



# Ecocritical Reading in Select Works of Rabindranath Tagore

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## Abstract

*Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary field of study, has added significant facets to literary criticism. We notice that the recent ecocritical philosophies have been reflected with gravity in Rabindranath Tagore's works before it was recognised as a discourse. The eco-consciousness that he carefully cultivated in his life was portrayed with great emphasis in his literary and artistic creations. Tagore believed that literature could be a useful tool to reduce environmental disasters and promote the ecosystem by developing consciousness through it.*

*Tagore deemed that the rocky and cruel earth was made habitable only by growing trees. Tree to him was the life founder. So he always sought the development of a close bond between men and trees. With his mystic and spiritual perception of nature, he tried to relocate man's position in nature. His plays like 'Raktakarabi', 'Muktodhara', 'Srabangatha', a good number of poems, and his paintings show his ideas about deep ecology, shallow ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, ecophobia, and the other aspects of ecocriticism. Segregation of humans from nature is declined in the concept of deep ecology. In some of his writings and lectures, Tagore defended the notion of kinship between man and nature. The idea, that human beings, should take care of nature for their own sake, is related to shallow ecology, and Tagore as the defender of nature worshipped it as a source of regeneration.*

## Keywords

Ecocriticism, Man, Nature, Earth, Ecology, Environment

## **Objectives**

Nature is always a major theme in literature, but the deep concern for the present environmental crisis has made it a significant global issue. When the issues of gender, race, religion, class, identity, human rights, etc. held the central position of literary creations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecocriticism emerged as a study of relationship between the physical environment and literature in the 1990s. The present paper briefly examines the aspects of the environment reflected in the select writings of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). It also focuses on the concerns of Tagore who was more critical and reactive to the dangers caused by environmental hazard, destruction of wilderness and materialism.

## **Methodology**

This paper has been written within the inter-disciplinary framework examining and discussing the secondary data collected through books, journals, websites, etc.

## **Introduction**

Nowadays people realise the interdependence of man and nature. Their concern for protecting the environment from man-made disasters has become a global issue. A positive response is developing all over the world regarding ecology. As ecocritical reading is a broader understanding of literature and the environment, Tagore showed concern and commitment in this regard. His engagement with nature is a leitmotif in his works of creation. About a century ago, he realised the inevitability of saving nature from destruction. He felt the necessity of preserving all the natural components to form a bubble of life.

There was no organized movement to support ecocriticism before the conference of the Western Literature Association in 1989 in the USA where Cheryl Glotfelty said, 'Just as the 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-centred approach to literary studies.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus, ecocriticism rejecting the notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed includes other theoretical views such as deep ecology, shallow ecology, Marxist environmentalism, environmental justice, ecofeminism, land ethics, etc. It is

evident that ecocriticism came out with a simple agendum to save the environment.

Rabindranath shows his environmental awareness in almost all the genres of literature he composed. His poems, songs, short stories, novels, plays, essays, etc. embodied plenty of environmental issues. Everywhere, he emphasized the harmonious co-existence between man and nature. He warns human beings about the dire consequences of destroying environment. He laments in his poem *Sabhyatar Prati* (To Civilization) for a lost world abundant with natural resources.

Give back that wilderness, take away the city –  
Embrace if you will your steel, brick, and stonewalls  
Of newfangled civilization! Cruel all consuming one,  
Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots  
And traditions of innocence. Come back evenings  
When herds return suffused in evening light<sup>2</sup>

The poem is a critique of modern civilization which is built on the exploitation of nature. Tagore as a defender of rural life urges people to protect the environment. He has paid glowing tribute to the trees and vegetation in his poem “Briksha Bandana” (Tree worshipping) where he reminds us that trees had the existence on earth long before man and animal existed. Trees graced with the light of the sun came into life and made the barren desert green. Worshipping trees is an expression of gratitude and inspiration of love for the green world.

He established ‘Shantiniketan’ in the lap of nature where he started the events of celebrating different seasons and introduced ‘Halkarshan’ (tilling the land) with great enthusiasm. The recurrent portrayal of seasonal beauties in his paintings reflects his love as well as concern for nature. He also voiced against the cornucopian view that holds the belief that the earth has abundant resources, and concern for environmental dangers is illusory and exaggerated. Bibhuti is a character of that type in *Muktohdara*. Tagore acknowledged the advancement of science but revolted against the exploitation of nature by science. He, much before the Western campaigners, actively thought about maintaining ecological balance and dreamt of a world that ensures congenial living for all.

*Raktakarabi* which was first given the title *Yakshapuri* is one of the most complex plays of Rabindranath Tagore in verse. The play reveals how human greed destroys the beauties of nature making it a mere source of profit. The play takes place in a kingdom called *Yakshapuri* where the king stays behind an iron curtain and people are forced to work in the gold mines to dig out gold to make him wealthier. He was so cruel that he didn't hesitate to kill them on the slightest pretext. Finally, there comes Nandini who leads them to a revolt. Her indomitable spirit guides her to stand against the king. She mocks the king for hiding behind his enclosure. Nandini symbolises freedom. Her sole ornament is her jewels crafted out of Red oleander (*Raktakarabi*), which she wears as a tribute to Ranjan, the man she loves. Nandini appears from the rhythm of nature. Through this drama, Tagore reveals the constant repression of the weak by the powerful and the exploitation of nature by greedy people. 'Here Rabindranath pointed out that the greed of man's power alienates him from enjoying the beauty of growing grass on the earth and blooming flower plants. He was very much aware that man's greed gradually was taking away the fertility of the land, caused global warming. Plantation, in his view, is necessary to fulfill the damage occurred by man due to deforestation. He introduced it in Sriniketan and Shantiniketan under the name of *Halokarsan*.'<sup>3</sup>

Ecofeminism stands against patriarchy and capitalism. It rejects the oppression of women and nature by mischievous people and urges for the liberation of women and nature. "The same habitual structures of thought, feeling and action that devalue and harm women also harm nature."<sup>4</sup> Thus, ecofeminism declares that the agents who oppress women and nature are the same.

*Raktakarabi* is a play about Nandini's revolt against an oppressive king to free nature and man from his enormous greed. Tagore conveys the message that the vast industrialization throughout the world would result in diminishing human compassion and cause Ecological Imbalance. So he used characters as a metaphor of human instincts such as greed, power, envy, love, trust, and sacrifice. 'While on one hand, Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition.'<sup>5</sup>

Tagore's immense love for nature is found in almost every genre of literature he created. Tagore wrote songs under the title 'Prakriti-parjaay' where 'prakriti' stands for nature and 'parjaay' stands for section, in which he urged to maintain adequate balance between

human activities and environment. Tagore's play 'Muktadhara' (The Free Fall) centres around a waterfall and a dam which has been built by Bibhuti, the royal engineer of Uttarakut according to the order of King Ranajit to deprive the villagers of Shivtarai. Going against the king, Abhijit, the foster-prince finally succeeded in breaking the dam and letting the water of the fall flow with its usual course. The play conveys Tagore's strong objection to human efforts of subjugating nature.

In the song, *Khanchar Pakhi* (Tame Bird in a Cage), Tagore nicely portrays the agony of a caged bird that can't sing the song of woodlands and its inability to fly into the forest for losing power and having dead wings. Tagore being a defender of nature always denounced unusual activities harmful to nature and its habitants. He was very anxious about the unrestrained exploitation of forest resources. Tagore said that by destroying nature, greedy people are digging out their graves. People have uprooted trees that give us clean air and help us make our land fertile. Completely forgetting their benefits, man has destroyed all the gifts of nature. Being concerned for nature, and wishing a harmony between man and nature, which is an essential prerequisite of sustainable living condition, is also reflected in establishing Santiniketan on his vision. The seasonal festivals of *Barshamangal*, *Brikhharopana* (Tree Planting Ceremony), etc. at Shantiniketan bear witness to his love for nature and untiring efforts to aware people of sustainable living by preserving ecological balance.

## **Conclusion**

Rabindranath expressed deep concern for environment much before the western development thinkers, and campaigned much to maintain ecological balance. Tagore opined in many of his writings that development activities are necessary but not at the irreparable cost of environment. Tagore dreamt of a world which ensures congenial living not only for us but also for our progenies.

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