

An Ecofeminist Reading of Tagore's *Red Oleanders*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a type of feminism that attempts to examine the relationship between woman's oppression and environmental exploitation in a male-dominated society. It also tackles the environmental problems and the factors that lead to the destruction of nature and the exploitation of woman. Ecofeminists reject the patriarchal system that subordinates both women and nature, causing both to suffer. They try to protect the environment and woman from man's tyranny. This paper aims at tracing aspects of ecofeminism in Ravindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. Tagore (1861-1941) is an Indian writer, poet, and dramatist. His play, *Raktakarabi*, is also known as *Red Oleanders*. It can be read from an ecofeminist perspective because nature and the main protagonist, Nandini, mirror each other. The play depicts Nandini's struggle to free nature from the tyranny of the king and his men who caused much harm to nature due to his thirst for power and greed. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight the exploitation of nature, and the oppression of woman by patriarchal society as presented in Tagore's play, *Red Oleanders*. Moreover, it investigates how far

the woman heroine conserves nature from the King, who is the main reason for all the town's problems.

Key Words: Development, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Ecofeminism, Environment, Hierarchy, Patriarchy.

Ecofeminism is a combination of the prefix eco- and the noun feminism. John K. Davies in "Society and Economy" states: "the prefix eco- represents ecology and is derived from the Greek word "Oikos", which means family, family's property, or house, in other words, the Earth" (Davies 290). Consequently, the term ecofeminism indicates the connection between woman and nature. Françoise d'Eaubonne was the first French feminist who coins the term ecofeminism in her book, *Feminism or Destruction* (1974). She was a feminist activist, and her works advocated for the elimination of all social injustices.

Chen Ling in "The Background and Theoretical Origin of Ecofeminism" indicates: "The term, Ecofeminism or Ecological Feminism, was first proposed in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Feminism or Destruction (Le Féminisme ou la mort)*. She called on women to lead ecological revolution and establish new relationships between humanity and nature as well as man and woman" (Ling 104). Consequently, Françoise d'Eaubonne wants women to start a revolution to save the earth. She makes a wake-up call and establishes new connections between humans and their environment, also between males and females.

Ecofeminism focuses on feminist and ecological perspectives. The feminist perspective focuses on gender discrimination and the oppression of women in society, while the ecological perspective focuses on the way humans interact with the environmental

elements of the ecosystem. The relationship between man and nature needs to be an integrated one rather than one of conflict and confrontation. Greta Gaard summarizes the basic characteristics of ecofeminism in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993). She states that:

In nature, everything is vital, a bio-centered view should be followed instead of the western anthropocentric, human beings should serve for nature, not vice versa, dualities such as male/female or culture/nature should be abolished so as not to declare one dominant part above others, reposition of male and female is important, the power and authority of the patriarchy should be distributed equally in the society so that oppression and exploitation can be prevented and the process of change should be visible in daily. (Gaard 20)

This quotation highlights the basic characteristics of ecofeminism that are: everything in our life is important, man should save nature, rejection of the western anthropocentric, elimination of dualism, equality between all organisms and preventing oppression and exploitation.

Ecofeminism explains the oppression of woman in terms of parallel oppression and exploitation of the environment since the misuse of nature mirrors woman's subjection. The patriarchal system enslaves woman and nature. The Patriarchy is a social system. In this system, the father or the oldest male member controls and dominates the family. In all ages, there has been a kind of patriarchal domination. This means that women are controlled by men who always aim at subordinating them. This perspective creates discrimination between men and women. Maureen Devine, an ecofeminist, in *Woman and Nature Literary Reconceptualization* argues: "woman is victim not only of individual men, but of patriarchal power structure that treat women and the environment as objects and within these power

structures both become victims” (Devine 52). This reveals that both woman and nature are victims in the patriarchal society.

Ecofeminism reacts against patriarchal and capitalist societies. It rejects the sufferings of women and nature at the hands of wicked men, so it refuses all forms of oppression. It calls for the liberation of women and nature. Patrick M. Curry claims that for ecofeminism, "the same habitual structures of thought, feeling and action that devalue and harm women also harm nature" (Curry 95). Thus, ecofeminism declares that the actions which oppress women are the same actions that destruct and damage nature.

Ecofeminism rejects the traditional representations of nature as pure, female, and suitable for exploitation. Ecofeminists study the exploitation and attacks on the environment and its resources by developed countries in the name of globalization and development. Nowadays, globalization and industrialization have a great impact on nature. Sandip Kumar Mishra declares in “Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature”: "During the last few decades, environment has posed a great threat to human society as well as the mother earth" (Mishra 168).

Mother Earth is suffering, natural resources are disappearing, forests are declining, many species of animals are on the threshold of extinction, and women are struggling. Therefore, the exploitation of natural resources has brought us to the verge of disaster. The rainforests are being chopped down, fossil fuels are rapidly disappearing, the seasonal cycle is in chaos, ecological disasters are becoming more common throughout the world, and our ecosystem is on the verge of collapse. As a result, when nature dies, humans lose their life support system. Thus, man’s misuse of science and technology led to the deterioration and exploitation of nature. Ian G. Barbour writes in *Technology, Environment, and Human Values*:

Throughout history, science and technology often have been accepted as the liberator from famine, disease and poverty. It has been celebrated as the source of material progress and human fulfillment. However, later there was a protest against science and technology saying that technology jeopardizes human and environmental values. Many consider that technology is a threat and something that pervades all areas of human life. (Barbour 44)

Thus, science and technology are the main factors that led to the current ecological crisis. The development in the fields of science and technology has dominated man's life. Consequently, man lost his freedom due to development and progress. Ecocriticism is against the deterioration of nature.

Ecofeminism is a sub-branch of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between the environment and literature. It asks how nature is represented in literary works. It is a new direction in the study of literature and culture. Harper Collins in *Dictionary of Environmental Science* points out: ecocriticism "has emerged as a modern ecological literary study and is now acknowledged as a vital critical approach. It has come to mean the application of ecology which is defined as the branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organism and their environment including other organisms"(Collins 80). Thus, the study of the relationship between creatures and nature is called ecology.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm are the founders of this literary school. One of the key publications that presented ecocriticism to the field of literary criticism was their collection of articles, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). In this book, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm explain ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). In the

United States of America, this critical approach is known as ecocriticism, whereas in Britain it is called green studies.

Ecocriticism shifts the focus of critics from "what happens inside the psyche of the protagonists of literary works to what happens in nature and in the physical environment in general. It moves from the inner to the outer world, and it adopts an extrinsic approach rather than an intrinsic one. It moves what had seemed mere 'setting' ... from the critical margins to the critical centre" (Barry 259). This means that the approach of Ecocritics is ecocentric, which means appreciating nature for its own sake, not anthropocentric, evaluating nature for its physical and material benefits, like other literary approaches. Furthermore, "it questions and challenges the long-standing and deeply rooted Western cultural tradition of anthropocentric attitudes." (Barry 262).

Consequently, the anthropocentric perspective demonstrates that man is the only representative of mankind, while the ecocentric emphasizes nature. From western perspectives, nature is seen as an object of exploitation. The place of women in the natural order within this system is very close to nature. Thus, patriarchal society puts woman and nature at the end of the hierarchical structure.

Ecofeminists believe that in pre-patriarchal societies, women were appreciated. They believe that during this time, there was no competition, but there was co-operation. Woman had a great position in society. Societies were more women-centered. They were respected. Vandana Shiva is a famous Indian ecofeminist. In her book, *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide* (1994), she states: "Ecofeminism rationalizes the point that women should rise against the male destruction of the feminine and the nature which are both seen as one and take action to restore everything in its natural place and protect nature for this is the only way to preserve survival of the Earth" (Shiva xvii-xviii). Ecofeminism rejects all kinds of oppression, men over women as well as culture over nature.

Feminism is the second part of ecofeminism. Georgina Ashworth defines feminism in *A Diplomacy of the Oppressed – New Directions in International Feminism* as "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family. It is a conscious action taken by women and men to change this situation" (Ashworth 1). Thus, feminism makes women aware of their exploitation and asks them to take action and reject this exploitation and oppression. In *Modern feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, Maggie Humm defined feminism as:

Feminism is a significant movement challenging the enormous patriarchal system by defending the rights of woman in the world. The French word *féminisme* stands for a belief in the form of a theory striving to extinguish and finish sexual differences and gendered roles in the discoursed society. (Humm 1)

Feminism rejects the patriarchal system and demands for woman's liberation everywhere around the world.

The main purpose of ecofeminism is to eradicate the harmful consequences of all anthropocentric acts conducted generally by men and to revive natural peacefulness and social equality on the earth. Karren Warren has a great role in the philosophy of ecofeminism. She indicated the four aspects of ecofeminism in "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections" (1987). She states:

- (i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature;
- (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature;
- (iii) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and
- (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective. (Warren 4-5)

Warren tackles the four aspects of ecofeminism. He argues that women's oppression and natural oppression are linked to one another. Karen J. Warren in *Ecological feminist philosophies* (1996) indicates that "the logic of domination is the source of the domination of both women and nature...The subordinate or the inferior group lacks some characteristics or qualities that the dominant or the superior group has "(Warren 44).

Ecofeminists reject the irrational behavior of man towards woman and nature. Ecofeminism wants all people to become protectors, producers and caretakers of natural resources and not the killers, polluters and consumers of the earth. This damage would be reduced if humans acted in harmony with nature and utilized the resources only for fulfilling their needs and necessities. Man has an endless desire to oppose nature to fulfill all his desires. He should only fulfill his necessary desires. Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive; Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) states:

Nature and women are turned into passive objects, to be used and exploited for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable desires of alienated man. From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being 'resources' in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment. (Shiva 5)

Shiva rejects the concept of development that leads to the destruction and exploitation of women and nature. She says that the concept of development is "actually a maldevelopment where women and nature are viewed as the other, the passive non-self. Thus, development is a project of domination and destruction of violence and subjugation of dispossession and the dispensability of both women and nature" (Shiva 1988: 9).

From an ecofeminism perspective, capitalism is an economic system in which man achieves capital goals. He does not care about woman who has a great role in his life and helps him to attain his goal. Therefore, ecofeminism criticizes globalization and

capitalism, which lead to exploitation and destruction. Thus, capitalism affects woman badly and also leads to the exploitation of nature. "Ecofeminists argue that women, and children, are hurt most severely by this process, as women receive no equivalent position of power or self-determination in a patriarchal capitalist economy to what they had in a subsistence economy" (qtd in Kroll and Robbins 255).

The traditional image of woman is portrayed as weak, suppressed, oppressed, submissive and silent who cannot call for her rights. But this image is changing and writers begin to write about a strong woman who asks for her rights. This new type of woman can challenge all obstacles that she faces in society to achieve her goals. Neeru Tandon writes in *Feminine Psyche, A Post Modern Critique* that "The influence of feminist movement during the 19th century made deep impact on the status of woman. ... As a result, the women have begun stepping out of the traditional boundaries. Breaking the traditional image of womanhood, they are succeeding to reveal a very different image" (Tandon 219). The new image of woman has changed society's perspective towards her. Now, society believes that woman has social needs such as man-woman equality. She should have a higher position in society.

Now women are ready to rebel against all the vices responsible for their unjust exploitation, inflecting their place and honor in the Indian society. Today they are confident enough to wage a war against the social system which is adopting a diplomatic approach towards the equality of rights for men and women (Tandon 219).

There are many Indian dramatists who, through their works, present the rebellious image of women and break the barriers of the old image. They also highlight the relationship between women and the environment. One of the major Indian dramatists who wrote about the modern concept of womanhood is Ravindranath Tagore.

Tagore, in his plays, depicts woman as a strong character who has a great role in society.

Ravindranath Tagore is a famous Indian poet and dramatist. Kalyan Sen Gupta in *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* states: "Tagore wrote an extremely large number of essays and books. In these works, he manifests his deep socio-political, as well as spiritual, convictions, and in effect presents us with a whole philosophy and vision of life and the world" (Gupta 5). In 1913, he became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature for his wonderful poem "Gitanjali." M. Kalaiaraasan writes in "Concept of Machine and Human Freedom in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Waterfall* and *Red Oleanders*": Tagore "was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer and painter, Tagore has given a new dimension to the gamut of Indian writing in English translation" (Kalaiaraasan 1).

Tagore has become one of India's greatest writers who tackles the relationship between woman and nature in his plays. Tagore's plays depict the power of male domination and examine the forms of oppression that result in the deterioration of women's lives and the destruction of nature. Thus, his plays reflect women's reaction to the destruction of nature and the tyranny of males. Tagore criticizes his society and the dangers caused by environmental destruction and materialism. He believes that the ecological and feminist issues can be resolved by adopting a new ecological theory that recognizes humans as essential creatures and women as equal to men. Tagore presents the earth as a caregiver and a life-supporter and highlights the possible role of women in resolving ecological problems through living in harmony with the earth. Women can be considered as the safeguards of nature and its resources.

Tagore, in his plays, tries to expose and solve the social and political problems in his society. Sushil Kumar Mishra writes in "Feminism in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore" about Tagore's heroines:

His female protagonists are subversive as they defy the accepted norms of the society and present women confident in their choices of life that they themselves make. ... They are shown self-sufficient and self-reliant. They remain victorious by proving their faith, assertiveness and strength to achieve their purposes but still they are full of love, compassion and motherly care for humanity. All these women can be role models for the modern women. Tagore is highly successful in redefining tradition through the portrayal of his women characters who certainly present an antithesis of the conventional model of women. (Mishra 6-7)

He shows the emergence of the new woman who questions norms, makes decisions about her own life and even attempts to change her society and her culture. He realizes that women prepare themselves to establish a new community and a new way of life all over the world. He aims at achieving women's liberation and equality with men. His "role in the liberation of women was a determining one. He uncovered the dilemma of women and argued for their independence" (Pal and Rath 6). Thus, the new woman doesn't submit to man's domination, but she resists it to exist in a healthy society. Thus, one of Tagore's most significant contributions to society might be considered his depiction of women. Tagore desires to restore order in society and create peace by returning men to nature. He wishes to create harmony between woman and man to have a healthy world.

Tagore's play *Raktakarabi*, is also known as *Red Oleanders*. The play is about a modern woman, Nandhini, who fights the king of the town and his men because they exploit nature and take its treasure. This play can be read from an ecofeminist perspective because nature and Nandini mirror each other. Tagore's play depicts Nandini's struggle to free nature from the tyranny of the king and his men, who caused much harm to nature due to the

king's thirst for power and greed. Therefore, *Red Oleanders* introduces nature's struggle with modernity and how the woman heroine preserves nature from the King. S. Ravindar and A. Cruz Thivagarar in "Rabindranath Tagore's Criticism on Utilitarian Approach of The Society and The Universal Value" indicates that

The play "Red Oleanders" is first written in Bengali language under the title "RaktaKarabhi". Tagore conveys the message that the Utilitarian approach and 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. (Ravindar and Thivagarar 306)

The king of the town, Yaksha, treats the workers as slaves. He orders them to excavate gold from the earth. The Raja or the King is a wicked person who abuses nature and all human resources to get the gold. People seem to forget the true happiness and purity of nature because the king transforms everybody in the town into human machines to seek wealth. Workers are therefore obliged to dig hard in the mines to fulfill the King's hunger. The wise man, Bishu, says about the thirst of the King:

Chandra: Brother, they've hoarded such heaps of gold, can't they stop digging now?

Bishu: There's always an end to things of need, no doubt; so we stop when we've had enough to eat. But we don't need drunkenness, therefore there's no end to it. These nuggets are the drink—the solid drink—of our Gold King. Don't you see? (*Red Oleanders* 48)

Bishu proves that the king's desire for gold does not end. The search for gold creates pain for the workers, the King, and the motherland. One of the play's key characters, the professor, portrays the tunnel diggers as "insects in a hole in this solid toil" (*Red Oleanders* 8), who "creeping out of the holes like worms, with loads of things of need" (*Red Oleanders* 5). Thus, he depicts the diggers as insects that have loads. The diggers are dissatisfied with their digging because they are exploited and exploit nature. They are also miserable since they are detached from their regular lifestyles. Here, from the perspective of ecofeminism, the play reveals the oppression and exploitation of nature. In the play, Tagore shows that all people are unpleasant because of this exploitation.

The people are unaware of the fact that they are exploiting nature. They plunder the wealth of earth for their king. The earth keeps all its treasure and it is not right to kidnap its wealth. The king treats people as mere machines for the productions of gold. The workers are numbered as prisoners. The slave people are made banish all life's sweetness from the place. Exercising a complete control over his people, the king heartlessly exploits Nature for more gold and outrages Nature in the process. (Kalaiaraasan 2-3)

The king desires to gather gold from the mines of the earth. With inhuman laws, he dominates his workers and compels them to obey him by using violence and power. Diggers are dehumanized and degraded, much like "the caged birds" (*Red Oleanders* 34). Therefore, they are like slaves. Thus, the king regards them as merely gold-producing machinery.

Like machines, they are driven by the king and his hierarchies consisting of governor, the priest and the professor. The weak community accepts the domination of the strong. Until Nandhini's visit to the place the workmen do not know that there is an alternative to the way they are living. By her action,

Nandhini changes the mind of the tyrannical king and makes him join hands with her at the end. She crushed the machines through her love and care. (Kalaiaraasan 3)

Thus, Nandini comes to the town to free its people from their king. The Professor describes Nandini as "The sunlight gleaming through the forest thickets surprises nobody, but the light that breaks through a cracked wall is quite a different thing. In Yaksha Town, you are this light that startles". (*Red Oleanders* 6). His description indicates that she tries to raise people's consciousness of enslavement and liberation. She fights alone just to achieve her objectives. Thus, Nandini refuses the slavery system and raises awareness among the people of Yaksha Town. Those people are not conscious of what occurs in nature.

Nandini: It puzzles me to see a whole city thrusting its head underground, groping with both hands in the dark. You dig tunnels in the underworld and come out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past.

Professor: The Jinn of that dead wealth we invoke. If we can enslave him the whole world lies at our feet.

Nandini: Then again, you hide your king behind a wall of netting. Is it for fear of people finding out that he's a man?

Professor: As the ghost of our dead wealth is fearfully potent so is our ghostly royalty, made hazy by this net, with its inhuman power to frighten people. (*Red Oleanders* 6-7)

This conversation highlights to what extent people in the town have become slaves to the king. They use both hands to search for treasure. Here, Tagore demonstrates the exploitation and

oppression of nature and workers. Tagore wants to raise awareness of how slavery changes and oppresses individuals. Similarly, the king oppresses Nandhini by preventing her from meeting her beloved, Ranjan. She is a beautiful lady who has a free spirit. The king's words reflect his brutal nature. He tells Nandhini:

Voice: I long savagely to prove to you how cruel I am.
Have you never heard moans from inside my room?

Nandini: I have. Whose moaning was it?

Voice: The hidden mystery of life, wrenched away by me, bewails its torn ties. To get fire from a tree you have to burn it. Nandini, there is fire within you too, red fire. One day I shall burn you and extract that also.

Nandini: Oh, you are cruel! (*Red Oleanders* 88-89)

This conversation shows that, as the king is cruel to nature, he is also cruel to Nandini. Thus, the king oppresses nature, the workers, and Nandini. Consequently, the King is trying to show his strength because he wants to oppress Nandini. This appears when he informs her that, if necessary, he may forcefully explore her beauty. Hence, this demonstrates his aggressive character, as he desires to grab everything by violence. Nandini's love for Ranjan is frustrated by the ambition of the King. The king informs Nandini that he wishes to put Ranjan in the dust.

Nandini: I shall go and sit near the gate of your fort.

Voice: Why?

Nandini: When Ranjan comes he'll see I am waiting for him.

Voice: I should like to tread hard on Ranjan and grind him in the dust (*Red Oleanders* 85).

This dialogue presents the cruelty of the king. He wishes to grind Ranjan to oppress Nandini because she adores him. The king cannot understand the concept of love except in terms of possession. Tagore shows great compassion for women, so he highlights their pains, difficulties, and sacrifices. Thus, Rabindranath Tagore believes that women suffer because of patriarchal Indian society and women are not given equal rights in society. Tagore constantly exposes the pathetic condition of women in social life in his literary work. He investigates how women struggle to achieve their rights in Indian society.

Ecofeminists believe that woman is closer to nature than man. In Tagore's plays, woman has a close relationship with nature. Thus, this connection appears from the opening of the play. Nandini attaches to the flowers, especially the red oleanders. She loves flowers, through which she can enjoy the beauty of nature. Her hair and neck are wrapped in red oleanders. For Nandini, the red oleander represents love, emotion, power, strength, charm, and nature. She tells the professor: "Ranjan sometimes calls me Red Oleander. I feel that the colour of his love is red, -that red I wear on my neck, on my breast, on my arms." (*Red Oleanders* 14). The red oleander flower and Nandhini represent liberation. Nandhini frees the workers from slavery.

Nandhini and the red oleander flower symbolize 'freedom'. The oleander is compared to Nandhini Nandhini challenges the beauty and love in a world dominated by mere money and powerless values. With her fearless love, care and belief in freedom, she is capable to make men out of slaves and set back brute authority. In the opening scene, the blossoming of red oleander symbolizes freedom and death at the end, Nandhini's red oleander bracelet found in dust, is freedom itself. (Kalaiaraasan 4)

This shows the connection between woman and nature. Tagore connects Nandini with flowers to show her connection to

nature. Ecofeminism argues that if women and nature unite, they will be released from their submissive condition. In *New Woman/New Earth*, Rosemary Radford Ruether states that

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movements with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society. (Ruether 204)

Nandini decides to protect nature. She is responsible for freeing nature from the king. She realizes that the king's goal is to exploit and oppress her and nature. Tagore depicts Nandini as a strong character, but she is oppressed by the king who all the time tries to show his cruelty to her. When he kills her lover, he oppresses her. Therefore, she decides to sacrifice herself to liberate all the villagers and herself from the king's tyranny.

It can, therefore, be argued that Tagore's *Red Oleanders* can be read from an ecofeminist perspective. The present study has reflected the cruel exploitation of Nature, as well as the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, it has highlighted the role of women in revolting against male oppression, and in protecting ecological categories from exploitation.

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