

Nature and Self Reflection in Tagore's *The Crescent Moon*

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Abstract

To perceive the human world in co-existence with nature and thereby to nurture freedom and constructive processes we need to rethink the transformative literature of Rabindranath Tagore, who explored an environment conscious, almost ecocritical vision of human existence inspiring a “deep ecological” sense of identification with the immediate environment. Tagore’s philosophy of nature with its wide range and variety reifies the real possibility of ‘living, learning and uniting oneself with the “organic wholeness of nature”. The relationship between the man and nature remains interwoven in his writings promoting an intimate, interdependent relationship revealing “the deepest harmony that existed between man and his surroundings”. The paper dealing with Tagore’s simplest collection of poetry *The Crescent Moon* in particular lays emphasis on the relationship of the mother and the child developing out of his traumatic experiences of childhood namely losing his mother quite at an early age and his subsequent identification with nature as an ‘alternative mother-principle’ Nature confers a psychological closure by connecting him with *Mother Nature* (my italics) “mother nature you have taken me in your affectionate embrace and have begun to sing your imposing music to me rich in harmony and melody”. Nature removed from the crudity of its daily entanglements activated within him a spirit of companionship and receptivity revealing to him “the deepest harmony that existed between him and his surroundings”.

Keywords- Mother- nature, symbiotic-coexistence, alternative-mother principle.

What is beautiful is beneficent:
O goddess Nature, in your beauteous world
No harm can ever happen. – Tagore

Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon*, one of his simplest and personally meaningful works emphasize the tender and the symbiotic relationship dwelling between the mother and the child. This relationship remains the central focus, particularly harping on the traumatic experiences in a child’s internal world upon losing his mother at an early childhood age. The child’s initial attempt to mitigate his eternal loss reflects to a series of mourning reactions, finally reconciling his loss in an attempt to create an ‘alternative world.’ This ‘alternative world’ may be Nature which relieves him, at least temporarily, from the pressures and involvements of his ordinary practical pursuits. Nature, removed from its mundane entanglements provides ‘for him’-an

‘alternative’ or one might say a ‘phenomenological’ nature to sustain his “soul in her arms without missing a particle of its light, its air, its scenery, its warmth and its shelter”

Tagore’s writing consists of imagery and unique illusion. Even though Tagore’s diction is written in the words of a fictionalized self, the recurrent emphasis through many of his poems and the depth of the inner feelings bear a replica of his real life- experiences. Losing his mother at a tender age made him suffer unusual deprivation in midst of wealth and cultural opulence. Contextual reference can be drawn from Tagore’s own recollection of his mother’s death:

“When my mother died, I was quite a child. She had been ailing for quite a long time when her malady had taken a fatal turn. She used all along to sleep on a separate bed in the same room with us. Then in the course of her illness she was taken for a boat trip on the river, and on her return a room on the third floor of the inner apartments was set apart for her. On the night she died, we were fast asleep in our downstairs. At what hour I cannot tell, our nurse ran in weeping and crying “Oh, my little ones, you have lost all!” My sister-in-law rebuked her, and led away, to save us the sudden shock at dead of night. Half awakened by her words, I felt my heart sink within me, but could not make out what had happened. When in the morning we were told of her death. I could not realize all that it meant for me.”

It was only years later that Tagore wrote a poem about his mother’s death. “The Home”, the first poem in *The Crescent Moon*, which speaks of his heartbreak at having lost her with a dendrolatrous image of earth’s motherland embracing his soul:

The Home

I stopped for a moment in my lonely way
under the starlight, and saw spread before
me the darkened earth surrounding with her arms
countless homes furnished with cradles
and beds, mothers’ hearts and evening lamps,
and young lives glad with a gladness that
knows nothing of its value for the world.

M. Wolfenstein in this regards emphasizes that the “the denial and acknowledgement of the parent’s death is obliterated to a great extent when individuals often make a career of acting out with other symbolic repetitions compensating for the loss of their dear ones”.

These responses include marked increase in self-identification with an idealization of the dead parent and unconscious fantasies of an on-going relationship or reunion with the deceased one. The images of the moon, oceans, stars, flowers and clouds form a constant leit-motif and reappear in Tagore’s poetry. He tries to relocate his painful emotional detachment from his loved mother by mitigating the energy to various objects of nature. He places an unrealistic urge to seek the omnipresence of his mother’s loving and comforting voice in the *champa* flower depicting his central fantasy of transformation of the object:

The Champa Flower

when after your bath, with wet hair spread
on your shoulders, you walked through the

shadow of the *champa tree* to the little court
 where you say your prayers, you would notice
 the scent of the flower, but not know that it
 came from me.

Tagore transcended his psychic pain of “infinite loneliness” and despair through his intense modes of identification with nature’s objects, enabling him to relinquish the yearning of the lost object. Instead of breaking the stasis or trying to escape from loneliness, he activated it as condition of companionship and receptivity with nature. His main intention was to evoke a close union with nature by writing of the flowering plants as they bow to the winds, of the trees scattering their blossoms and of the rain falling tip-tap flooding the river beds. The magical chant of the nonsensical words “*bristi pade tapur tupur, nadi elo ban*” (the rain falls tip-tap, the river gets flooded) transported him on the “pair of wings” to a world of transcendental beauty “revealing the deepest harmony that exists between him and his surroundings.” The simple joy of sounds that the nonsense nursery rhymes convey, captures deliberately the reverberating ecstasy of a child’s innocent chanting of the nonsensical rhythmic expressions.. Tagore was much influenced by the British Romantic poets as well as by the sights, sounds and traditions of the Bengal country side. Suchismita Sen in “Tagore’s Lokashatiya: The Oral Tradition in Bengali Children’s Rhymes” states that “Tagore’s interest in ‘naïve and childish poems’ stems out from his empathy with the English Romantics. Tagore’s attitude to childhood is certainly similar to the adulation of the child initiated as a cultural movement by Wordsworth in his famous quote “the child is the father of the man”. Tagore praises both the purity of the child as well as the Platonic essence of pristine innocence of childhood:

“If one thinks about it, one realizes that there is nothing as old as a child. Adults have been deeply influenced by time, place and culture. But the child has remained the same for the last hundred thousand years”.

Tagore suffered from unusual deprivation in the middle of wealth and cultural flamboyancy of his family. With no mother to protect him, the servants in charge of him tried to keep his movements restricted within a circle drawn on the ground. Reared under the “servocracy” of poor and ignorant servants who all treated him abusively, the child longed for the open space “my heart rose in rebellion against an arrangement where there was no tinge of color and no play of life”, alienating an individual from nature. In accordance with the Tagorean perspective the child often served as models for the adults and was displayed as monkeys to be trained. The adults wished for the child’s mind a “world that is lifeless, promoting dull conformity to mechanical routines and coercive punishments.” In their attempt to “civilize the non-civilized they beat out their thirst for color, music and movement of life.” In the poem “Baby’s World”, thus the speaker speaks:

I wish I could travel by the road that crosses Baby’s mind, and out beyond all bounds;
 Where messengers run errands for no cause between the kingdoms of kings of no history;
 Where Reason makes kites of her laws and flies them, and Truth sets Facts free from its fetters”.

The wonderful line “Where Reason makes kites of her own laws and flies them, and Truth sets Fact free from its fetters” expresses the rebellion against the logical progression of authoritative discourse. The child-nature revolts against such domineering “with all power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment.” This world of self-fashioned expression “where messengers run errands for no cause between the kingdoms of kings of no history” exists in a psychological state that precedes the accession of children to escape the unquestionable strangle of the harsh realities and authoritative adult world. Tagore ends the volume *The Crescent Moon* with a poem called “The Last Bargain.” “The Last Bargain” expresses, perhaps, the debt his poetry owes to the inspiration of nature:

The sun glistened on the sand, and the sea waves broke waywardly.

A child sat playing with shells.

He raised his head and seemed to know me, and said, ‘I hire you with nothing.’

From thenceforward that bargain struck in child's play made me a free man.

Thus taking a sheet of paper “to make a boat with” the child transcends the realms of reality to dream a way of accessing the freedom of the outside world.

According to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, when the child enters the world of imagination, he revolts against the adult world of cruelty and competition where the adults “clamour and fight, [they] doubt and despair and they know no end to their wranglings.” The capability of children to escape the unquestionable realities is an attempt to perceive the world not as a set of discrete identifiable objects, but rather an acceptance of unconditional world of creative-imagination. From his earlier days Tagore loved the outdoors-freedom, greenery and sunshine as “hiding its last gold like a miser.” He would delightfully spy outside the “charmed magic casements opening in the foam of perilous seas in the fairy lands forlorn.” His intense ‘yearning and longing’ for reconciliation with the outer world remained untranslatable like “a boy’s shrill voice into that sky, travers[ing] the dark, unseen, leaving the track of his song across the hush of the evening.” Viewed from the psychoanalytic perspective J. Bowlby stated that Tagore’s intense ‘yearning and longing’ evolved as an important reactionary phase in context to the series of strict restrictions and losses incurred upon him:

that we were not prisoners for ever within a solid stone wall of life was the thought which unconsciously kept coming to mind.

Recurrent denial of the objects he cared for and loved at his childhood caused his repression and mourning to be activated. It is important to note that in his poem “Sympathy”, it is the child Tagore who deprives his fantasized mother of the chance to hold him, rather than himself being deprived of her affectionate coaxing and cajoling. His sentence “I will never let you take me into your arms again” is a reversal of his enormous sense of emotional detachment with his mother, mingled with desolation and intense yearning for re-union. To reprimand the expressions of his angry strivings and to recover the object lost he created infantile images of his mother with whom he enjoyed episodes of truant pranks:

The *Champa* Flower

“Where have you been, you naughty Child?”

“I won’t tell you mother.” That’s what
you and I would say then.

The loss of an object promoted a breakthrough of massive amounts of objectless libido of traumatic intensity within him. Fantasy conjured in the world of nature enabled Tagore as a child to experience a gradual decathexis of the lost object. Nature revealed to him “all spots which display a special beauty or splendor.” She provided him the source of freedom, reunion and the merging of his “consciousness by growing with and growing into the surroundings.” For Tagore, nature becomes ‘internalized’, as a thing of joy and was not viewed as a casual mechanism to be investigated by science and harnessed by technology to meet the demands. Rather it remained essential for him to hear “the welcome music of the home” and to feel his place in the harmony of nature’s music:

The Home

I stopped for a moment in my lonely way
 under the starlight, and saw spread before
 me the darkened earth surrounding with her
 arms countless homes furnished with cradles
 and beds, mothers’ hearts and evening lamps,
 and young lives glad with a gladness that
 Knows nothing of its value for the world.

A close study of Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon* reveals his eco-poetic consciousness embracing the real experiences of living and uniting oneself with the organic wholeness of nature. Tagore celebrates the natural harmony and human connectedness with nature like a symphony “mingling the voices of a stormy day with the tumult of delight and enchantment satisfying the pleasurable senses of human beings. Nature to him is an antidote to his melancholic mood “kissing poetic thoughts every moment”. Tagore’s nature is a tranquil world, promoting sustainability and harmony. The symbiotic co-existence of man and nature promotes an ecological vision for a better world. His sensitivity attached to natural places and his varied ways of encountering and responding to nature at different life stages stretches beyond the boundaries of his aesthetic appreciation and remains an “inevitable object containing a ground of delight for all men.”

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