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Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* is a garland of songs which adorns the Indian English poetry with its fragranced melodious strings sung by someone who experienced an ecstasy—a state of divine union of soul with the Supreme. Tagore's philosophy of nature has wide range and variety. The imagery, pervasive but not startling, is taken from nature and from Indian classical mythology. Tagore was also bold enough to fight against the fineries that keep man away from mother earth. Tagore's *Gitanjali* echoes in its cadence the essence of every religion, giving solace to the whole humanity in the heart of mother earth; the nature, resonating the ancient Indian mysticism. "To Tagore the world of nature is not an illusion but is rather a medium for accomplishing indivisibility with the infinite" (Nagar 77). Aridness is the result of drought and dried soul. The poet feels sorry for the causes of this aridness that he experiences both in spirit and body. Deforestation and urbanization has led the land to cry in anguish to save it from further destruction. It is there Tagore sang again on the fragmented land where the walls have separated man and nature and stopped God from dwelling amidst. Man separated man from his company and the nature is destroyed at the hands of technology. It is in this anguish Tagore says "Send thy angry storm, dark with death, if it is thy wish, and with lashes of lightning startle the sky from end to end." (*Gitanjali* Poem No.40)The ecological world can be easily explored through literature in order to bridge the gap between science and literature. The poetical works of Rabindranath Tagore is imbued with ecological elements.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Deforestation, Aridness, and Urbanization

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As Ecocriticism emerged as a new critical field of study in the 1990s, scholars of literary ecocriticism pivoted a considerable amount of attention on writers whose works are filled with the natural images and themes. Ecocriticism, then, attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence. Therefore, with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996 and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 critics changed their angles of vision and strived for bringing about a unity between man and nature with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 20).

What ecocritics do, includes re-reading of the works employing a nature-based approach, with specific consideration of the depiction of nature and laying a considerable emphasis on the role of nature in creating unity between human minds and nature. Consequently, romantic poetry became the main icons of ecocritical studies. In other word, Romanticism ignited the marks of the green consciousness which was fatally killed by the harsh enlightenment era of Bacon, and Descartes.

Tagore's *Gitanjali* is one of the most important poetical works that exemplify the poet's proclivity towards ecology. Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1912) is one of the most important poetical compositions dealing with ecocriticism. Tagore's poetry permeates ecological elements. These eminences of his trait made Tagore part of the disciplinary study of ecocriticism. He himself was not aware of this newly formed discipline but his works by its merits indeed became a part and parcel of the discipline. One does not find Tagore dealing with the natural phenomenon as extensively as the better known "nature" poets like William Wordsworth, Toru Dutt and so on. But as Garrard explains, "it seems likely that any given concerned individual will probably have both eco- and anthropocentric attitudes at different times, under different conditions" (Garrad, 2004, p.20). Therefore, in some of his poems, one may notice that he has taken a different perspective by riveting his attention on nature. His poetry not consistently but resonates with ecological sentiment. Consequently, he could be considered as an ecologically conscious early modern poet and a worthy contributor to the discussion of ecology at a time when these modern terms were not in existence. One who has

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known and read Tagore will easily find his life closely attuned to the nature and his establishment of Visva Bharati University is one such example which speaks in volume of his nature centred life. A depth study of Gitanjali songs surely leads us to three important elements that are God, Man and Nature. Nothing seems to take away the attention of Tagore other than these three essential and unavoidable and essential topics of life. He tries to deliver to us the visions of possible harmonies between humanity and nature.

The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end. (Gitanjali Poem No.10)

Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song---the joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass, the joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world, the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word.”
(*Gitanjali* Poem No.59)

Consequently, it will be easily noticed that human beings are lost in a life which is captive in the walls of cities at the expense of neglecting the nature. Tagore weeps with never ending plea to stop fragmentation by boundary walls and segmentation. In his poem 36 we hear a heart touching prayer for our nation.

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
... (*Gitanjali* Poem No.36)

In this respect, man has lost its priority to valueless things, materialism. Selfish motivations have crept into the life of man. Tagore is persistently against this selfish and instrumental attitude of man towards nature. From his point of view, every natural phenomenon possesses “value in its own right, without reference to human interests” (Garrard, 2004, p. 183) and “the value of non-human forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes” (Rothenberg, 1989, p. 29). Therefore, he gives

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the highest priority to nature and reproves those who belittle this place of nature. Tagore's poems clearly reverberates these themes time and again with forceful allegation to man's cruelty towards nature and natural values.

Gitanjali poems doubtlessly take Rabindranath Tagore to the realm of Ecocritics and none can ever object to the statement that Tagore indeed is an ecologically conscious early modern poet.

Nature imagery and symbolism in the Poetry of Tagore

The nature imageries illustrated in his poems are often quaint depictions of Indian landscapes, particularly those of Bengal. In Tagore's eyes, nothing was trivial or insignificant and each nuance of simple everyday life attained in his poetry an eternal significance. "In an uncountable number of his poems we notice Tagore's great dexterity of employing a wonderful abundance of nature imagery with rich variety and freshness". (Mohit 84) In some contexts, nature is the benevolent and affectionate mother whose presence and healing touch is not only enjoyed by the poet or the persona but also equally by the readers. At other times nature appears to be angry, ruthless and harsh.

The rain has held back for days and days, my God, in my arid heart. The horizon is fiercely naked---not the thinnest cover of a soft cloud, not the vaguest hint of a distant cool shower.

Send thy angry storm, dark with death, if it is thy wish, and with lashes of lightning startle the sky from end to end. ... (Gitanjali Poem No.40)

In his poetry there is a perpetual use of pastoral imagery, plant imagery and water imagery. Also, countless elements of nature appear as mystic motifs throughout the collection of his poems. For instance, the river, the ocean, the waves, earth, moon, sun, stars, sky, flowers, the birds and bees, the sand and dust are all recurrent symbols. Moreover, the time of the day and the season are also used as motifs in his poems. All the symbols amalgamate in a beautiful union to contribute in some way or the other to the key themes, which are exceptionally diverse. These are clearly an expression of Ecological themes that bespeak Tagore to be a Disciple of Ecocritical studies. "...In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words..." (Gitanjali Poem No.42). "Most of the images of Tagore's poetry diffuse the aroma of the Indian

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tradition of rich imagery, particularly the nature imagery. The images and symbols of the poet are not complex, pedantic and far-fetched as generally seen in the metaphysical and modern poets in English literature, but they are simple and lucid like those of Wordsworth and others of the romantic school of poetry. Most of the images of Tagore smell the flavour of the great Indian epics and scriptures. Tagore drank deep from the vessels of the rich Indian heritage.”

Pastoral Imagery in *Gitanjali*

The pastoral imagery includes pictorial descriptions of gardens and meadows, cattle and pastures as well as rice grains and fields. In his poem 8 he writes “shut off from the healthful dust of the earth” is as a deprivation of a great fair of common human life. The integration of these pastoral images captures the essence of rural life and brings the poem to life. The pastoral imagery undertakes a similar function in poem 11 where he says, “He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in Sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.” These lines illustrate and highlight the significance of hard work and toil and it is there the Lord and Master of the universe abide. In Poem 5 of *Gitanjali* we have, “endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil” and the “bees are plying their minstrelsy at the court of the flowering grove”. The Poet invites the reader to find consolation and rest in the bosom of Mother Earth where you have the refreshing sights of the birds and fishes, fruit trees and forests. “Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.”

The poet means to say that the Lord of the universe is found amidst the peasants and the poor people of humble and lowliest in nature. God’s dwelling is found amidst the poor and it is they who give true honour to the Lord through their humble service to the nature. Man must earn their livelihood tilling the earth and planting the crop. Tagore believes nature to be a path to the almighty.

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!”

“Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.”

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Plant Imagery

The plant imagery used by the poet includes those of seeds, roots, fruits, flowers, leaves, trees, branches, forests and groves. The diversity clearly emphasizes Tagore's adroitness in embodying such assorted aspects of nature as imagery and motifs in his poetry. "The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by..." (Poem 18) And in the poem 69 clear imageries of plant is used to define life. "It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers." (Poem 69)

Flower, is yet another vital motif Tagore uses most persistently in his works. This mystic image of the flower assumes a metaphysical dimension in many of his poems. On the day when the lotus bloomed ... My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded. (Poem 20) "the flowers were all merry by the roadside;" and in poem 6 the poets emphasizes on self-surrender and ready will to offer through the imagery of a flower. "Though its colour is not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and pluck it while there is time." Withered leaves danced and whirled in the hot air of noon.

Imagery consisting of trees, forests and groves is often used to create the scenery of the poems as seen in the lines, "The shepherd boy drowsed and dreamed in the shadow of the banyan tree, and I laid myself down by the water and stretched my tired limbs on the grass.(Poem 48 pg.138), They crossed many meadows and hills..., the flower is reigning in splendour among thorns...(Poem.55) Lilies and jasmines surge up on the crest of the waves of light. (Poem.57). The poet aesthetically merges the nature imagery with the lives and actions of the personas. Another motif that is part of the plant imagery is that of fruits. "...why there is honey in the cup of the flowers and why fruits are secretly filled with sweet juice...(Poem 62.)". By the imagery of fruits, he brings down the emphasis on to the productivity and moral values of mankind. Nature and especially the trees and plants greatly influenced Tagore in his poetic carrier as well as in real life. These imageries forcefully encourage the readers to be close to the nature and to protect its sanctity.

Water Imagery

Tagore also uses plenty of water imagery which evoke spirit of ecology and ecocritical elements. This element of nature assumes the shape of vital motifs in the forms of

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the river, streams and the sea in his poetry. In Poem 3 we have the imagery of stream, “The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.” (Poem 3), and in poem 5 that of a shoreless sea, “an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil” (poem 5). Tagore's astuteness is apparent in the way he moulds the imagery in order to make it one with the persona. The hydraulic metaphors of the river and the stream can be interpreted as speech and life flowing together.

Rain is a recurring symbol in the poetry of Tagore. Rain can be considered as the reflector of the poet's psyche. When the poet wants to express the distress and aloofness especially the sufferings he faced in past, he chooses the imagery of rainy hours, as in the poem “The sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless...”, “...I know not how I am to pass these long, rainy hours.” and “The rain has held back for days and days,...” and “...thy voice pour down in golden streams breaking through the sky.” Likewise, the word overflow often alludes to the metaphor of the river. For instance, “By what dim shore of the ink-black river”, “The waves have become clamorous, and upon the bank in the shady lane the yellow leaves flutter and fall.”

Published in 1910, *Gitanjali* is Tagore's most popular work. Compared to the Books of Psalms in the Bible, *Gitanjali* explores a personal relationship between the poet and the divine. The divinity he often translates as, “Lord of my life’ or ‘life of my life” which we read in the Psalms as a dialogue or personal talk between the Psalmist and his creator, the God. He also refers the divinity to as “my God”, “King”, “Father,” “Mother,” “Lover,” “Friend”, and “inner most one.” The range of term here suggests the varied associations of the Divine and also the conventional metaphors Tagore generally uses to develop his relationship with the divine. Perhaps the most numerous poems are those in which, like John Donne or St. Teresa of Avila, Tagore speaks of the deity as a lover with whom he longs to be united. In song 66, Tagore varies the formula somewhere. He describes a woman who dwells in *Pardah* within his heart.

She who ever had remained in the depth of my being, in the twilight of gleams and of glimpses; she who never opened her veils in the morning light, will be my last gift to thee, my God, folded in my final song... There was none in the world who ever saw

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her face to face, and she remained in her loneliness waiting for thy recognition.

(Gitanjali Poem No.66)

Many men have come asking for her, but, none has seen her face, because she waits only for God. The woman represents the spark of divinity in Tagore which longs to be reunited with its source, and the purdah suggests its loneliness and purity. The divinity within inspires Tagore's songs and motivates him to lead a pure life, but he confesses that involvement in common place events sometimes creates a smoke screen which obscures the divinity within and without. The common place, however, also has its divinity. God is to be found not only in the temple but also in the workmen in the fields. Because divinity runs through everything, even the metaphors which Tagore uses to describe god have an element of literal truth. The female divinity connects him again to the Ecofeminism where earth is compared to a mother, a woman who nurture and foster the life.

Ideologies of Rabindranath Tagore as a Naturalist

Rabindranath was a philosopher, poet, dramatist, teacher, essayist and painter of outstanding repute. His philosophy of life was based on the ideals of dedication, patriotism and naturalism. As a true philosopher, he developed an ideal experimental education institution in Santiniketan. Tagore was a great advocate of spiritual education and also stressed on harmonious development of the child with equal emphasis on mental, social and emotional growth. Tagore was the greatest prophet of modern Indian renaissance who sought to bring change through education. Although he was an ideal philosopher, but the thoughts of naturalism, pragmatism and individualism are also reflected in his philosophy. "To Tagore the world of nature is not an illusion but is rather a medium for accomplishing indivisibility with the infinite. Nature, which is a medium of spiritual communion, is for Tagore the manifestation of God." The values which contributed a lot towards enrichment of his life are discussed as follow:

The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore draws ecological elements from all these sources that can be studied in depth and detail. Tagore's Gitanjali (1912) is one of the most important poetical compositions dealing with ecocriticism. WB Yeats in "Introduction" of Gitanjali writes: Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so

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daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defense.

All these thoughts of Tagore specifically foretell the poet's instinct towards God, man and nature. His song offerings in *Gitanjali* indeed is a collection of his souls earning to be close to the mother earth and to be fostered by its rich treasury which he alone could realize, meditate and wanted the world around him to be aware through his literary works. Every nature imagery is rich with magnificent message. We need to meditate on the eternal truth through the nature. This leads men to be partakers of eternal glory. Nature is the source of all that great truth of life. This is the reason great men of every age went to the mountains and hills to encounter God through renunciation. Every saint of every religion speaks in volume the bond of union between God and nature. These eminences of his trait made Tagore part of the disciplinary study of ecocriticism. He himself was not aware of this newly formed discipline but his works by its merits indeed became a part and parcel of the discipline.

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