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X

17. The Changing Pattern of India's Exports during Reform Period
- *Hatkar Manita G.* 88
18. Issues in Higher Education in India
- *Munde Ramkishan Haridas* 96
19. Freedom and Morality: Mahatma Gandhi's Contribution to sustainable concept of Rural Development.
- *Parasram Bachewad* 101
20. Analytical Survey of Selected Sports Development at University Level
- *Prasad Ramakat Kulkarni* 105
21. Psychological Consequences of Social Media on Collegians
- *A. D. Chauhan and M. J. Choudhari* 112
22. Impact of Climate Change on Biodiversity In India
- *Vyankat B. Lamb* 118
23. The Role of Self- Help Groups in the Empowerment of Rural Women: A Study of Selected Groups in Sorpeth Taluka
- *Tengse S. A.* 121
- ✓ 24. Eco-Critical Reading Of Rabindranath Tagore's The Water Fall
- *V. D. Satpute* 129
25. Renewable Energy Sources in India: Challenges and Opportunities
- *Wakode Jyoti Sahadeo* 136
26. India's Export: Trend in Composition and Policy Implications
- *Talekar S. D.* 145
27. A Study on Hockey Player's Diet
- *Vandana Damodhar Arak* 151
28. You fell, I was pushed: A game of Zero-sum in reservation and atrocities
- *S. D. Wakode, G. D. Bansod and D. S. Rangacharya* 155
29. Political Empowerment of Women in Indian Rural Politics.
- *Tadkalkar Nandini Prabhakarrao* 161
30. A Study of Marathi Poetry in India
- *Rajiv Vaijanathrao Yeshwante* 164
31. A Study of Approaches to Physical Education in Schools
- *Ravindra Baliram Khandare* 167
32. Adiwasi's Remedies: Mal-nutrition, Migration- Problem and Solution
- *Sonawane P. S.* 170
33. Buddhist and Culture in India and Thai
- *Sambhaji Sopanrao Darade* 176



Eco-Critical Reading Of Rabindranath Tagore's The Water Fall

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*Literature is mirror to society. Society gets reflected through the various genres of literature. The writers represent the age in which they live. A piece of good literature expresses global qualities which helps literature to remain immortal. Today the word environmental degradation is being discussed at the top priority at national and international level. The issue of environment transcends the boundaries of nations because now it has been the problem of world community. The contemporary writers like Arundhati Roy, (1961), Kiran Desai (1971), Arvind Adiga (1974) etc have given timely expression to the issue of environment. The issue of environmental degradation came in literature mainly after the industrial revolution. Charles Dickens is probably the first author to voice against the disastrous effects of industry emissions on child laborers. An Eco-Criticism is a post modern approach to study literature. It enables readers to view a work of art from ecological perspective. Eco-Criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment. Rabindranath Tagore has preached the world to respect nature and protect it so that humanity will get protected. This research paper is an attempt to read Tagore's *The Water Fall (Muktadhara)* from eco-critical perspective. Although the terms like environmentalism, eco-criticism etc was not coined in Tagore's period, he can be considered as one of the pioneers of the eco-critical movement which emerged in 1990s. The paper focuses the vision and philosophy of Tagore regarding the protection and preservation of rivers which are the perennial sources of human sustenance. Tagore prefers the construction of small dams which will not create environmental problems and will be of more beneficial to the people. Tagore questions the very existence of large dams which displace the thousands of people and create disharmony in ecological system. Tagore discards the use of gigantic machinery to stop the flow of water. The construction of big dams not only bifurcate the integrity of river eco system but can be the means of exploitation in the hands of powerful people. The reading of Tagore's *The Water Fall* compels us to ponder over the present degrading scenario of the rivers in India and the probable solutions to overcome the problem.*

[Key Words: Environmental Degradation, Ecological concern, Eco-criticism, Muktadhara, Development.]



Introduction

Environment means surroundings. It refers to everything remaining around human beings. It includes water, air, and land. Environment protection Act 1986, defines it as, "The study of basic components of our surroundings and their interactions is called the environmental science. Educating people on environment and its problems is called environmental education. Every man is being surrounded by air, water, soil, stones, animals and other human beings". (Arumugan and Kumaran 2013). For Indians the word 'environment' is not new. It has references in the 'saint literature' produced after 12th century. Prominent saints of Maharashtra have preached the importance of environment through their Bhakti Literature. The great king of Maharashtra- Chattrapati Shivaji Maharaj, had also awakened people about environment through his 'ADNYAPATRA'- order of the king. But unfortunately we Indians have forgotten the preaching of environment protection and imitated the infrastructural development of other countries which resulted in the pollution and natural hazards. Since literature is mirror to society it gets reflected through the various genres of literature. In fact a piece of good literature always stands for the test of time. Authors represent not only the age in which they live but some of them predict the probable danger to be confronted by the humanity in near future. In postmodern era, a drastic change took place in the human life style. Undue importance was given to the unproductive and unnecessary things which resulted in robbing the natural wealth. Environmental problems have been the major issue since last some of the decades. The issue of environmental degradation came in literature mainly after the industrial revolution i.e. after 1860. Charles Dickens is probably the first author to voice against the disastrous effects of industry emissions on child workers. Literature and environment have been in close association since pre-historical time. The affinity to nature and its protection had been given expression in religious literature of every country. Indian writers are no exception to this and we have numerous literatures where we have deep love and respect towards nature. Rabindranath Tagore is one such writer who preached the world how to respect the nature and protect it so that humanity will get protected automatically. In this paper I have selected Tagore's *The Water Fall (Muktadhara)* for study. Tagore's 150th birth anniversary prompted me to give thought to his works where he had repeatedly stressed as to how modern men have failed to respect nature. In present context, it will be a best tribute to Tagore if the modern man will follow some of his preaching. Tagore first became concerned about man's impact on the environment after seeing an oil spill at sea on his way to Japan in 1916, decades before an environmental movements emerged in west. In his various speeches in Japan, he had expressed the consequences of spilling oil into the sea. Even today the marine oil pollution is a matter of grave concern for environmentalists. Although the terms like environmentalism, eco-criticism etc were not coined in the then period, Tagore can be considered as one of the pioneers of the eco-critical movement which emerged in late 90s.



Environmental Degradation and Present Scenario:

Today the word environment is being discussed at top priority not only at national level but also at international. The issue of environment transcends the boundaries of nations since it has become the problem of globe. Environment plays a vital role in the development of human beings. Healthy environment is must for the peaceful living of human beings. For last two centuries humans have excessively robbed the natural resources and created the things for themselves. This excessive and reckless use of the natural resources resulted in having the pollution and the advent of most of the natural hazards. Since thousands of years man has been living in this world. Our ancestors lived and disappeared from the earth. Today we are living and tomorrow we will disappear. It is the duty of each individual, society, state and nation to handover earth safely to the next generation. But today the earth has become sick by the disastrous activities of human beings. The mother earth is in dire and surrounded by the man made calamities. She needs help from us. The earth is being disturbed by various problems by which the mankind has trapped. The problems like: Global Warming, Green house Effect, Acid rain, Water pollution, noise pollution, Pesticide Pollution, Marine oil pollution are dragging the human beings at the threshold of death. Since this has been the global issue, national and international agencies are working in the direction of the conservation of environment. The most important step was taken during United Nations conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio De Janeiro in 1992 popularly known as "Earth Summit". "The concept of sustainable development was mile stone in this conference which refers to the equitable distribution of natural resources between present and future generations"(Sheoran 2016). The world is witnessing the growth in the natural and manmade calamities. In such a scenario it is the need of the hour that every individual must be conscious about environment because this problem cannot be overcome by single nation or state or law etc. When environment protection will become a mass movement then and then only we will be able to protect the environment at great extent.

Literature and Eco-Criticism

Eco-criticism is a postmodern critical theory which studies the relationship between literature and physical environment. Eco-critical perspective allows us to read literature through ecological perspective. In modern times literature is being viewed from the eco-critical approach. It is an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment. Eco-criticism as a separate movement or school of literary criticism started after 1990 in America. Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as follows:
Eco-criticism 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 Marxists criticism rings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, eco-criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty and Herold 1996).



Explaining the reason behind originating the eco-logical approach to literature, Dr. Vertha Fenn observes:

The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have only caught the attention of the writers. It is this senses of concern and its reflection in literature that have given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely eco-criticism (Fenn 2015: 114-119).

Tagore as Environmentalist

Rabindranath Tagore was the first Indian writer to have Nobel Prize for his anthology Gitanjali. He was a prolific writer and has twenty five volumes of poetry, fifteen plays, ninety short stories, eleven novels and thirteen volumes of essays to his credit. But the world knows him as a writer of Gitanjali for which he received Nobel Prize. Tagore had tremendous influence of Upanishadas (ancient scriptures) on his writings. He respects nature and states as to how humans are dependent on nature. He is of the opinion that nature makes man's life worthy to live. It provides us water, air, food etc. A century before, Tagore commented on the issues of exploitation of environment. He has appealed to protect nature through his poems, plays and short stories. Subhash Dutt said, "The literary works of Tagore can be used for raising awareness about environment" (Bhattacharjee 2013: L). In numerous writings of Tagore we witness the relationship between man and nature. His popular poems titled, 'The Tame Bird Was in a Cage and I Plucked You Flower' can be read from eco-critical perspectives where the humanity is awakened about future environmental threats. Besides his poems, the plays like *Raktakharabi* (*Red Oleanders*) and *Muktadhara* (*The Water Fall*) are the examples where we can study Tagore as environmentalist.

Objective of the Study

The objective behind writing this article is to focus and highlight Tagore's vision and philosophy regarding the protection of rivers which are the perennial sources of human sustenance. It is an attempt to highlight as to how the construction of big dams is unnecessary. He had suggested constructing small dams which will not create environmental problems and will be of more beneficial to the people. The objective is also to appeal people to adopt the Tagore's micro level rural centric development plan. It is good move on the part of Govt. of Maharashtra that it has initiated the construction of small earthen dams under the scheme of 'Jalswarajya' which will result in increasing the ground water level and it will quench the thirst of many. For this reason, Tagore's *The Water Fall* (*Muktadhara*) has been taken for study. The reading of the play has a present relevance where the question has been raised whether big dams are necessary.

Tagore's Ecological Concerns in the Water Fall:

Tagore's *The Water Fall* is one of the finest dramatic works published in 1922. It portrays the evils of big dams to be constructed on the rivers. It has



the theme similar to the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the problems related to the construction of big dams. According to Arundhati Roy (1999), "large dams displaced 33 million people in the 50 years after independence"(Roy Arundhati 1999). In fact the construction of big dams and its impact on environment is the topic of debate in modern world. Some think that the construction of such big dams is helpful in providing water for drinking, industry and for irrigation. It is also helpful in creating hydro-electricity etc. In similar way there are more adverse effects of such big dams which will threaten the very existence of environment and humanity. Ghoshal puts Tagore's philosophy of dams:

Tagore did not oppose small dams and use of modern technique of production but he always raised his voice against the rampant unrestricted use of technology leading towards the damage of the ecological system. Boundless and mindless growth will ultimately lead towards total destruction---- it was his firm belief (Ghoshal 2016).

Commenting on the adverse effects of big dams Dr. Gope Ananta says, but over dependency of man on technologies for controlling the natural gifts to meet his demand have invited so many unwanted problems many years ago. A poet warned us in poems, essays and dramas that techno-centric river impedimentaion not only bifurcate the integrity of river ecosystem but it will be the means of suppression and exploitation by the powerful to the powerless people in the society in near future. (Gope Anant 2016: 167-170).

The storyline of the play runs like below: The King Ranjit rules over the kingdoms of Uttarkut and Shiv-Tarai. Muktheadhara – the free flow of water from the nearby mountains flows down the mountain slopes of Uttarkut and reaches into another kingdom called Shiv-Tarai. The water fall is a place in an imaginary location of Chitrakut. Actually Chitrakut is financially dependent on Shiv-Tarai. This is the reason that king Ranjit desires to control the territory by building a big dam across the Muktheadhara and by denying the water to shiv-tarai people. The water of the river is the lifeline of both the countries. The king Ranjit has close affinity with the Uttarkut subject but has developed indifference to the subject of Shiv-Tarai. He used to collect taxes forcefully from Shiv-Tarai. He doesn't show mercy to the shiv-tarai people when they fail to pay taxes due to the failures of their crops. King Ranjit wanted to keep the subject of shiv-tarai under his control by any means. Bhibuti, an engineer, prepares a plan to build a big dam and imprison the waters of the Muktheadhara. In the beginning the villagers are happy because they are assured to get livelihood by working at the construction site. But soon people's life becomes miserable "as the natural stream loses its water because of construction work. As a result their fishing business, agriculture and social life get affected" (Sharma 2012). People of Uttarkut, being at the upper side of the dam, were happy to have such a project and so they praise king and Bhibuti. But the people of shiv-tarai didn't like the plan which will keep them from having the free flow of water to their country. The king was happy to have new weapon in his hand to keep the people of shiv-tarai under his control. Despite of the resistance on the



part of the shiv-tarains, Bhibuti constructs a big dam with the help of gigantic machines.

But Abhijit – the Yuvraja—opposes the plan on the ground that his father will subjugate the shiv-tarai people by not releasing the water to them when they are in need. Another reason of opposing the dam was that Abhijit is not a real son of the King Ranjit. As an infant, he was found at the bank of the Muktheadhara. King Ranjit's Guru's Guru (teacher's teacher) found some signs of imperial destiny on the body of the Abhijit which prompted King to adopt him as his son and legal heir despite of having his own son. When Abhijit learns this history from Maharaja Vishwajit—Uncle of King Ranjit--- he develops a motherly attitude to Muktheadhara and wants to free her from the grip of dam. Abhijit was of the opinion that the people of shiv-tarai must not deprive of water. It is their natural right. He expresses his love to nature: "Beautiful is Earth, it sings. To reach the smallest thing that has sweetened my life. I offer my reverence today" (Tagore 1996:134). Abhijit, as a governor of the shiv-tarai, had opened the Nandi Pass road for commercial benefit of the shiv-tarai people. In fact the road had been blocked for past three generations by the kings of the Uttarkut dynasty. Although the decision was pleasing to the shiv-tarai people, but the people of Uttarakut resented by this act of the Abhijit and they wanted to detain him and punish. In order to save Abhijit from the fury of the people; King orders the detention of Abhijit. But somehow the Yuvraj escapes from the prison and is ready to break the dam to free the river – Muktheadhara. Before breaking the dam he says, "I must pay off debt of my birth right. The current of the waterfall has been my first nurse and I must set her free. (212). In the end Abhijit breaks the dam in the darkness and he himself also gets swept by the currents of the water and gets killed. Abhijit sacrifices his life for the freedom of Muktheadhara and for the economic welfare of the shiv-trai people.

Conclusion

The play *Muktheadhra* by Tagore stresses the importance of water for sustaining the life of all living beings on this planet. In Indian scriptures rivers are being offered the status of mother—one who gives life. Today the world is having many disputes regarding the sharing of water of the river or claiming the benefits of dams. Approximately hundred years back Tagore had depicted the conflict between two countries i.e. Uttarakut and Shiv-tarai on the issue of water. Even after hundred years the situation hasn't improved but rather worsened. Some have predicted that there will be third war on the issue of water. Tagore is not against the building of the small dams but he opposes big dams constructed by using gigantic machineries. Rabindranth thinks that there are three elements, pride, greed and power which cause man's separateness from the harmony of the nature. Bhibuti, an engineer, employs machinery in the construction of dam and attempt to conquer the nature. The big dams stop the flow of water and also stop crops growing there which ultimately result in disharmony between man and nature. Sanghamitra Dasgupta has rightly pointed:



In Muktaghara Rabindranath has given a shape of the idea that man with his power has attempted to establish his absolute power over nature. It ultimately destroys the relation of man with nature and breaks the harmony in nature. The harmony can be resulted through love and care, but not by power. It appears to us as a voice of Eco-feminist, who propagate that modern development policy, which causes the environmental degradation, ignores the symbioses, the inter connection of nature and sustainability of lives. It is a matter of grave concern how common people's life are sacrificed for the sake of the so called development" (Dasgupta 2011: 36).

In the progress of human civilization, generally it is observed that we are developing at the cost of nature. In fact whatever progress we are doing, it is ultimately for the comfort of the people. But if we are destroying biodiversity in the pursuit of human gain, it won't be actual gain but loss on the part of human beings because the adverse effects of losing biodiversity will be more dangerous than gaining something from it. It is the time to follow our traditional knowledge of water irrigation management with the help of new technological assistance. It is the time to protect and conserve river so that earth remains better place for life in generations to come. Mandatory environmental education will help people in taking positive decisions for their future planning. R. Tagore's literary works have played a vital role in making mankind conscious of their responsibilities toward the mother earth where we live. We must accept the ZULU philosophy called UMBUTU meaning "my existence (human beings) is depending on your (Earth/planet) existence. This is the only survival mantra.(Kumar 2013:299).

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