

LISTENING TO THE POLYPHONY IN NATURE: A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Whenever we are concerned about the immanent crisis regarding earthly environment and its ecosystem, we inescapably encounter the age-old hierarchical value-ordering of diverse living entities that ultimately endorses the segregationist politics around nature/culture or nonhuman/human dichotomies. These divides are intrinsically embedded into our fundamental discourses thereby facilitating anthropocentrism and the reduction of non-humans, plants and even other humans into mere resources for consumption. Now, in order to address the ecological catastrophe, we must have to rethink such prevalent fallacious frameworks, and hopefully, literature can create rooms for the perceptions of 'co-habitation, co-evolution, cross-species sociality' (Haraway 2007: 4). In my proposed paper, I wish to explore how an open-ended flow of 'becoming through interaction with multiple others' (Braidotti 2013: 89) can be dreamt of through stories like 'Balai' and 'Kunti and the Nishadin', written by Rabindranath Tagore and Mahasweta Devi respectively. The first story relates how a little boy, transcending his human-boundaries, leads a unitary existence with trees; in the second one, the venerable epical queen-mother Kunti, at the last stage of her life, comes to terms with the peripheral subsistence of Nishad women, forever denied by her own urbane culture.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ethics and Ecology, Becoming-Earth, Post-humanism, nature-culture continuum.

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The term Nature is a space for much ideological contestation. Is it a kind of abstraction of the outer world, an image residing just out of the human mind? Or is it an immeasurable elemental force sustaining and regulating all the human and the non-human entities of the earth? From an ethico-political perspective, it provocatively becomes a site for resistance to the human cultural interference and refuses to be the *terra nullius*— ‘a resource empty of its own purposes and meanings and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect’ (Plumwood 1993: 4).

Reason, soul, mind or volition—these are the attributes which are mostly found handy in securing the dominant position of human in this earth; every other form of life has been conceived as something static, non-conscious, inactive physicality. Thus ‘nature’, with its non-humans as well as multiple marginalised groups of other humans, turns into a sort of negative necessity—an inferior Other—needed for the optimum opportunistic consumption of it. Such absurd human-centredness ‘is a complex syndrome which includes the hyper-separation of humans as a special species’, ... ‘is expressed in denying both the mind-like aspects of nature and the nature-like aspects of human’, and refuses ‘to give other species their share of the earth.’ (Plumwood 2009: 116-117) This megalomania ultimately ends in the present environmental disaster that wreaks havoc to the non-humans and humans alike.

In order to save the situation, (to stop the boomerang if possible), we must enforce Deleuzian ‘deterritorialization’ so that we humans become cognisant with the otherness that resides inside us. We must obliterate the human/nature dualism by resituating oppressing-human-cultural ethos in ecological terms and the creative-agentic-resilient presence of the otherness in nature in ethical terms. In fine, we should celebrate the Upanishadic belief that everything on this earth is nothing but the manifestation of the

Brahman: 'This humanity is the honey of all beings, and all beings are the honey of this humanity... It is the immortal; it is *brahman*; it is the Whole.' (Olivelle 1998: 73)

Now, as Haraway wonderfully states, 'Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope' (Haraway 2007: 17), literature can open the vistas for the possible avenues towards such 'cross-species conversation' (ibid). I, in my proposed paper, have wished to explore the polyvocality of Nature through literary imaginations captured by two stories, namely, *Bolai* and *Kunti and the Nishadin*, penned by two Bengali authors, such as, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahasweta Devi.

Bolai (originally in 1928), at its very outset, talks about the species evolution and interconnections of humans and other natural organisms in this earth:

'The story of humankind forms the conclusion to the many chapters that tell the history of the earth's many creatures... In any human society we sometimes encounter the various animals that live hidden within us--this we know. In reality we call that human which has blended all the animals within ourselves, combined them into one: penned our tigers and cows into one enclosure, trapped our snakes and mongooses in the same cage.' (Gupta P. 2002)

In this story the composition of any creature is compared to any *Raga* that consists of all the seven musical notes, yet has a single key note characteristic of its own; and the protagonist of the story, *Bolai*, is described to have the rhythm of the plants prominently within him. *Bolai*, as a boy, liked to stay motionless and stare like trees, instead of moving to different places that would be typical of his age. He related himself to the nature's courses and seasons as intuitively as trees would do. His body and the spirit, just like plants, shared the planetary pulses like the heat of the sun, the moisture of the rain, the flow of the air, the colour of the bloom and the untold promising pleasure of the buds:

'When it rained, he behaved like a happy tree in July, when it grew very hot, he moved about bare-chested, embracing the heat like trees do... in the month of Magh, he behaved like the mango tree beginning to bloom; in Phalgun, he became a flowering sal tree... rolling down the grassy fields of the Himalayas, he began to resemble grass...' (Roy 2017: 101)

In Tagore's tale, human and plant mingle into a unique existence as they overlap in Bolai's soul:

'he could see the people within these gigantic trees--they wouldn't speak, but they seemed to know everything... tender young leaves, just arisen; he felt a companionship towards them that he didn't know how to express. They too, seemed to fidget in their eagerness to ask him something...' (Gupta P. 2002)

This echoes the age-old camaraderie of plant and human, expressed in the ancient texts like the *Yogavasistha*: 'As a tree perceives in itself the growth of the leaves, fruits and flowers from its body; so I beheld all these arising in myself' (*Yogavasistha* 62.7: 77)

That is why Bolai could not tolerate the pain caused to the body of any plant either by plucking the flowers and fruits or by pruning the leaves and branches. Because he instinctively

'knew about the secret life of the seeds that had fallen from trees overhead and had now struck a tiny root in the ground... Though he was only a little child, he was as old as the earth's forests—he carried their spirit in him.' (Roy 2017: 102)

However, the plant-person narrative reached its climax when Bolai found a sapling of a silk cotton tree and nurtured it against his narrator-uncle's will so that it robustly grew into a 'shamelessly large' tree standing straight in the middle of the pathway. He had identified himself with the tree; it is termed as Bolai's 'friend'; and even after he left the place for higher education, he could not forget it. The passionate love for the tree emanated from Bolai's heart was ultimately implanted into his aunt's mind also, and, although the narrator-uncle was said to have the tree cut the story ends with his final realisation that the tree was nothing but Bolai's replica—'his life's double'. It reminds us of the interpenetration of plant - human co-existence intensely expressed by Bill Neidjie:

'If you feel sore. . . .

headache, sore body,

that mean somebody killing tree or grass.

You feel because your body in that tree or earth.' (Neidjie 1985: 52.)

The second story by Mahasweta Devi named *Kunti and the Nishadin* (2005) (originally in 1999) is a novel attempt to give voice to that 'voiceless section' of our society by means of rewriting an ancient epical episode. In an imaginary backdrop of a forest, the author makes the aged Kunti of the *rajavritta* confront her feminine Other, the Nishad-woman from the *lokavritta*. In the age-old grand narrative, the subaltern expression had been forever muted, foregrounding the royal lives of the kings and their bloody battles for the kingdoms. The royal urbanised culture had always utilised the indigenous ways of life as mere resources, denied the agency and subjectivity of the natives by homogenizing them with some 'insentient' nature, and led to our present world

'where we face the imminent prospect of loss of the world's forests along with the bulk of its species diversity and human cultural diversity, where many cultures have had the whole basis of ancient survival patterns destroyed by a species of development and 'progress' which produces inequality as inexorably as it produces pollution and waste.' (Plumwood 1993: 7)

Devi's tale reads the official elitist Brahminic chronicle against its grain, by reviving the obscured accounts of the survival, oppression and exploitation of the forest tribes like the Nishad-Kirat-Sabar-Nagavanshi. The revitalisation of the suppressed is executed in three levels: it provides a female perspective thereby merging the privileged (Kunti) and the oppressed (Nishadin) into one; it counters the hegemonic discourse of the epic by revisioning the Jatugriha episode of *The Mahabharata*; it subverts the nature/culture vis-à-vis *lokavritta/rajavritta* dichotomous model by assigning individuality, empowerment and ethical superiority to the repressed subaltern.

In the story, the royal mother Kunti was located amidst a dense forest where she, along with other elders like Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, had come for practising *vanaprastha* at the last phase of their lives. There, out of her formal rigid regal structure in the palace, she could address her individual existence, discovering herself all alone inside the forest—the 'forest feels as warm as mother's embrace' (Devi 2005: 31) to her—she could now delve deep into her soul and feel relieved:

'She never knew that she carried within her such a burden of unspoken thoughts and feelings. Life of the *rajavritta* was so different. Mother of the Pandavas. Wife of Pandu. The role of daughter-in-law, the role of queen, the role of mother, playing these hundreds of roles where was the space, the time to be her true self? All the while—amazingly—she never felt that anything was hers, hers alone.' (ibid: 28)

Kunti wanted to unleash her buried desires, angsts and guilts in front of the forest: 'The forest feels good... Here, one can be alone with oneself. Here, one can whisper and confess.' (35) Vidura had apprised Kunti about the mystical existence of 'the spirit of the forest'—'*Aranyaka*' or Nature-Mother who stays in harmony with the tribes, but wilders the outsiders like Kunti through Her mysterious spell. Kunti, though surrendered herself to the Mother Earth, still vacillated between her previous royal self and the present secluded state. She could notice the silent flow of the lives of the tribal forest women—'a tranquil, happy, hardworking lot, their faces always wreathed in bright smiles' (28); being soothed by the aroma of the resinous trees she realised her life to be an utter wastage—a mere implementation of role-playing regulated by others: 'Blindly following a predetermined predestined path to death.' (ibid) Yet, she wilfully distanced herself from the Nishadins retaining her habitual vanity. Thus, she felt secured that no one would be there to comprehend her secret contemplations because nature—with 'these trees, the river, the birds, the murmuring leaves, the wind, even... the Nishadins' (29) — was conceived as an abstract blind entity to the civilised Kunti. She was certain that the privilege and precedence of her upper-class linguistic tool was inaccessible to these forest entities 'who, even if they hear her, won't understand.' (ibid) Therefore, she started confessing the mistakes and transgressions of her past life, focusing on her complex relationship with the Sun god and Karna. She, as if, retrieved her younger self again and remembering how, only once in her life, she was self-directed to invoke the Sun, took bath in the woodland stream, letting loose her hair though white in colour amidst sunbeams:

'she sat with her back turned to the sun. What if the sun looked down at her today? Would he even recognize her? A million years for mankind are a mere instant for the gods...' (34)

She recalled Karna, the son born from her communion with the Sun-god, and how she could not do justice to him at the time of his birth, at the time of his socio-cultural recognition, at the time of the epoch-making war and, at last, on his death. That he was her child of her maidenhood prevented her to validate her motherhood. When, at the time of *tarpana*-ceremonies, she finally asked Yudhisthira to perform rites in the name of her first son, she was ultimately made to face that question of which she had been afraid all through her life. As a woman of the *rajavritta* she had no right to choose her own partner, but she could bear the children of many partners if they were chosen by the society in the form of her impotent husband: 'I am Pandu's wife, my husband is not the father of my sons, yet you are all Pandavas. But Karna will never be any more than a carpenter's son.' (37) Kunti told these words to the Mother Earth and the elderly Nishadin, being Her embodiment as if, listened with compassion. But Kunti could not tolerate this pity of the *lokavritta*, and her vain insensitivity to the nature was shattered by the Nishadin, who at the end, asserted her potential authority by disclosing her linguistic cognizance forever denied by the *rajavritta*-culture. She proclaimed the superiority of the natural ways of the indigenous people especially in relation to the women's authority over their own existence. The Nishadin clearly showed Kunti that the sins of which she counted guilty of herself were no transgressions in their community at all.

'The *rajavritta* folk and the *lokavritta* folk have different values, different ideas of right and wrong. If a young Nishad girl makes love to the boy of her choice and gets pregnant, we celebrate it with a wedding.... Nature abhors waste. We honour life.' (41)

By her biting sarcasm and resentment for Kunti's amnesia regarding the Pandavas' plotted assassination of six gullible Nishads in the Jatugriha i.e. the house of lac made by Duryodhana, the Nishadin fiercely uncovered the hidden cultural-political-social injustice and manipulation suffered by the peripheral others perceived as 'nature' as a whole:

'you never thought of us as human, did you? No more than the mute rocks, or trees or animals...' (40)

'Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. That was not even a crime in your book' (43)

'to the people of the *lokavritta*, to sacrifice or harm innocents in one's own self-interest is the most unpardonable sin. You are guilty of that sin.' (41)

The Nishadin's words were protest against all the atrocities inflicted on the nature by the human-made civilisation, manifested not only in the Jatugriha-episode, but also in the Khadava-daha episode of the epic. Irawati Karve provides an anthropological perspective to this ancient nature/culture conflict:

'The pastoral Aryan people kept large herds of cattle and practised agriculture with the help of animal-drawn ploughs. Their history records many instances of either burning or cutting down forests... Khandava was a great forest on the banks of the Yamuna... Perhaps Krishna and Arjuna burned the forest to provide more land for cultivation...this forest was not merely a forest with birds and animals in it. We are told that Takshaka, the king of the Nagas, lived there... Here again Krishna and Arjuna played the familiar role of the conquering settler. The Spaniards and Portuguese in South America, the English in North America and Australia are but the latest historical examples of the same process...the feud between the Pandavas and the Takshakas... incidentally tells us of the colonization of the land by the Aryans.' (Karve 1998: 60-61)

Thus, Nishadin's voice is the voice of the subaltern and Vandana Gupta rightly observes, 'natural space of the forests gives the subaltern power and agency to rip apart her guise of grandeur and hold Kunti accountable for her heinous crime against the low caste tribals' (Gupta 2009: 70) And lastly, the victimized and subjugated Other turned triumphant by nature's own law as Kunti had to consciously await the similar kind of death by burning in the forest fire. Nature, it seemed, took revenge by pronouncing its voice of protest through the mouth of the Nishadin.