
ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN ENGLISH

WOMEN POETRY

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Abstract: *The relationship between humankind and Nature has been an intimate one ever since the beginning of the creation. Human beings have unconsciously inherited Nature in their blood. The story of human evolution has been a story of various human encounters with Nature, and she has become a part of human consciousness also. It is but natural that Nature has been a perennial theme in world literature. Indian literary tradition evidences a very close connect with the world of Nature. Nature continues to be a significant presence in the writings of Indian English women poets also, though the treatment of Nature varies from poet to poet and differences can also be perceived in pre -independence and post- independence poetry. This paper seeks to explore the various facets of ecological consciousness and concerns as revealed in the poetry of pre-independence women poets and also highlights the human-nature interface in their works at the thematic and the stylistic levels.*

Keywords: *evolution, consciousness, literary tradition, ecological consciousness, pre-independence, interface, thematic, stylistic.*

Primitive humans - instinctive and emotional by temperament - were in direct contact with Nature and poetry expresses the instinctive part of an individual most effectively. So the relationship between Nature and poetry is basic and very natural. The earliest poetry of Australian aboriginal people was steeped in Nature. The tribal songs had Nature not only as a theme but in form also as poetry was conceived in terms of the natural objects. The traditional song of New Hebrides' islanders has two parts, namely, "leaf" and "fruit" and in the Polynesian song from Tikopia, we have three parts of the song meaning "base of tree trunk," "intermediate woods" and "the bunch of fruit"(Kanadey 9). Nature has been an eternal entity in the world of literature across Time and Space. The influence of Nature on humans has been immense and they have been moulded by Nature inside and out. Hence, *Homo sapiens* and Nature continue to

influence each other though human attitude towards Nature has varied from Wordsworth's "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" ('Immortality Ode') to Tennyson's "It is Nature that kills/and not for her sport either. She knows nothing" ('The Promise of May')

Indian literary tradition has accorded a paramount place to Nature. Our Vedas and Sanskrit classics are replete with elements of Nature and natural descriptions. Indians are renowned for their love for Nature. Prof. Philo M. Buck has thus pointed out the fact:

Nor does the Indian imagination, even for a moment; forget its heritage of mountains, forests and rivers. No people in the world in their literature are more nature-conscious. (Kanadey 8)

Nature has been an integral part of Indian consciousness and a part and parcel of Indian folk-songs.

Our women poets have responded to the world of Nature even in their earliest available works composed during the Sangam Age. These works can be divided into two genres - 'Akam' and 'Puram.' 'Akam' poems deal with love and 'Puram' poems take all else into scope including Nature. In regional poets like Akkamahadevi, Rami, Mira Bai, Atukuri Malla, Chandrabati, Muddupalani, Mahalqa Bai Chanda, Jogeswari and Kuntal Kumari we have Nature employed as a rich stock of images, Nature participating in the drama of love and Nature acting as a background to human action.

Our early Indo-Anglian poets Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu were pre-occupied with the theme of Nature and it continues to make its presence felt in the poetry of modern poets also, though their approach and attitude towards Nature differs from that of their predecessors.

Toru Dutt, a "Child of the green valley of Ganga" holds the honour to be the first significant Indo-Anglian Nature poet as Nature had no special attraction for her predecessors like - Henry Derozio, Madhu Sudan Dutt and Kashiprasad Ghose. It is in Toru's poems that genuine sensitiveness to the world of Nature finds its first expression in Indo-Anglian poetry. Her letters, original pieces and her legends amply bring out her undying love for Nature.

Toru Dutt's response is that of a romantic and an aesthete. She has sensitively responded to the external aspects of Nature like sights, sounds and colours. The poet appears to be a painter in words and we have Keatsian sensuousness and picturesqueness in her poems.

Her portrayal of her Baumaree garden, the source of her poetic inspiration, is a feast to all senses of man :

*And o'er the quite pools the seemuls lean
Red red and startling like a trumpet's sound.
of bamboos to the Eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps and white lotus changes
into a cup of silver.*

(ABLH 171)

The poem 'Buttoo' contains a delightful inventory of glorious trees. The poet has painted a beautiful landscape in her poem 'Sita' and the sunset on Indian lake has been vividly captured in 'Sindhu'.

Her poem 'Our Casuarina Tree' contains all that can be associated with Toru Dutt as a poet of Nature-objective description of the tree, personal impression of it, reminiscences and wish for the immortality of the object of Nature which is dear to her heart. The first stanza presents a pictorial description of the tree where the poet beautifully blends the senses of sight and sound. In the next stanza the tree assumes a subjective colouring. It is human associations that render loveliness to the objects of Nature:

*O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
For your sake shall the tree be ever dear!*

(ABLH 174)

The tree is personified and finally, the poet wishes immortality to the tree:

May lord defend thee from oblivion's curse!

(Ibid, p.175)

Thus, Toru Dutt's portrayal of Nature is very simple and limited. It is mostly confined to the sensuous and pictorial presentation of natural objects. Only in one poem – 'Our Casuarina Tree' the treatment is mature and we get an idea of what the poet might have accomplished. Her contribution is that she made Nature a valid poetic theme for Indo-Anglian poetry.

Nature holds the most prominent place among Sarojini Naidu's poetic themes also. Toru Dutt made Nature a significant poetic theme and Sarojini unfolded before readers the beautiful world of Nature. The very noman-clature of her poems suggests the predominance of theme of Nature, for example, 'Spring', 'In a Time of Flower' and 'Summer Woods.' Nature is an essential presence in her world --main concern in some poems and existing as background or

symbol and imagery in others. Like a typical Romantic, fed up with the urban life, she wants to go far from the toil and weariness, the praise and prayers of men: "O let us fling all care away and lie down and dream/ Neath tangled boughs of Tamarind and molson and neem." ('Summer Woods', *The_Sceptered Flute*, 190) Sarojini's response to Nature is an aesthetic response to loveliness and we have before us the marvellous world of sight, sounds, colours, fragrance, joy and ecstasy in various natural phenomena and objects.

Spring, the Queen of Seasons, is the greatest favourite of the poet and she is 'ever drunk with the rich, red honey of spring'. The season generates a new life and vigour in the world of Nature and all- poppies, butterflies and king fishers are rejuvenated-a picture beautifully captured in the poem 'The Spring':

Poppies squander their fragile gold...

In the silvery aloe- brake

Coral and ivory lilies unfold

Their delicate lives on the lake.

Kingfishers ruffle the feathery sedge,

And all the vivid air thrills

With butterfly wings in the wild-rose hedge

and luminous blue of hills

(The Bird of Time 87)

Like Tagore in his poem 'Breezy April', the sheer beauty of the season throws Sarojini into 'Ecstasy'. Spring possesses such a swaying charm that the poet forgets all her grief and chirps:

Shall we in the midst of life's exquisite chorus

Remember our grief,

O heart, when the rapturous season is over us

of blossom and leaf?

(Ibid 99)

Sarojini has composed very few poems on summer, autumn and rainy season. Among these her poem on summer entitled, 'June Sunset' is a much-appreciated poem of exquisite beauty where the poet wraps all Nature-vegetable, animal and human world in great serenity and calmness. Right in the beginning she sets the tone, "Here shall my heart find its heaven of calm" (*The Broken Wing*, 192-93).

The scene fixes itself as an artist's work and palpability of scene is an artist's envy. The poem breathes contentment and tranquility and it is a delightfully original treatment of late summer season. The rainy season, so favourite with Indians and poets like Tagore, finds only ritualistic treatment in two of Sarojini Naidu's poems entitled 'The Harvest Hymn' and 'Hymn to Indra, Lord of Rain'. Autumn Season elicits only one 'Autumn Song' from the poet where the mood is of melancholy and nostalgia.

Flowers hold a special fascination for Sarojini Naidu. Some of her poems are dedicated to this gift of Nature while flowers appear in abundance in other poems. She is so captivated by the beauty of gulmohar-blossoms that she feels compelled to compose a poem 'In Praise of Gulmohar Blossoms'. Sweet fragrance and enchanting beauty of crimson roses is described in her poem 'The Time of Roses' The poet is so much charmed that she wants to measure out her life with flowers:

Hide me in a shrine of roses!

Drown me in a wine of roses!

.....

Crown me with the rose of Love.

(The Broken Wing 194-195)

The worlds of love and Nature are very closely related in Sarojini Naidu. Nature is the choicest place for love and in 'Summer Woods', the beloved invites the lover to Nature's mystic garden where:

You and I, together, love, in deep blossoming woods

Like Krishna and like Radhika, encompassed with delight.

(The Sceptred Flute 191)

Lovers' togetherness enhances the charm of Nature and separation makes even the world of Nature enwrapped in gloom. The passionate sight of spring season stirs the maiden to depths and she wants to share her joy with her lover 'In A Time Of Flowers' :

O Love : do you know the spring is there

With the lure of her magic flute ?....

(The Bird of Time 92)

Same objects of Nature inflict pain in the state of separation in "Vasant Panchmi" where an anguish-filled widow cannot bear the life, joy and excitement of spring season.

Nature does induce to Sarojini Naidu her moments of mystical experience. The poet expresses her idea of rebirth in 'Solitude':

*Or perchance we may glean a far glimpse of the
Infinite Bosom
In whose glorious shadow all life is unfolded or furled
Thro' the luminous hours ere the lotus of dawn
shall reblossom
In petals and splendour to worship the lord of the world.
(The Sceptred Flute 133)*

In the poem 'A Challenge to Fate' the poet's 'indomitable soul' and 'impassioned heart' commune with the Infinite. The objects of Nature assume a deeper meaning at times as in 'The Song Of Dream'.

*And spirits of Truth were the birds that sang
And spirits of Love were the stars that glowed
And spirits of Peace were the streams that flowed.*

For the poet, Nature is the source of ultimate eternal truth, love and peace.

(The Sceptred Flute 21)

The poet's world is glugged with similes, metaphors and images derived from the world of Nature, for example, in 'Palanquin Bearers' we have Shelleyian quick succession of lovely romantic images as Sarojini describes the lady:

*She sways like a flower in wind of our song:
She swims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
.....
She hangs like a star in the dew of our song
She springs like a beam on the brow of tide.
(The Golden Threshold 3)*

The poet has put objects of Nature to symbolic use also. Lotus flower is a symbol of the cosmos in 'To a Buddha', innocence and purity in 'To My Children' and purity and spiritual power in 'The Lotus' where Mahatama is compared to lotus. Birds have a symbolic significance. In 'The Bird of Time' they represent time, human pain and pleasure, in 'Salutation to Eternal Peace' they symbolize the poet's spiritual urge and heavenly hunger, and the soul craving to merge in infinite is like a 'homeless bird' in 'The Flute Player of Brindaban'.

Wind stands as a symbol of life and vigour in 'A Time of Flowers' and winds become wise, experienced travellers in 'A Song in Spring'. In her poem 'Leili' the dancing winds are devotees in the temple of Nature. In James Cousin's view this symbolism stands surely among fine things of literature. ⁽²⁶⁵⁾

The poet reveals affinities with many English Romantics like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Indian poets like Aurobindo and Tagore, yet she is different. She differs from her Indian predecessors like Tagore and Aurobindo as these poets have presented God, Man and Nature in an integral relationship with emphasis on cosmic destiny. Sarojini Naidu, like Toru Dutt, is mostly preoccupied with personal emotions and feelings. Her treatment of Nature is a combination of both influences-English Romantics and Hindu-Sufi mystics.

The poet does not reveal any definite philosophy or vision of Nature. Symbolism and mysticism are a part of her treatment of Nature, but essentially it is an aesthete's response to the external world of Nature and delight in its various manifestations. Man and Nature are inextricably linked in her world, be it the enjoyment of various aspects of Nature or the world of lovers. It is in Sarojini Naidu's poetry that Nature receives a detailed presentation in an Indo-Anglian woman poet for the first time. Rajyalakshmi's words give one the idea of Sarojini's wide range of feelings towards Nature: "From an innocent childhood wonder to an adult apprehension of Universal Love, from a lover's ecstasy to a devotee's bliss of communion, from a poet's mimicry to a prophet's epiphany." (181)

The perusal of the poetry of these two major pre-independence Indian English women poets Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu brings out the prominence of ecological consciousness in their writings. With her 'limited canvas', Toru Dutt can be designated as the 'First Indian English Nature Poet' whereas Sarojini Naidu emerges as the first Indian English woman poet to explore and express in details the various facets of human interaction with nature - portrayal of her beauties and bounties, close Human-Nature association, the mystic moments, and nature also becomes an integral rich part and parcel of the poet's symbolism and imagery. Away from the shadow of post-independence complexity of vision and burden of various postmodern theories and narratives, the poetry of these first two women poets continues to charm readers with its naturalness and simplicity at the thematic and the stylistic levels.

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