

Rabindranath Tagore's *Mukta- Dhara*- An Ecofeminist Reading

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Abstract

The paper attempts to read Rabindranath Tagore's play, *Mukta- Dhara*, from an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism recognizes the interconnection between nature and women and protests against the capitalist patriarchal domination of nature and women and advocates for the sustainable development of the society. The play exhorts for the liberation of Mother Nature, by freeing a water resource, which is bound by a dam built across it.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, nature, women, capitalist patriarchy, domination, liberation.

Rabindranath Tagore has been a visionary and prophetic writer, who has foreseen matters ahead of his times, and has warned beforehand, the consequences, which may happen as a result of the inadvertent management of resources by the human beings. Tagore's short play *Mukta- Dhara* is such a prophetic play, which warns the humanity, about the dangers of inhumane industrialization and technological revolution, which Tagore has feared, will bring disaster and annihilation to the whole world. The playwright has foreseen the immediacy and urgency to protect the nature and the natural world from all manipulation and exploitation. He equates the status of the nature to that of the women and exhorts the need to protect the nature from the capitalist and imperialist clutches and domination of patriarchal hegemony. This is evident in his play *Mukta- Dhara*.

Mukta- Dhara, as the title of the play indicates, is about the liberation of a water resource from the confines of a dam, built across it. The water source which flows from the mountainous Uttarakut to the valleys of Shiv- tarai, has been the sole support for many people, especially the people of Shiv- tarai. The King of Uttarakut, King Ranajit, as well as the people of Uttarakut, in order to forbid the people of Shiv- tarai to use the water to irrigate their lands, and to establish domination over them, build a dam across the river. They resort to the modern capitalist and technological means, and establish their imperialist control over the Shiv- tarains. Many people have had to sacrifice their lives in the process. Capitalism always gives way to imperialism and domination. Capitalist patriarchy often aids in the establishment of hegemonic structures. King Ranajit employs capitalist patriarchal means to overpower the Shiv- tarains. King Ranajit and his skilful engineer Bibhuti, are the imperialist patriarchs in action, who establish hegemony over nature and thus enslave the submissive Shiv- tarains, who are helpless. The pathetic plight of the Shiv- tarains can be equated to the pathetic victimization of nature and womanhood.

The water resource, *Mukta- Dhara*, is the real protagonist of the play. *Mukta- Dhara* is the embodiment of all principles that are feminine. It is the life sustaining principle and nurturing element of the Shiv- tarains and is a symbol of fertility. But, *Mukta- Dhara*, the

Mother Nature, is under bondage, with the construction of the dam, which symbolizes patriarchal domination and control over nature. The harmonious connection between ecology and humanity is disrupted. King Ranajit and engineer Bibhuti represent the patriarchal drive to control and subjugate women's bodies according to male fantasies. Capitalist patriarchy always puts its weight on the subaltern and the marginalized. Ecofeminist discourse is rooted in the idea that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature and natural resources are the outcomes of a patriarchal worldview.

The play creates an awareness about the domination of capitalist patriarchy against the brutal invasion on the feminine bodies of Mother Nature. Fritjof Capra's concept of deep ecology is an awareness that fights against all the dominator systems of society like patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism etc. which are always "exploitative and anti-ecological." (Capra 8) "...ecofeminists see female experiential knowledge as a major source for an ecological vision of reality." (Capra 9) Ecofeminism acknowledges the inevitable interconnection between the oppression against women and the exploitation shown towards nature and thereby, protests and struggles hard against these oppressions and exploitations. Ecofeminism is the resistance against all dominator systems. Andy Smith quotes Karen J Warren in her essay entitled, "Ecofeminism through an Anticolonial Framework", "Because all feminists do or must oppose the logic of domination which keeps oppressive conceptual frameworks in place, all feminists must also oppose any isms of domination that are maintained and justified by that logic of domination." (qtd. in Smith 21)

In the play, the Prince of Uttarakut, Prince Abhijit, fights against this patriarchal imperialism, by all means he can. Abhijit understands that "he is not of royal birth, but was picked up below the falls of Mukta-dhara." (*Three Plays* 17) He has an inherent sense of connection with the water source. He has always used to sleep beside the river, like a child beside a mother. "In the sound of this water I hear my mother's voice." (*Three Plays* 18) These words echo the deep reverence and affection, Prince Abhijit has towards the Mukta-Dhara as well as towards the Mother Nature. He tries to rescue the water source from the clutches of the confinements and ultimately liberates it. He feels imprisoned under the weight of Mukta-Dhara's imprisonment, "my river of life must run free, overleaping the palace walls." (*Three Plays* 28) He understands that it is his duty to liberate Mukta-Dhara, "God writes for us the secret mystery of each man's spirit. Mukta-dhara is His word to me, bearing the secret of my inner being. When her feet were bound in the iron fetters, I was startled out of a dream." (*Three Plays* 29) He struggles to free the Mother Nature. For him, the machine "mutes the music of earth, and guffaws with its iron fangs at the sky.... Beautiful is earth. To each smallest thing that has sweetened my life, I offer my reverence today." (*Three Plays* 30) In his repayment of his debt to the Mother Nature, Abhijit sacrifices his life also. "... in her [Mukta-dhara] freedom he has found his own!" (*Three Plays* 76) Mukta-dhara, "...like a mother, took up his wounded body in her arms, and carried him away." (*Three Plays* 76)

In the capitalist patriarchal world-view, the principle of sustainability loses its significance and thus human beings can never find an alternative with which to continue their lives. Tagore has foreseen this through his play *Mukta-Dhara*. Bibhuti, the engineer goes against the principle of sustainability. His research of twenty five years to build a dam does not teach him sustainable solutions. Vandana Shiva in the 'Preface' to her book *Ecofeminism*, writes "...the issue of reductionist, mechanistic science and the attitude of mastery over and conquest of nature [is] an expression of capitalist patriarchy. Today the contest between an ecological and feminist world-view and a world-view shaped by capitalist patriarchy is more intense than ever." (xviii) The world-view shaped by the

capitalist patriarchy is against the principle of sustainability. This is seen in the number of lives lost in the process of the construction of the dam in the play, *Mukta- Dhara*.

Ynestra King in her article, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology” stresses that the need to challenge all forms of social domination systems, “... extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing.”(20) Feminist and ecological discourses are mutually interdependent and intertwined and attempt to subvert and all forms of social dominator systems, thereby privileging the value of the Other. Catherine Zabinski quotes Karen J Warren in her essay “Scientific Ecology and Ecological Feminism”,

Value- hierarchical thinking within oppressive contexts maintains the domination of the superior group over the inferior group. Warren’s expansive definition of *ecofeminism* goes beyond the analysis of male/ female and nature/ culture dualisms to oppose value- hierarchical thinking based on class, race, age, sexual preference, or any trait used to perpetuate a power- over relationship.(315- 316)

An ecofeminist critique of the play *Mukta- Dhara*, also reveals this “value-hierarchical thinking within oppressive contexts”, which “maintains the domination of the superior group over the inferior group”. The Shiv- tarains are dominated by the Uttarakuts on account of the river, which the Uttarakuts consider as their own possession and on which they negate the element of “nature” dualism and impose the element of “culture” dualism to exploit according to their will. King Ranajit and the people of Uttarakut try to “perpetuate a power- over relationship” over the river as well as the Shiv- tarains. As Petra Kelly states, “The ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe or nuclear holocaust.” (113) This is exactly what Tagore also is trying to convey through *Mukta- Dhara*.

Gretchen T. Legler quoting Karen J. Warren in her essay, “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism”, says that the ecofeminism makes “visible the various ways in which the dominations of women and non- human nature are sanctioned and perpetuated under patriarchy, and engaging in practices and developing analysis aimed at ending these dominations.”(234) *Mukata- Dhara* is a critique of the way in which the “dominations of women and non- human nature are sanctioned under patriarchy.” The play, attempts to create an awareness about the far reaching consequences of the actions of domination by man over nature.

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