of nature in his writings. By exploring crucial issues related to environment, his works create ecological consciousness among the humanity. Literature functions as a manifesto to create environmental consciousness in humans. Literary and cultural expressions articulate different viewpoints and phases of human understanding on Nature. Ecocriticism and post-colonial theory share many aspects in common and can be read as associative or even complimentary to each other. Both these discourses are predominantly political and concern themselves with the struggle against oppression, injustice and exploitation of humans as well as natural world. Nature has been vividly described in different forms in Postcolonial literatures. The literature of the post-colonial period has significantly portrayed the aftermaths of colonialism and its devastating impact on the social, cultural, religious, political and economic life of the indigenous people. The colonizers have not only subjugated, tortured and enslaved the people of their colonies but they have ruthlessly exploited the vast natural resources of the country. Tagore's play Red Oleanders (1924) also known as Rakta Karabi provides platform to discuss ecocriticism, ecofeminsm, marxist environmentalism, modernism and postcolonial aspects. In this play, Tagore attacks on the capitalist exploitation of earth and human beings in the modern industrial world. By exposing the human selfishness towards earth through mining, Tagore has expressed his deep concern for the preservation of the natural resources and ecosystem.*

**Keywords:** Nature, Ecocriticism, Post-colonial Theory, Red Oleanders, Sustainable Development

There has been a close and sacred relationship between humans and nature since ages. Humans are very much dependent on natural world for their very existence. This profound relationship between human and non-human world exert a strong influence on human culture and sustenance. Therefore, the relationship between human and natural world becomes a part of literature. Literature functions as a manifesto to create environmental consciousness in humans. Literary and cultural expressions articulate different viewpoints and phases of human understanding on Nature. Historical processes of

industrialization, capitalism and colonization aggravated dualism of Man and Nature. The representations of ecological realities and environmental concerns in literature have always been religious, philosophic and symbolic. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be known for environmental disorder and the literal redrawing of worldwide maps. Environment affects and even largely determines all things ranging from food, fashion, technology to race, class, gender, sexuality, mentality, nationality, law, religion, economics etc. Eco-imbalance is not a specific problem that is confined to one nation, one place, or one city but it

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is a global phenomenon. Therefore the whole world should unanimously come forward to re-evaluate and re-align academic disciplines in order to launch a global campaign for the renewal and the restoration of healthy environment.

Before discussing the term 'ecocriticism' and its cultural implications, it may therefore, be appropriate to have a cursory look to see how the non-human environment/nature operates in ancient literature. Viewing ecology as a study of a natural web of life points to the fact that man stands somewhere in the web. We realise that early man and nature were indisputably one and that nature was virtually unchanged by the every newcomer of humans. One finds a deep sense of engagement and a profound connection of humans with the surroundings which is a remarkable feature of ancient writings. According to Maxmuller, the Vedas were composed sometimes before the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The hymns of the Rigveda, the first of the four Vedas, celebrate different objects of nature for their contributions to the wellbeing of the mankind, and special homage is paid to the sun as the source of creation and preservation of life on the earth. In Ecological Readings in the Veda, one can observe:

Nature is to be understood as a friend, revered as mother, obeyed as father and nurtured as a beloved child. Nature is sacred because man depends entirely on it and because of this everything is sanctified, including man and the terrifying aspects of nature itself, such as glaciers, landslides, earthquakes, storms. . . (Vannucci 75)

Similar consciousness is all prevailing in The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Meghadutam, a Sanskrit classical text, and many other classic texts. Natural world occupies an important place in the narrative structure, plot and representations of myths in these epics. In modern times we notice that environmental awareness gained momentum within literary studies as a reaction to the processes and tendencies of industrialization, capitalism and globalization.

Primarily inspired by nature writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and environmentalists like Rachel Carson; and academicians such as Leo Max and Raymond Williams, environmentalism has

developed over the past few decades into a distinct field of investigation, geographically as well as thematically. Since ancient times critics have analyzed several contemporary issues of literary values like classicism, neoclassicism, romanticism, marxism, modernism, postmodernism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, humanism and feminism and so on. But literary studies for a long time did not pay any attention to a serious issue that is environmental concern as represented in literature. Environmental philosophy examines our relation, as human beings, to nature or our natural environment. It reviews our philosophical understandings of nature and our conception of nature's value and entitlements. It examines how we are to live with and in nature, and to what degree nature is or is not implicated in our own human identity. It also includes our assumptions about the basic stuff and structure of things and the morality of our treatment of living things and systems.

Ecologically oriented literature postulates for a better understanding of nature in its wider significance. Environmental problems and ecological awareness have always been part of human life, and found expression in philosophical as well as literary works. It is therefore necessary to look carefully at the relationship between man and nature from an ecological viewpoint. The terms 'environmentalism' and 'global environmental movement' are often used interchangeably with 'green' or 'ecological movement'. Initially, environmentalism emerged in Europe after its long history of colonialism and natural resource exploitation before spreading to the United States and the other countries of the world. The movement reflects growing concerns about the impact of human activities on the well-being of the environment.

According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation." The publication of two landmark books—The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and

Harold Fromm along with Lawrence Buell's *The Environment Imagination* (1995)—is generally regarded as the defining moment for the field. As a pioneer in this arena, Glotfelty gives one of the most provisional definitions:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Ecocriticism xviii)

For that reason, ecocritics ask several questions on the relationship between environment and literature but one question seems to be the most important that is an ecological interpretation of texts.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is an intersectionality between postcolonialism and ecocriticism. The Indian ecocritic, Ramachandra Guha, argues “the need to bring postcolonial and ecocritical issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist mode of social and environmental dominance”(qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 1). Hence, postcolonial ecocriticism is a real shift that serves the dual purpose of ‘greening’ postcolonial discourse. It exposes complex background and continuities in colonial/imperial ecologies. Cajetan Iheka in her essay “Dispossession, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*” expresses that:

The primary critique that postcolonial ecocritics leveled against first –wave Anglo-American ecocriticism was that it neglected the social dimensions of environmentalism in the effort to preserve nature (Rob Nixon). This criticism rested on the assumption that the deep ecological perspective ignored the conditions of humans especially people of color in Western contexts as well as the inhabitants of postcolonial societies who are disadvantaged in the allocation of ecological risks. (664)

Therefore, postcolonial ecocriticism studies the cultural, social, environmental dominance and

economic exploitation of the colonized/marginalized – the natives and their land.

In *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature of the Environment* (2011), DeLoughrey and Handley suggest that there is an “emerging scholarship on post-colonial ecology which exhibits the western discourse of nature and environment shaped by the imperial history. The role of literature, here, posits a remarkable shift when it comes to interfacing between humans and the environment. Thus, there is certainly a need to merge the theory to begin a holistic study of the environment which includes humans, non-human creatures. Because the environment and human culture cannot exist in isolation; they are an inextricable part of each other”. As a result, postcolonialism and ecocriticism are very much connected with each other, since colonialism significantly affected the lives and culture of the native people of their colonies through their tyranny, cruelty and ruthless exploitation of the natural resources of that country. The hapless, wretched condition of the human society, left after the end of imperialism got reflected in the surrounding environment as well.

The objective of my paper is an attempt to take an overview of ecological consciousness from postcolonial perspectives in Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. Popularly known as Gurudev, Tagore is renowned as a great philosopher, thinker, teacher, and reformer. He has enriched not only Bengali literature but also Indian literature by giving many classics that marked Literary Impact on both the East and West. For his masterpiece *Gitanjali* (1913), Tagore was awarded Noble Prize for Literature in 1917. Revered for his profound acumen, he was considered a versatile playwright who modernized Bengali literature by rejecting rigid classical forms and resisting linguistic strictures. Rabindranath Tagore as a social philosopher and a preacher has enhanced social, political, educational, cultural and environmental values among readers. Some well known plays of Tagore *Sacrifice*, *Sanyasi*, *The Post Office*, *King and the Queen*, *Red Oleanders*, *The Waterfall*, *Natir Puja*, *Malini*, *Chitrangada*, *Chandalika* etc. depict various significant aspects of human society in his literature.

Published in 1924, *Red Oleanders* or *Rakta-karabi* allegorically highlights the battle between materialistic, authoritarian control and the capitalist exploitation of natural resources, human slavery and environmental degradation. The play was an upshot of his motivation of the image of a red oleander plant crushed by pieces of discarded iron that Tagore had come across while walking during a visit to Shillong, Assam. Hence, Tagore described the flower, red oleander, as “created from the blood of its cruelly pierced breast.” The play provides a platform to discuss ecocriticism, ecofeminism, marxist environmentalism, modernism and postcolonial aspects. In this play, Tagore portrays the increased exploitation of the natural resources with the help of technology. He also attacks on the capitalist exploitation of earth and human beings in the modern industrial world. By exposing the human selfishness towards earth through mining and inhuman treatment to labours in the mine, Tagore has expressed his deep concern for the preservation of the natural resources and ecosystem. Therefore in *Red Oleanders*, Tagore has showcased the issues of working class, mine diggers and natural surroundings which are closely associated with the present-day global capitalism and commercial greed. Subsequently, man is departing from human values, moral principles, spirituality and natural world.

The protagonist of the play, the King or the Raja of Yakshapuri, is a cruel person who examines atrocities towards human and non-human world alike. The Raja sits concealed behind an iron veil and watches his retinue engaged in extracting wealth from the Earth. He cruelly exploits natural resources as well as humans in order to build a strong bureaucracy and add to his wealth. The Raja is enthralled to watch how his entire retinue continued mechanically to safeguard his citadel and his ever mounting capital. Immediately Nandini a free-spirited woman enters this lifeless fortress of the Raja and captures the hearts of all. All the other characters – the professor, the mad man Bishu, the excavators Kishor, Gokul and Phagulal and even the Raja’s sardars try to appease her in their own ways. For all of them she is a fresh whiff of life and joy. While for the other woman, Chandra, she is the

femme fatale, the ‘rakshashi’ who has come to enchant men and ruin their chastity.

Nandini, however, remains unperturbed by all this. Her beloved Ranjan persistently inspires her to reach greater heights of humanity. She finally is able to break the shackles of greed and torture in Yakshapuri but the play ends abruptly with no clear signs of closure. There are signs of a catastrophe but a peaceful reconciliation in the end cannot be ruled out too. Nandini’s spirit, surprisingly, brings a change of heart in the Raja too and in the end he joins hands with her to overturn the depressing status quo. This was a brief outline of the play. This play is a very difficult one for its symbolic meanings at different layers. Rabindranath Tagore said about the play:

The habit of greed—greed for things, for power, for facts, with all the ramifications that greed is able to set up between man and man – is arrayed against the explosive force of human sympathy, of neighborliness, of fellowship and of love, the force which we may term good. Good is here arrayed against the dehumanizing force of mammon, of selfishness, of evil; of that which separates us from our fellows against that which cements us together, of that which, because it divides us, is untruth, is a lie. (qtd. in Lal 24)

Initially, Tagore had named the play as well as the protagonist *Rakta Karavi*. Then he christened both Nandini. Ultimately, both the names prevailed and the play was named *Rakta Karavi* or *Red Oleander* and the chief protagonist was Nandini. The flower red oleander and the persona of Nandini seem to get merged into each other. The fiery red colour of this flower depicts her passionate zeal to face the Raja who is a living terror on Yakshapuri and also to bring about a change in the mindsets of the people of Yakshapuri. She fearlessly faces Raja and says:

The living heart of the earth gives itself up in love and life and beauty but when you rend its bosom and disturb the dead, you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious. Don’t you see everybody here is either angry, or suspicious, or afraid? (RO 24)

Tagore probably chosen this flower to express the nuance of the play fully beauty and death are the two sides of the same coin. Nandini faces both with immense courage. She is aware of her beauty but is not afraid of death too. She adorns the flowers all over her body. The death of Ranjan shatters her but she does not stop her work. Nandini, therefore, is the new woman of the post colonial era who does not fear to face the world. Her attire, her speech, her movements all testify this fact. The creative genius that Tagore was, he gives Nandini the complete space and freedom to mature.

Red Oleanders shows the subtle ways in which colonialism was transforming politics, society, economy and culture in India. Tagore has very cleverly chosen the name Yakshapuri for his play. Pundits say that the Puranic Yakshapuri contained the golden throne of Kubera, the god of wealth. Tagore's Yakshapuri is also the land of gold where the Raja's men go on excavating and on adding to his wealth. The Raja does not need to do anything but sit behind veil and watch his sardars, who are also his intimate counsellors, run the state. The sardars on their part leave no stones unturned in exploiting human resources. The excavators are denied even a human existence. They are not called by the names but have been given numbers, thereby rejecting their claim to identity selfhood. The excavators on their part have merged with the system complete and could not even imagine an existence outside their present conditions. The foolish sage, Bishu in the play talks about this hunger of Raja as:

The calendar never records the last day. After the first day comes the second, after the second the third. There's no such thing as getting finished here. We're always digging one yard, two yards, three yards. We go on raising gold nuggets, after one nugget another, then more and more. In Yaksha Town figures follow one another in rows and never arrive at any conclusion. That's why we are not men to them, but only numbers. Phagu, what's yours? (RO 48)

Therefore, the narrative is about the harmful end result of growing capitalism and the moral humiliation of people, which is represented by the conceit of mine.

The pursuit for gold brings afflictions to the people of the town, to the King himself and to the mother earth. The mine diggers are portrayed in the play as "insects in a hole in this solid toil . . . creeping out of the holes like worms" (RO 243). The people of Yakshapuri feel distressed over their exploitative nature of task. One of them utters his discontentment by declaring "But are we closely fitted to their profits- like husks to grains of corn- with nothing of us left over" (RO 251). Consequently, people feel depressed, fragile and dejected because they are disconnected from their natural life.

Hence, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the whole world seems one single Yakshapuri. The geographical differences are now blurred with the immense advancements of technology. The Rajas of this world are ruthlessly exploiting and wasting natural resources at an incredible speed. As a strong critique of capitalist and industrialist exploitation, Tagore has employed mining to exhibit the adverse consequences of exploitation of natural resources by the human beings. Therefore, being a responsible citizen of the society Rabindranath Tagore has tried to aware scholars and people at large by showing his concern for the environment. Tagore also expresses his distress over the utilitarian approach, excessive use of technology and enormous industrialization all over the world that would result in ecological imbalance and environmental upheaval.

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- **Abbreviation:** RO Red Oleanders

