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Nature and Sustainable Development: A study of Tagore's Short Stories

Abstract

Ecological crisis and environment degradation are an outcome of human interference and arise out of disturbances of natural conditions. The world literature since the time immemorial have provide glimpses of environment conducive to socio-political ,socio-economic and socio geographic changes. Indian writing in English is essentially a product of the colonial period flowered after independence.

This paper amply illustrates how Rabindranath Tagore's conception of the short stories is the exquisite commingling of character with environment. One can't imagine the survival of Rabindranath Tagore's Characters without their environment. Nature is depicted in Tagore's stories to fulfil various functions. As a lyrical poet he could feel the pulse of nature. Nature plays a definite role in the plot of his stories.

Keywords: Sustainable, Ecological, pulse of nature, lyrical quality, affinity with environment, organism, ecosystem, conservation

Introduction

Man has learnt the art of flying in the sky like a bird, swimming in the water like a fish, but he has to learn the art of living on land like a man. The earth is the only place in the universe which is known to sustain life and the only planet endowed with water and the sustainable atmosphere: the two together are known as biosphere, which supports all life. All organisms depend for their survival on the environment in which they live. It encompasses all living and non-living things - air soil and water, man, animals, plants, towns, villages, rivers, mountains, earth etc.

Environment includes all the physical (air, water, land etc.) and biological factors (Plants and animals or what we all technically call flora and fauna). Man is the centre of this ecological web and thus directly responsible for pollution as well. The biosphere consists of both living organism and their nonliving surrounds in an intimate relationships and is made up of a large number of big and small ecological systems powered by the solar energy. The ecosystems are the basic life support systems on this planet and have to be conserved and developed to satisfy human needs and to improve the quality of human life on a sustainable basis, not only for the present but future generations too.

Ecological crisis and environmental degradation are an outcome of human interference and arise out of disturbances of natural conditions. Ancient Indian Culture propounds concrete concept in favour of intraspect as revealed in the following propound Upanishad statement -

"The Universe is the creation of supreme power meant for the benefit of all his creations. Individual species must, therefore, learn to enjoy its benefits by forming a part of the system in close relation with other species. Let not any one species encroach upon the other right."¹

India has a rich heritage of species and genetic strains of Flora and Fauna. Overall 8 percent of world species are found in India. It is estimated that India is tenth among the plant rich countries of the World. India has diversity and its ecosystem consisting of forests, wetlands, deserts, marine areas, etc. and each system supports thousands of species. But India's rich biological diversity is rapidly eroding. More than half his forests are gone, two thirds of its wetlands drained out or polluted, almost all of its dry scrub and grasslands habitat destroyed. No organism can live alone in this world. So all organism (Plants, animals) live together in a community called biological community. The success of this community depends upon its interrelations and interactions with the physical environment such as air, water, light, heat and soil.

Poonam

Lect. in English
Dr. B.R.A. Govt. College
Sriganganagar (Raj.)

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Man is the only organism who can control and influence the atmosphere according to his own needs. This is because he has made a large number of scientific discoveries and inventions due to his intelligence.

Ancient races from Indians of the Vedic age to the native American Indians believed in the unity of man, Nature and God they looked on a supreme God as the creator of the beauty and power of Nature. They believed that the mother earth was the body of the supreme lord. So they lived in great harmony with Nature, respecting all forms of life. Later on mighty empires came up but we always remember that our first in our native land was mother nature. The western idea about Nature has changed considerably in the last few centuries. We have begun to think only of ruling the forces of Nature. The west has come to believe that we live in a hostile world where everything has to be conquered and what man needed has to be forcibly taken from Nature. Indians thought of themselves as part of nature. But the western idea is that the nature only includes lower beings like plants and animals and that man is separate from nature and superior. Science advanced and men's conquest of Nature grew. Suddenly all over the world people began to realize that something was going wrong in a big way. It began to rain less in various parts of the world. This happened because man had been destroying thousands of acres of forests for years. Today the very existence of the earth is threatened by problems of pollution of various kinds.

"Literature is the mirror of society" is a very old dictum but still valid. The world literature since the time immemorial have provide glimpses of environment conducive to socio-political, socio-economic and socio geographic changes. Indian writing in English is essentially a product of the colonial period flowered after independence. *"Essentially a poet, Tagore was much more than a poet as understood in the western sense of the term, as Gandhi was more than politician or patriot. He was a poet in the traditional Indian sense of the word. Kavi, a seer an intermediary between the human and the divine. His genius enriched whatever it touched. Like the sun after which he was named (Rabi-Ravi-Sun) he shed light and warmth on his age, vitalized the mental and moral soil of his land, revealed unknown horizons of thought and spanned that divides the East from the West"*.² Rabindranath Tagore, a man of versatile genius and achievements, was the first Indian poet and writer who gained for modern India a permanent place on the world literary map. My concern in this paper is how Rabindranath Tagore's conception of the short story is the exquisite commingling of character with environment. While Rabindranath Tagore's international reputation rests largely on his poetry, his short stories too have brought him considerable recognition as one of the foremost Indian writers. Perhaps the short story form, on account of its brevity and unity of effect, has served him as a powerful vehicle for conveying his insight into different facets of human experience. His multi-dimensional vision of life is discernible in the

sixty one short stories he has written. In them significant moments in human life are depicted, telescoping man's relationship with man and with environment.

Tagore's short stories have received some critical attention over the years Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta has surveyed them in both the thematic and the technical aspects.³ This survey, however, by its very nature tends to be diffuse to focus on the technique of his short story. C.V. Venugopal makes a brief mention of Tagore's achievement in the context of the Indian short story in English.⁴ G.D. Khanolkar, in biography of Tagore gives us the facts about the birth of the short story in Tagore's writing however it might be profitable to take into account Tagore's own views on the short story form and to analyze a few representative stories in an attempt to assess the extent to which he is able to put into practice his own principles.

As G.D. Khanolkar tells us, Tagore's short stories "took their birth from his peregrinations" (96) through his estates. At Shileida, Patisar or Shahazadpur Tagore would freely mix with the peasant folk and listen to them for hours as confidante. He would record all that he has observed in the simple men during the course of the day. In a letter from shahzadpur he says:

So often I feel I could write lots of little stories lovely ones. I would enjoy writing them sometimes all sorts of feelings flit through my head too many to put into verse. They have to be put into diaries and such like.⁵

In the short stories of Tagore one can find the influence of man, nature and the mysteries of the supernatural. "The pictures of our rural urban lives, disintegration of the old joint family families, family quarrels, conflict in love and affection, conflict between religious superstitions and humanistic values and the final triumph of humanism provide a pageant of the entire Bengal life" (Bandyopadhyay 60).⁶

Tagore's earlier stories contain the themes of village life, which he observed when he visited the villages as land lord of his family estates. As has been said earlier, immediately after his marriage he was sent by his father to Shelidaha to manage the estates there. From this he toured widely in many villages, going about mostly in house boats, surveying the expanse of waters, that is the Padma. Nirmalkumar Sidhanta writes on it:

After years of city life he was now in the midst of the bounties of Nature, with plenty of opportunities of admiring natural scenes and surveying the panorama of rural life. Living here the poet was impressed on the one hand, by the wide expanse of waters and on the other by the unknown human beings who had inhabited the villages for generations and centuries. (Sidhanta, 285)⁷

Nature is depicted in Tagore's stories to fulfill various functions. As a lyrical poet he could feel the pulse of nature. That is why in most of his stories one finds an integral link between man and nature. A true picture of Bengal with all her natural beauties is presented to the readers through the stories. *"The author ponders over the fate of those who live in the midst of this rich nature. Tagore could feel subtle*

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nuances of the beauty of nature and link it with human life" (Basu 105). Tagore uses nature for the creation of a particular mood. This element of nature gives his stories a lyrical quality. In order to convey a mood in a better way Tagore takes either similar or dissimilar phenomena of nature. Human feelings get depth and completeness as the author reveals them through nature. Nature plays a definite role in the plot of his stories. Tagore is realistic in the depiction of nature. "In the stories of Tagore nature often, as in real life, is an unconcerned witness of human drama" (Basu 108)⁸ Unlike Wordsworth, Tagore never tries to make nature poetic or takes it as a shelter from worldly ailments.

Tagore preferred lighter colours. Glaring colours like red, black, yellow were not used in his stories. The characters in his stories are not distinguished men but they create a lasting impression in our minds. Like all the classical works of art, Tagore's stories demand a deeper study from the readers.

These feelings subsequently took the shape of

"Secret Tales" or "Short Stories" and he tells us that "To read them, brings back my travels as a young man along the rivers, and recaptures the happiness I derived in the villages from both man and nature"(99).

The reality that is represented in his works is neither naturalistic crudeness nor sheer poetic fancy. This is made clear by Tagore himself while describing the way he composed short stories during the monsoon when he was somewhat free from the estate work:

I am sitting writing a story, slowly and steadily. The light and shade of the world outside its colors and voices, are mingling in my pen. The world I am fashioning with all its inhabitants, is set about with very sun and rain, this flowing river and its reedy islands, this monsoon sky and this shaded village, this rice field standing so thick in its ever gurgling water. (100)

There is an exquisite commingling of character with environment. This is stated in his letter:

As I sit writing bit by bit a story for Sadhana the lights and shadows and colors of my surroundings mingle with my words. The scenes and characters and events that I am now imagining have sun and rain and river, and the reeds on the river bank, this monsoon sky, this shady village, these rain - nourished happy corn - fields to serve as their background and to give them life and reality.(165)

Concerning the life likeness of his characters Tagore writes from Shileida:

If I do nothing else but write short stories I am happy and I make a few readers happy. The main cause of happiness is that people about whom I write become my companions they are with me when I am confined to my room in the rain, on a sunny day they move about with me on the bright banks of the Padma.⁹

Thus in both the statements Tagore envisages a deep sense of harmony between character and environment. In the short stories of Tagore we find affinity of man with environment. Short

stories like "Subha" and "The auspicious vision" are superb achievements in what Tagore himself says in his letter of the 28th June 1895 concerning the harmony of character and environment¹⁰ The characters of Subha and the dumb girl in "The Auspicious Vision" are a part of the very rhythm of Nature.

The Story of "Subha" rendered in omniscient narration, fully brings out the fusion of character and environment. In the environment of her own family, the dumb Subha feels out of place, a silent weight upon the heart of her parents. This makes her move away from her people and live in her own private world, getting desire to the silent and amiable Nature. The "illimitable loneliness" of the "Silent troubled girl" Subha is the very loneliness of Nature;

Nature, herself at full Moon, like lonely Subha, was looking down on the sleeping earth. Her strong young life beat within her joy and sadness filled her being to its brim, she reached the limits even of her own illimitable loneliness, nay, passed beyond them.¹¹

The conclusion of the story, while it comes with a degree of suddenness to the husband of Subha, does not bring any surprise to the reader. On the contrary, it enhances the feeling that Subha, the dumb companion of the cow, the goats, and the kitten, cannot, after all fit into the artificial world of the city-bred man. Subha should remain the darling of Nature, a part of Nature's eternal loneliness.

"The Auspicious Vision" is the story of a dumb village girl confronted by a sophisticated young man, Kantichandra. This story like "Subha" depicts character in relation to environment and the tension or absence of it, consequent upon reversal of situation. Kantichandra goes to the swamp of Nydighi for hunting and notices a village maiden whose "Beauty and a rare freshness as if she had just come from Vishwakarma's workshop(50)". Having been captivated by the beauty of the girl, he goes to the house of her father Nabin Banerji and asks the old Brahmin to give Sudha in marriage to him. By an accident, Kantichandra mistakes the dumb girl for Sudha her sister and finds himself married to the sister instead. He realizes the deception only at the time of the "Auspicious Vision" in the course of the wedding ceremony. However, on knowing that he really has not married the dumb girl for whom he approached Nabin, he feels "a sigh of intense relief, as of escape from calamity".(58)

Thus Kantichandra suddenly removes her from his mind. What was once a blissful vision of beauty, vanishes from his mind. But the beauty of the dumb girl is a part of the eternal beauty of Nature. She is but "The companion of all the animals and birds of the locality".(58) Hence she has to remain a part of her environment.

An interesting short story depicting both human relationship and environment is "The Postmaster". The postmaster, a city bred man, "felt like a fish out of water in this remote village". As a silver lining to the dark cloud of this isolation, comes his association with Ratan. When he is ill, Ratan nurses him back to health. While he revolts to the

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environment of Ulapur, the only source of his peace is Ratan. When the boat carrying the postmaster moves on the river, he intensely feels the relationship between the natural and the human.

The grief stricken force of village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of mother Earth herself (168)

Within the brief space of the short story Tagore is able to achieve super harmony of character and environment, Characters like Subha and Kanti's bride in "*The Auspicious Vision*" are a part of the very rhythm of the natural life out once the character is exposed to an alien environment, there is breakdown of communication; Subha and the dumb girl in "*The Auspicious Vision*" bring out the closeness of the human world with the natural. In the short stories Tagore tried to show how the characters are out of tune when they are away from their natural environment.

The importance of clean environment has found ample mention in the Vedas and scriptures. Rivers, lakes, oceans, trees, forests, mountains and even animals and birds have been treated as holy and their significance has been emphasized by advocating their worship. Naturally the object of worship has to be kept clean by all means. Environment protection is not the responsibility of the government alone. All sections of society have to participate in this endeavour. The role of every literary writer as well as individual in environment protection is of great importance because if every individual contributes substantially the effect will be visible not only at the community, city, state or national level but also at the global level. It is the responsibility of each individual to protect the Earth and provide conducive environment for itself and innumerable other species which evolved on the Earth. Social and individual consciousness if carefully graded is a step to transformation.

Man, the dominant organism of Earth, has stood apart from the interaction of living things, yet, as he is discovering he is inextricably tied to his environment. The air he breathes, the water he drinks, the food he consumes, the industrial and forest products he uses and throws away bind him to the functions of local global ecosystems. If we want to adopt some concrete steps in the issue of environmental protection, the forest policy instead of being a revenue earning instrument, should be directed towards development of perennial forests, not to be used for commercial purposes but for conserving the soil and water. "Conservation" is the management of human use of the biosphere benefit to present generations, while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations whereas "development" is the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and nonliving resources to satisfy human needs and to improve the quality of human life.

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