

Echoes of Earth and Woman: An Ecofeminist Reading of Tagore and Atwood

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Abstract

The present paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Red Oleanders and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing to understand how the two texts illustrate the intertwined oppression of women and nature within a patriarchal, anthropocentric setup. The paper investigates the manner in which these works conduct a comprehensive study of feminine existence and the natural world within the capitalist and commodification frameworks in an ecofeminist perspective. In Red Oleanders Tagore reveals dehumanising logic of industrial modernity in the form of the mining kingdom where mechanisation, surveillance and profit turn people and nature into commodities and life-centered ecological and ethical opposition to authoritarian power is expressed through the figure of Nandini. Likewise, Surfacing follows a psychological and ecological journey of a woman into the Canadian wilderness, where the process of disconnection with technological culture is being used as a way of re-establishing the sense of identity and establishing a non-exploitative relationship with the wild. Based on a close textual analysis, this paper maintains that both texts perceive nature as a moving and challenging matter, in agreement with feminine subjectivity, ethical renewal and environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women and Nature, Patriarchy, Anthropocentrism, Industrial Modernity, Capitalism, Ecological Consciousness, Feminine Subjectivity.

Introduction

“What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. What we do to women, we do to nature.”

Susan Griffin, Woman and Nature

In a powerful address, Susan Griffin highlights the core premise that underpins ecofeminism, which is that patriarchal authority is the root cause of both the exploitation of women and the destruction of the environment. A revolutionary vision that brings together environmental knowledge and female struggle, ecofeminism is more than just an ideological criticism; it is a revolutionary vision on its own. The objective of ecofeminism, which is both a sociopolitical and literary discourse, is to bring to light and dismantle the intertwined repressive structures that are responsible for the subjugation of women and the environment to the influence of industrial, economic, and patriarchal forces. Investigating ecofeminist problems has been made easier by the fact that literature, which is both a mirror of society and a tool for criticism, has offered useful ground. From ancient stories that linked women to the fertility of the land to contemporary novels that trace women's isolation in mechanised worlds, literary works have always depicted how closely gender and environment are intertwined. This has been the

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case since the beginning of their existence. Karen Warren, a feminist philosopher, is quoted as saying, "the domination or subjugation of women is linked to the domination or subjugation of nature".

Broadly, both of these concepts cannot be comprehended in their entirety apart from one another. The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which ecofeminist ideals are mirrored in two significant literary works: *Red Oleanders* by Rabindranath Tagore and *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. Although they are geographically, genre-wise, and culturally apart from one another, both of these works present a powerful image of women who fight against dehumanising systems and reassert their profound spiritual, moral, and emotional connections with the natural world. This research demonstrates how literature may be used to question patriarchal norms and advocate for a society that is more peaceful, inclusive, and ethical. This is accomplished by studying the characters of Nandini and Atwood's Nameless Narrator through the perspective of ecofeminism.

Understanding the Concept of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that holds the belief that there is a connection between the subjugation of women and the deterioration of the natural environment. The term eco-feminism is a combination of the words ecology and feminism. It emphasises the idea that an end to the oppression of women is inextricably linked to ecological values and that women should be primarily concerned with putting an end to the exploitation of the ecosystem. Eco-feminism has been particularly prominent within radical feminism and within the Green Movement. As Greta Gaard addresses, "eco-feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature." Eco-feminist theorists take into consideration the interconnections that exist between sexism, the dominance of nature, racism, species, and other forms of social inequality. Further, it holds the idea that is essential to both feminism and environmental ethics, constructing it as ecological feminism, which is the perspective that there are significant connections, historical, experiential, symbolic, and theoretical, between the dominance of women and the dominance of nature. This knowledge is critical to both of these fields. This patriarchal dualistic doctrine draws a strict line defining them as distinct from one another. However, this very idea should replace the notion that man is unique from woman and superior to her, embracing the reality of both biological and cultural variety. Additionally, it challenges the dominance of men over women and the natural world. Some ecofeminists argue that even though both women and nature are essential to human existence and the provision of resources, their roles in society are frequently disregarded and dehumanised. The fact that women are more closely associated

with the natural world confers upon them a moral and spiritual superiority that ought to be translated into political and social terms as well. Women are seen to be degraded whenever nature is exploited, and vice versa. This is true in any situation. Within the framework of patriarchy, the exploitation of both nature and women goes hand in hand without exception. Within a society that is ruled by men, women are subjected to exploitation, and the natural world is also being tainted and damaged by the influence of contemporary technology and commerce.

The present study aims to introduce, discuss, and firmly establish the critical symbiosis between women and nature, as well as their collective contribution to the sustenance of human existence, through an examination of two significant literary settings in India and Canada. In Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)*, the protagonist Nandini represents a symbol of feminine defiance and a protector of the marginalised natural environment under patriarchal oppression through her conflict epitomising both the oppression and possible rejuvenation of ecological and female identities within an Indian framework. On the other hand, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, set in the desolate wilderness of Northern Quebec, chronicles its nameless narrator's transformative journey in which she reconnects with the land, rejects artificiality and patriarchal dominance, she reclaims autonomy, confronts trauma, and reconstructs an identity intertwined with natural belonging. This study also examines the two works from an ecofeminist perspective, demonstrating that women and environment are not simply backgrounds, but interrelated entities whose emancipation and resilience are essential for human existence in many cultural and geographical contexts. Both Rabindranath Tagore's play *Red Oleanders*, which is set in India, and Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, which is set in Canada, appear to have so many things in common in terms of the environmental setting in which they are set and the ecofeminist approach that they take to the subject matter.

Ecofeminist Dimensions in Tagore's *Red Oleanders*

Red Oleanders is a symbolic drama written by Tagore that takes place in Yaksha Town, a dystopian industrial complex that is ruled by an invisible and all-powerful King. Under these conditions, the people who live here are reduced to the status of laboring robots, and they work tirelessly to collect gold from the ground. The natural world is obliterated, hidden, and rendered unexplainable, because they are deprived of freedom, leisure, and sunshine. The play is a representation of the mechanisation and alienation that are the results of unrestrained industrialisation. Nandini, who is decorated with a garland of red oleanders, enters this desolate environment. The garland is a sign of energy, resilience, and the relentless force of nature. A message of vitality, joy, and spiritual rebellion, she is a messenger of life.

Yaksha Town is infused with feeling, consciousness, and hope as a result of her presence, which disrupts the previously mechanical rhythm of the town. She makes the following observation: "It puzzles me to see a whole city thrusting its head underground, groping with both hands in the dark. You dig tunnels in the underground and come out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past." (Red Oleanders, P 11)

Certainly, through the play *Red Oleanders*, Tagore has effectively propagated the two distinct ideas that lead to the themes of industrialisation, which results in an ever-increasing greed for money and power, and a solitary woman's search for her place and position in a society that is dominated by men. Tagore has communicated this concept through Nandini, the main character of the play, as well as the King of Yaksha Town, who is the possessor of an unimaginable wealth and power. The town is known as an industrious settlement, and it is in this town where workers gather lumps of gold by sweating while it is dark outside. They do not have any time for leisure or enjoyment, and there is no need for a wide sky or green ground. Contrarily, the King is invincibly strong and the owner of unfathomable wealth and power. The garland that Nandini wears is created from the blossoms of red oleanders, and she stands out among all the other things that the town has to offer. She has been presented as an agent of nature who has been seen three times to bring to the attention of the people the damage that is being done to nature, only to satisfy the requirements of man's egotistical aspirations. With her entrance, she carries with her the message of love, hope, and liberation. She also makes the people aware of their bonds by implanting a longing for freedom deep inside their souls. In her pursuit of genuine pleasure, Nandini is fearless to societal conventions and taboos, and she steadfastly refuses to adhere to them. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she is the primary source of energy in the play. "Nandini is presented by Tagore as a spirit of joy, love, and beauty. Hers is the challenge of virgin beauty to the world of males," (N. Tandon, Perspectives and Challenges in Indian-English Drama, 134) The entirety of the narrative is a stunning depiction of a woman's tenacity in the face of adversity and her strategy for living in a world that is devoid of any form of kindness and beauty. In addition to this, she makes her existence acceptable in a world that categorically rejects the existence of women.

Nandini's Ecofeminist Resistance

When it comes to ecofeminist resistance, Nandini's rejection of consumerism, power, and patriarchy is the highlighting feature. She represents a moral force that stands in opposition to the faceless power of the King. Because of her bravery, compassion, and unwillingness to be silenced, she is a symbol of both the ecological integrity and the inherent femininity of the world. Nandini is not only a character; rather, she is the embodiment of courageous beauty,

the voice of ethical protest, and the spirit of nature themselves. Tagore concludes by saying, "The modern age has brought the geography of the earth near to us, but made it difficult for us to come into touch with man." (Mohit K. Ray, 164) This detachment from human values and the natural world is something that Nandini actively works to rectify. She invites the workers to acknowledge their servitude, to question the anguish they are experiencing, and to exercise their agency once again. Her message is clear and loud regarding the exploitation of human life and the natural world under the guise of industrial capitalism, which is both demeaning and unsustainable. Throughout the play, Nandini challenges patriarchal authority and the dominance of physical might, emphasising the significance of genuine human values over material prosperity. Particularly illuminating is how she encounters the King, "I challenge you to terrify me, just like you do the rest of the people. I am disgusted by your gluttony!" She makes an effort to reawaken his consciousness while simultaneously presenting him with the white kunda flower, which is a sign of purity and serenity. The king, in the presence of Nandini, feels emotionally and ethically impoverished, although he holds an enormous amount of authority. Her ideas are reflective of the ecofeminist philosophy, which holds that power does not lay in dominance but rather in compassion, awareness, and the bravery to confront oppression. When it comes to confronting injustice or suffering for the truth, Nandini is not scared to do either. The transforming potential of ecofeminist resistance is encapsulated in her statement, "If it is necessary to die in order to live life, what harm is there in dying?"

Though the King has the supremacy of immeasurable wealth, yet he is unable to escape from the unyielding dare and sublime natural charm of Nandini. For example, by offering the white kunda flower to the King, who is the preserver of all delusions, she communicates the imperative of nature to eradicate the root of evil, affirming the transcendence and superiority of the natural world. She attempts to convince the King of the implications of his terrible treatment of nature and convince society, which is feverishly browsing the "dead wealth," that all natural resources are God's gift to us and should be handled with respect and dignity. Nandini wants the powerful king to experience the sublimity of nature, which he can only experience when he establishes his sympathetic relation with it. Truly aware of the fact that her fearless expressions have the potential to result in a significant punishment not only for her but also for her beloved, she does not hesitate to present the naked truth to the King. She poses a query in response to: "...can blocks of gold ever answer to the swinging rhythm of your arms in the same way as fields of corn? Are you not afraid, King, of handling the dead wealth of the earth?" (24-25)

Tagore does not engage in any form of criticism; rather, he advocates for the adoption of a balanced attitude toward the expansion of materialistic interests and the aesthetic interests of

society. According to him, power is always restricted to a specific region, regardless of how large or small that area may be. He echoes in Nandini, "I dare you frighten me, as you do the rest. I scorn your indulgence!" (142) when she forcefully refuses to be the part of this cruel system saying "If this is the way of man's being, I refuse to be, I want to depart with those shadows, (98) Nandini identifies as the super human when says "I've come to take you away from here." (64) Amongst all the men in the Yaksha Town, she is the only woman who refuses to live like animals; rather, she establishes the high humanistic values forcefully, declares, "If it is necessary to die in order to live life, what harm in dying." (102)

Though in the play there are so many characters, yet the essence of humanity is completely absent. Nandini, alone, is the person, who is nothing "She is a tuned-up lyre in the midst of the clamor of the market place. (91) Finally, she is successful in bringing about what is anticipated of a noble labor, which is that a noble spirit must give up her life for the welfare of others.

Atwood's *Surfacing* as the Ecological Self

Tagore's Nandini, in her affection and anguish for nature, evokes the nameless narrator of Margaret Atwood's renowned novel *Surfacing*. The nameless narrator of the novel articulates her profound anguish regarding the escalating devastation of natural resources due to the rampant materialistic desires of American society. The novel *Surfacing* recounts the journey of a nameless protagonist who returns to the pristine island in Northern Quebec of her childhood to seek her missing father. The story chronicles the protagonist's quest for her father, which acts as a catalyst for her exploration of her inner self, as we see her progressive immersion in nature and her pursuit of spiritual insight. The protagonist's emotional and creative demise is illustrated through her connection with her partner, her art instructor, and her now-repudiated attempt at abortion, which she perceives as an act of murder. She serves as a "metaphor" for all those who are used and mistreated due to their weakness. In her quest to restore her identity and heritage, the surfer embarks on a psychological journey that immerses her in the natural environment. Similar to the voyage, the language, events, and characters in Margaret Atwood's work illustrate a civilisation that subjugates and controls both woman and nature. In her quest to locate her absent father in the wilderness and beneath the lake, the nameless narrator discovers that nature has been exploited by Americans. They devastate the environment just for their amusement. Atwood illustrates the exploitation of nature and women in *Surfacing*. The opening phrase of the novel signifies the demise of the birches: "The lake where the white birches are perishing, the affliction is advancing from the south, and I observe they now offer seaplanes for rent." (Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, 5) The

protagonist discovers that Canada is being exploited by Americans. Nature is also a casualty of civilisation, being compromised by commerce and contemporary technology. The pristine slopes and woods have been obliterated. The expanding industries necessitated power generation, resulting in an elevation of the lake level, which led to the loss of ecosystems to manage the dam or the obliteration of mature trees. The heroine sees that her homeland has transformed into a "foreign territory", a wasteland of civilisation. The protagonist is astonished by the "newly broken stubs, wood and pith resembling splintered bones, ferns trampled" (135). The interaction between nature and Americans is characterised by exploitation, resulting in significant landscape degradation. She perceives Americanism as a contagion that is "spreading up from the south," which appears to have obliterated the cultural values of the protagonist. Americans are "polluters, desecrators, and victimisers" of the land. She states: "The nationality of Americans is irrelevant; they represent our future and what we are becoming." They proliferate like a virus, infiltrating the brain and commandeering the cells. The protagonist, who holds the belief that "killing was wrong...only enemies and food could be killed" (150), is taken aback when discovering the corpses of deceased animals. The Americans exterminated them only for amusement and to demonstrate their dominance. Akin to how her former lover had disfigured her, serving as "his proof that he was still young... A certificate framed on the wall." (170) Similar to nature, Anna's body is perceived as a commodity for commercialisation. In the lake scene where David compels her to disrobe. He addresses her as "darling, a good girl," and wishes to place her photograph "next to the deceased bird" (136). Anna is described using animalistic terminology, illustrating that in a patriarchal society, women are perceived as inferior to males, akin to animals.

The protagonist's reentry into the natural realm illustrates the eco-feminist influence inside the narrative. She associates herself with Nature, stating, "I am part of the landscape. I could assume any form, such as a tree, a deer skeleton, or a rock." (187) She undergoes a profound transformation in perspective, ultimately learning to enjoy the natural environment and facilitating her own recovery in the process. She endures the tyranny of a patriarchal society. Her aberrant act of absorption exemplifies the eco-feminist perspective that "the ramifications of a culture predicated on the devaluation of life-giving forces and the glorification of life-taking actions are significant for both ecology and women." Her former partner has an emotional detachment regarding the kid; for him, it is "as straightforward as having a wart excised." He stated it was not a human, only an animal. During her recovery journey, the narrator starts to draw comparisons between herself and the deceased heron. The heinous murder of the heron serves as a clear ecological analogy to the narrator's experience. She has profound revulsion over the avian slaughter and draws parallels to the persecution and harassment of women. She cultivates profound empathy for the flora and animals and

recognises that regeneration via nature is the one remedy for her breakdown. Human beings are not fundamentally distinct from nature; the realisation of our humanity is deeply connected to understanding and valuing the nature both inside and around us. (43) Her connection to nature heightens her awareness of the victimisation of women. As her feminist awareness peaks, the heroine prepares the foundation for insurrection against oppression. She recognises that only the weak and vulnerable are subjected to exploitation. Consequently, until we reject victimhood, we are rendered powerless. She utilises Joe to conceive but declines to marry him. The power battle appears to have concluded. She is currently pregnant and is assured of her ability to deliver the child and reintegrate into society and nature.

Comparative Analysis

It is intriguing to identify the analogous areas of comparison between Tagore's play and Atwood's novel. From an eco-feminist perspective, these works effectively illustrate humanity's detrimental attitudes towards society, encompassing the overuse of natural resources and the exploitation of women. The criteria for comparison are as follows Nandini in *Red Oleanders* and the unnamed heroine in *Surfacing* possess a profound emotional connection to their surroundings. Nandini asserts, "Human beings' fundamental needs are finite." Physical hunger has a limit. However, there is no limit to human desire. (9) Identical perspectives have been presented from the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*. "We are perpetrating this act of transgression for sport, amusement, pleasure, or recreation, as they term it." These were no longer the appropriate justifications. "That constitutes an explanation, yet it does not serve as an excuse." (10) Nandini's rebellion against the relentless and harsh disruption of the natural equilibrium will bring us face to face with the catastrophic realities of our society: "The living heart of the earth surrenders itself in love, life, and beauty; however, when you tear its bosom and disturb the deceased, you summon forth the curse of its dark demon—blind, unyielding, cruel, and envious." (24)

In their respective works, Tagore and Atwood challenge the same patriarchal structures that legitimize the abuse of women and nature through the characters that they portray as protagonists. Despite the fact that they are situated in separate cultural settings, Nandini and the anonymous narrator both exhibit a certain level of resistance. The voices of conscience, the bearers of ecological truth, and the emblems of feminine power are expressed by these individuals.

The assertion made by Nandini is that "Man's basic needs are limited." There is a peak to one's physical hunger. On the other hand, the desires of man have no limits. Similarly, the narrator in Atwood's work muses on the situation, saying, "We are committing

this act of violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it." At this point, they were no longer reasonable justifications. Although that is an explanation, it is not an excuse.

In both of these remarks, the capitalist mentality that equates consumption with development is called into question. The return to simplicity, equilibrium, and regard for the land is something that they advocate for. It is not theory alone that gives rise to their ecofeminist awareness; rather, it is the lived experiences of suffering, oppression, and awakening that have given rise to it. Within the context of their own stories, nature functions as both a haven and a stimulating agent. Nandini, the heroine of Tagore's novel, wears the red oleander as a sign of life and resistance, whereas the protagonist of Atwood's novel integrates with the forest in order to once again discover who she is. In accordance with Nandini: "The living heart of the earth gives itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom... you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon." Similarly Atwood who reiterates: "They had their chances, but they turned against the gods."

In each of these works, the characters condemn the exploitation of the natural world and call for the protection of human life as an ethical need. Their ecofeminist perspective is neither anti-modern or nostalgic; rather, it is profoundly moral and forward-looking. Instead of looking for a return to the past, they are looking for a reimagining of the future that is founded on harmony, empathy, and equilibrium. The unnamed narrator also denounces the harsh and avaricious disposition exhibited by Americans towards nature. She resembles Nandini when she states: "The trees will never be permitted to grow that tall again; they are destroyed as soon as they become valuable [...] the trees they have felled exhibit swollen edges around the wounds, scar tissue." (46) Nandini want to highlight that when we cherish and honour nature, it enhances our lives via its inherent benefits, facilitating ease in our existence. However, when we burden the Earth with our detrimental beliefs, we inadvertently facilitate our own demise. Our might, manifested as the super ego, has also been bestowed by this earth, this sky, and this boundless ocean. The unnamed narrator elucidates similarly to Nandini: [...] it was not the guys I despised, but rather the Americans, the human beings, both men and women. They have opportunities, yet they rebelled against the deities. Here is Nandini: "However, when humanity, in its hubris and arrogance, exploits Nature through violence, a curse befalls it." (656) Although Nandini advocates for love, happiness, and peace, she does not hesitate to wage battle against the injustices perpetrated against her in the name of womanhood. Ultimately, she attains her desired outcome. She is very aware of her identity as a woman and emphasises that this identity should not be underestimated. Similarly, the unnamed protagonist discards all obstacles in her path and resolves to live her life according to her own principles. Both women saw themselves as representatives of nature, tasked with

salvaging the planet from the harm inflicted by man. They are the esteemed victors, having recognised their exceptional capacity to effectuate significant transformations in any human community.

Conclusion

Both the works address the wellbeing of human society, which depends on the reinstatement of natural law, cautioning against the imposition of man-made regulations that exceed the natural order, whether concerning natural resources or women's involvement as equal participants in life's journey. The works address the well-known stages of crises in civilisation, specifically industrialisation and materialism. Although the portrayal of women differs among creators, they exhibit some predominant commonalities when they embody their true fighting spirit. They are adept at securing victory on their own terms. These women exemplify the quotidian challenges of human existence, particularly those faced by women. An analysis of *Surfacing* and *The Red Oleander* reveals the impact of environmental deterioration on women's lives inside this patriarchal culture. To have a peaceful and healthy human existence on our planet, the maintenance of environmental equilibrium is essential, since it is closely linked to the oppression of women. Eco-feminism does not oppose technological advancement but rather critiques industrial expansion that compromises the environment.

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