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Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

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Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Kondotty,

Pin: 673638

India

Ph: +91 483 2711432

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Reading Tagore's *Red Oleanders* through (Ungendered) Ecofeminist Lens

Dr. Anindita Chatterjee
Dr. Nilanjana Chatterjee

Ecofeminist literature and theories call for an end to all forms of oppression. Since Francoise d'Eaubonne's introduction of the term 'ecofeminism' in the 1970s, the idea has been continuously adopted and adapted. Curiously, Tagore's play *Red Oleanders*, appearing some forty-five years before d'Eaubonne's *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, provides us with a gender-neutral perspective to ecofeminism and shows how ecofeminist awareness is not (and must not) be limited to gender-specific approach. The present study reads *Red Oleanders* braiding ecofeminist and gender perspectives to show how Tagore's notion of ecofeminism is unique and gender-inclusive and then attempts to explore the universal relevance of Tagore's idea of ecofeminism. The first section explores the gender-neutral ecofeminist approach of the Nandini-Ranjan-Bishu trio (instead of Nandini's) and explicates their commitment to resist environmental, economic, and intellectual exploitations in the context of mining practices. In so doing, the second section analyses how the triad undoes the essentialist approach to ecofeminism and calls for a non-essentialist take on ecofeminism. The present study is unique as it, for the first time, attempts to situate Tagore's ungendered vision of ecofeminism in the context of *Red Oleanders*.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Tagore, Ungendered, Oppression

Introduction

Tagore's play *Red Oleanders* - appearing in 1924 (some forty-five years before d'Eaubonne's *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*) - has been conceived and directed worldwide, echoing the eco-ethical consciousness of Nandini, Ranjan, Bishu against the complex web of capitalist power structure. While the text provides us with an early illustration of an oriental awareness and a visualization of the 'ideal' ecofeminist perspective, its sustained theatrical productions testify to its contemporaneity, necessitating further ecofeminist reading of *Red Oleanders*. The present study, therefore, undertakes an ecofeminist reading of *Red Oleanders* in two segments. The first segment analyses the ecofeminist elements in the text. The second segment explains how the ecofeminist performances of the Nandini-Ranjan-Bishu triad subverts the essentialist approach to ecofeminism and calls for a non-essentialist gender-neutral take on ecofeminism. In doing so, the study explicates the interpretations of industrial colonization on the one hand, and the ecofeminist language of music, flower, and dance on the other. The present study is unique as it investigates the changing possibilities for ecofeminism in the context of *Red Oleanders*.

Section I: Ecofeminism and *Red Oleanders*

Ecofeminism has been conceived broadly as both a theory as well as a movement that describes the connections that denounce the analogous demolition, subjection, and exploitation of women, nature, non-human animals, and other marginalized communities. It proposes diverse alternative solutions, to put an end to the violence exerted on women and the deprived, as well as to the destruction of nature and natural resources and the extinction of non-human animals and species. Whereas the first and the second wave of feminism strived to achieve rights and empowerment of women, ecofeminism synthesized two movements previously thought of as separate: that of ecology and feminism- a theory involving 'peace movements, labour movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements' (Gaard 1993, 1). In his play *Red Oleanders*, Tagore provides us with an initial illustration of a vision that bears a

close semblance to the essential tenets of contemporary ecofeminism. Tagore understood the embedded lacunae of uninhibited industrialism, motivated by the capitalist greed for power and wealth, which, he felt, would eventually lead to the ‘crisis of civilization’ (which is also the title of his last public speech, April 1941). In “Can Science be Humanized?” (1933), Tagore mentioned about an equilibrium between machines and humanity. He observed, ‘There is no meaning in such words as spiritualizing the machine; we can spiritualize our being which makes use of the machine’ (Kundu xxiv). In a way, the play *Red Oleanders* is about a constructive conciliation between the forces of Nature, Humankind, and Machine.

Pramathanath Bishi who published the play in 1925 identified *Red Oleanders* as a symbolic play. Tagore has saturated the play with botanical metaphors. Alienation, environmental degradation, degeneration of human souls, mechanical lifestyle, and evil entrapment are some other themes that resonate in the play. The play shows how the idea of development and progress implies a simultaneous annihilation of the natural ecosystem. Though the motif of red oleander assumes profound significance in the play it is surprising to find that only one red oleander tree is found in the play which is ‘nearly hidden away behind a rubbish bush’ (Tagore 2012, 3). The setting of the play Yakshapuri is a capitalist town which breeds contempt for beauty. The play commences with the mention of red oleanders when Kishor brings the flowers for Nandini: Nandini ‘must have red Oleanders’ (Tagore 2012, 3) he says. Tagore’s Nandini is a human embodiment of the ecofeminist principles which he sought to portray. The red oleander flowers are the essence of life for her. The red flowers metaphorically become synonymous with Bishu’s fiercely rebel soul. In the end of the play Nandini leaves her wristlet of red oleanders as a token which symbolizes her sacrifice for the reformation she had sought to bring forth. Yaksha Town - a staunch patriarchal, capitalist fictional town - is the setting of *Red Oleanders*. In *Red Oleanders*, Nandini, Bishu and Ranjan’s ecofeminist ideas clash against the capitalist ideologies of the Yaksha town. The name of the town ‘Yaksha’ bears a mythological dimension. Yaksha is another name for

Kuber, the deity of wealth in the extended ‘Hindu pantheon’ (Tagore 2012, xiii). Power-based hierarchy is the characteristic feature of the town wherein the king is at the apex operating through his diverse tools of persecution to preserve his power and authority. The mining industry thrives at the cost of the devastation of nature. The Yaksha town thrives on the blood of the labourers. The people hunt and hoard the dead-wealth from the depth of the earth. According to the Professor in the play, the capitalist town is a city in obscurity – ‘The shadow Demon, who lives in the gold caves, has eaten into it’ (Tagore 2012, 4). The work in the prevailing cruel system is unending and boundless: ‘the calendar never records the last day’ (Tagore 2012, 15). It is a city where people have lost their human identity and have been reduced to certain numbers and alphabets (for example, 47V and 69 NG) and function like automatons. The miners find their escape in intoxication. Tüzün argues, in a capitalist society, a large section of the population — comprising the ‘dwindling middle classes and poor and homeless people—live under dreadful conditions (3). The diggers in the Yaksha town are utilized by the capitalist society to aggrandize wealth and empower themselves. Bishu explains the harsh reality of this torment: ‘If you go there today you will fly back here tomorrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food’ (Tagore 2012, 14). The Governor and the hypocrite preacher also are a part of the prevailing system of exploitation. The preacher seeks to indoctrinate the minds of the workforce to make them useful to the system. He chants:

Just think of it, friend 47 V, yours is the duty of supplying food to this mouth which chants the holy name. With the sweat of your brow have you woven this wrap printed with the holy name, which exalts this devoted body. Surely that is no mean privilege. May you remain forever undisturbed, is my benediction, for then the grace of God will abide with you likewise. (Tagore 2012, 17)

What is striking in *Red Oleanders* is that Tagore has deliberately avoided the poetic eulogization and romanticizing of nature. Nandini represents an indomitable fierce spirit, who openly challenges the oppressive system. Nandini warns the king:

... 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. (Tagore 2012, 8)

When the Professor asks Nandini if she is not afraid of the King, she replies unflinchingly, ‘Why should I fear?’ (*Tagore 2012*, 6). Unassailable and indomitable she epitomizes the indefatigable spirit of Nature. Through her resistance, firm convictions, infectious simplicity, bold spirit, fiery dauntlessness and valorous actions she embodies the elemental energy of Nature that is ‘connected with the earth, the air, the light’ (Tagore 2012, lxxvi). She feels sore to see how the ‘whole city thrusting its head underground ... comes out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past’ (Tagore 2012, 4). The King and Gokul rebuke and hate her for defying the order but she persistently questions and challenges the authority of the autocrat. The trio Nandini, Ranjan and Bishu exhibit ecofeminist awareness as they seek to propagate love, educate, and enlighten the Yaksha people. The state power wants to banish all forms of ecofeminist forces in the play. King and his administration fear these forces because they aim at unsettling the hegemony of power. The administrative system fears the gallantry of Ranjan, and so he is killed. After Ranjan’s death, Bishu and Nandini along with the other workers of the town revolt against the power edifices of the town. The Governors and his accomplices of Yaksha town conspire treacherously against the king. Nandini dauntlessly asks the king to lull her to the same sleep as that of Ranjan. Bishu is Nandini’s companion in her clinging love for the earth and the sky, the flora and fauna of the landscape. They are not afraid of the repressive bureaucratic system. The trio live in harmonious relationships with nature. Heller observes:

In order to see nature, we must be increasingly conscious of our social desires and anxieties, our reluctance to relinquish power within society. If we are not conscious of our own greed, then we will see nature as a greedy force from which we must continually steal in order to survive. (230)

Nandini reveals the reality of the brutal and life-annihilating system to the king where innocent people are thrashed under the vicious social system. The king ultimately comes to realize the treachery of his retinue headed by the Governor and the oppressive bureaucratic system. They unite and seek to establish an ecological revolution. Nandini's role in transforming the king is important. In the words of the Professor, 'Someone said that the King has at last had tidings of the secret of Life ... I have thrown away my books to follow them' (Tagore 2012, 50). The throwing of books and shredding of iron net are symbolic of the change that occurs along the course of the action of the play. It represents the shattering of the cruel socio-political system. The ultimate victory is achieved when the King – transformed in the end — comes out of his dark palace himself, defying the net and his militia (which is now bent on thwarting him). Ultimately the forces of life triumph over the forces of death in the play: a process visualized by Ranjan and initiated by Nandini and Bishu — despite being obstructed by the repressive system — finally triumphs. It is interesting to note that unlike much of the anti-essentialist theorizing and activism in the history of ecofeminism, which took place in the early days of the ecofeminist movement, Tagore's *Red Oleanders* does not project gender stereotype of women as being only inherently close to nature as opposed to men. Nandini, along with Ranjan and Bishu, collectively represent the ideal ecofeminist spirit.

Section II: Ecofeminism Beyond Gender

Karen J. Warren defines “ecological feminism” as an umbrella term which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connection within social systems of domination between those humans in foremost dominating or subordinate positions:

After the charges of gender essentialism levelled at ... (ecofeminist theory) most feminist working on the intersections of feminism and the environment thought it better to rename their approach to distinguish it from essentialist feminisms and thereby gain a wider audience, hence the proliferation of terms such as “ecological feminism” (Warren, 1991) ... social ecofeminism (Heller 1999; King 1989), “critical feminist eco- socialism” (Plumwood, 2002), or simply gender and the environment. (Gaard 2011, 27)

In fact, Indian ecofeminist consciousness has always been non-binary and genderless (combining the dual aspects of the *purusha* and the *prakriti* within the dynamics of nature), nonprescriptive, rational (determined by the Dharma and Karma relationship based on the law of cause and effect), strategic and righteous (and not religious). This Eco ethics probably originated from the Indian Vedic culture (Krishna Nanditha, 2020) wherein Indra, Agni, Vishnu, Pushan, Ushas, Dyauspitr, Prithvi and Rivers were considered as integral to the sacred environmental knowledge — conditioned by the then environmental historical moment (which was exposed to various natural calamities such as earthquake, drought, or flood). Indian Vedic literature, therefore, is a cultural representation of these human activities with environment and nature (for example, ‘Nadistuti Sukta,’ ‘Prithvi Sukta’ and Shantih mantra in the *Rig Veda*, the *Atharva Veda*, and the *Yajur Veda*) wherein preservation/destruction of air, water, and land lead to a consequential salvation/damnation. Krishna’s unique position in the universe – as represented in the *Bhagvada Gita* - posits the cosmic harmony of the earth, water, and air. Sanatana (meaning eternal) Dharma (meaning righteousness) - according to the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain culture - acknowledges the interconnectedness of duty, cosmic law and justice which collectively sustain welfare of the human, animal and plant lives on the earth and balance the Pancha Maha-bhoota. The *Purana* acknowledges nature as integral to inter-being— all species are equal in the eyes of the Creator wherein human control is discouraged. The ancient Tamil Environmental Studies (as represented in *Aindu Tinai*) represent geographical landscapes as realms divided between Lord Murugan, Lord Krishna, Lord Indra, Lord Varuna and Goddess Kotravai. Nandini, Ranjan and Bishu’s ecological sensibilities also reflect similar genderless and rational ecofeminist righteousness.

Tagore’s play *Red Oleanders* (written approximately forty-five years before d’Eaubonne’s *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*), brings out the cry of resistance against the complex web of capitalist power structure through the characters of Nandini, Ranjan, and Bishu. Tagore envisions the idea of authentic love in the play through the trio. According to Heller.

Authentic love must dissolve hierarchical separations within society and between society and nature. It must undermine social divisions-including sex, age, and race-to establish the possibility for mutual understanding, active compassion, and cooperation. (230)

His philosophy resembles the concern of contemporary socialist ecofeminists who believe that all systems of domination such as capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism are ecologically damaging and morally disparaging in nature and must be contested. The play *Red Oleanders* is based upon the principle that everyone irrespective of sex and gender should consider it a moral obligation to fight rightfully with the oppressor and the repressor within a given power structure. Tagore establishes a metaphorical conflict between materialistic, authoritarian control and poetic, nature-inflected freedom in the play. Throughout the play, the dramatist expresses a strong critique of the reductive utility-based capitalistic worldview propagated by the King. The Yaksha town, which constitutes the setting of the play, is controlled and dominated by the invisible Raja or King who exploits natural resources and amasses wealth. He commits atrocities towards nature, humans, and other living species in his insatiable greed for wealth and power. His administrative system is fraught with rigid customs, slavery, exploitation and inequality. In order to develop a highly centralized bureaucracy, the king and his crew relentlessly exploit nature as well as all possible natural and human resources. Bishu is a mad philosopher in the play who overtly condemns this thirst of King along with the free-spirited Nandini and her lover Ranjan. Tagore's play brings out a complex and nuanced idea of a non-essentialist, gender neutral ecofeminist consciousness along with Tagore's philosophical conviction of a vital ecology. The growing importance of ecofeminist literary and cultural criticism inside the arena of ecocritical theory lies in its derisive criticism of the forces of capitalism and globalization, exploitation, 'free' trade, and the international corporate behemoths. In the play *Red Oleanders*, the King represents the force of ruthless industrialization and progressive destruction against which the collective voices of Ranjan, Bishu and Nandini register their protest. Through the figure of the malicious King, Tagore's play *Red Oleanders* shows how uncontrolled lust for power has unsettled the ecological

balance in nature which in turn has threatened the very existence of man. It reminds us of the traditional all-inclusive understanding articulated through revered texts and secular Indian literature which provide 'constant reminder to sustain and foster the ecological balances of nature' (Chaudhuri 1999, 173). After meeting the fearless uninhibited figure of Nandini who symbolizes the vital energy of the earth, the King realizes how he has lost his connection with nature, air, water, soil, plants, and animal life altogether in his merciless quest for capital. Unlike the king, Nandini and Ranjan both believe that the earth with its rivers and rich flora and fauna constitute an intricate web of life. Nandini condemns the king's ruthless annihilation of nature to achieve and amass wealth, thereby ensuring advancement and industrialization. She shows how industrialization implies a simultaneous annihilation of life and living organisms.

The play reflects an Oriental notion of ecofeminism that alludes to the degradation of nature or *Prakriti* (the breathing force that supports life) by forces of capitalism, mechanization, state crafted brutality and other repressive state apparatuses. The workers in the mine digging the tunnel are described as 'insects in a hole in this solid toil... creeping out of the holes like worms' (Tagore 2012, 243). Bishu, who represents the voice of insanity or unpopular wisdom highlights the miserable plight of the villagers caught in the trap of greed and exploitation of a king who is driven by a demonic yearning for power. Tagore's unique jihad against industrial colonialization and mechanization of humanity through the trio Nandini- Bishu-Ranjan brings out Tagore's apathy towards industrial colonization and mutilation of nature. The play *Red Oleanders* thus becomes Tagore's significant eco-conscious narrative against industrial colonialization and mechanization of humanity through ungendered imaginative reforms.

Conclusion

Tagore's texts are made to represent his philosophy of life, deeply felt, and sensitively represented as they are. Critics have sought to trace new lights to bear on these texts in the later years. The assessment of a nuanced literary text is that it reworks and rejuvenates itself to multiple interpretations across time and space. The present study seeks to make a humble attempt to undertake a unique interpretation of *Red Oleanders* by braiding ecofeminism, and gender to explicate how Tagore's notion of ecofeminism is unique, gender-inclusive and (still) relevant. The first section has identified an ecofeminist approach, which is believed and propagated by Nandini, Ranjan and Bishu (instead of Nandini alone as an individual) as they resist environmental, economic, and intellectual exploitations in the context of mining practices. The second section has analyzed how the three characters undo the essentialist approach to ecofeminism and thereby inspire readers to conceive of an ecofeminism which is non-essentialist and gender inclusive. The main idea that the paper seeks to emphasize upon is that Tagore's ecofeminist awareness is an omnipresent fluid perception fusing and blending all binaries together.

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Dr Anindita Chatterjee

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

Government General Degree College, Singur

Pin:712409

India

Ph: +91 9830510479

Email: bluehighways071@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-1244-5544

&

Dr Nilanjana Chatterjee

Associate Professor

Post Graduate Department of English

Maulana Azad College, Kolkata

Pin: 700013

India

Ph: +91 9064752101

Email: nil325@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-0955-3480