

BRITISH BENGAL’S FEMINISTIC STUDY OF SAKUNTALA, MIRANDA AND DESDEMONA: AN ECOCRITICAL REINTERPRETATION

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Kalidasa, the eminent Sanskrit dramatist is very often called “the Shakespeare of India” and naturally a comparative study between the two ‘Shakespeares’ may be expected of the Indian critics and it was started by some critics of the British Bengal. Very often some people concerned with the utilitarian aspects of things raise the question of relevance, in this post-Modern age, of the ancient Indian texts like those of Kalidasa and the Elizabethan texts like those of Shakespeare. These are two much trodden fields also. The reply to the question of relevance may be sought in the criticism offered by the British Bengalee critics like Rishi Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (the first Bengali novelist), Rabindranath Tagore, et al. Chronologically Bankim Chandra is the first who attempted a comparative study between Miranda and Sakuntala (the heroine of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnam Sakuntalam*) and Miranda and Desdemona in his article “Sakuntala, Miranda O Desdemona” (‘O’ means ‘and’). Tagore in his “Prachin Sahitya: Sakuntala” (Ancient Literature: Sakuntala) also interpreted the two characters. Dwijendra Lal Roy in his book *Kalidasa O Bhababhuti*, referred to Shakespeare and a comparative study between Shakespeare and Kalidasa is found in this book. None of these critics coined the term ‘ecofeminism’ but if explored in critically it proves to be nothing but ecofeminism, or at least foundation stone of this social and literary movement. While dealing with ecocriticism, ecofeminism, ecolonialism, ecoMarxism or any other social or literary movement concerned with ecology, one cannot but keep in mind the environmental aspects, since all these movements are somehow related with environment, both physical and human. The critics mentioned above also did the same but they are yet to be given the recognition. The aim of this paper is to prove them as ecofeminists and also to prove the relevance of the texts of Kalidasa and Shakespeare in this age of ecological crisis and thereby, justify the contemporaneity of the two ‘Shakespeares’.

The term Ecological feminism or ‘Ecofeminism’ was coined in 1974 by Francoise d’Eaubonne (<http://www.enotes.com/ecofeminism>) who considers it to be the social movement that regards the subjugation and relegation of women and nature as interconnected. It is one of the few movements and analysis that actually connects the two movements, ecocriticism and feminism. More recently, ecofeminist theorists have extended their analysis to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature (including animals), and also racism and social inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature. Although the term

‘ecofeminism’ was coined first in 1974, the root of the movement had already been existent in the British Bengal.

Very often woman is compared to nature and therefore, a question arises, “Why woman, and not man?” The answer may be found in David Pepper who aptly says that “Marx recognized the priorness of an ‘external’ or ‘first’ nature that gave birth to humankind. But humans then worked on this ‘first’ nature to produce a ‘second’ nature” for the benefit of humans”. Likewise a woman is required to be ‘fit’ for a man but not the vice versa. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva also say in their book ‘Ecofeminism’, “nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global and so on.” Vandana Shiva also claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it that has been ignored:

Women in subsistence economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognised by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women’s lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth.

The term ‘Eco-feminism’ is comparatively a new and confusing concept in literary criticism because while ecology is purely a scientific term, feminism is a literary or social movement and yoking the two is rather astonishing. Eco-feminism is a branch of eco-criticism, itself a new branch which attempts to establish a relationship between literature and the physical environment. Greg Garrard quotes in his book *Eco-criticism* from Glouffly’s book *The Eco-criticism Reader*:

“Simply put, eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary study.”

Garrard also adds that eco-criticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. So eco-criticism may be interpreted as the analysis of a literary text from an ecological point of view.

Apart from the environmental point of view, Nature in Bengal is also viewed as mother and sometimes as God from times immemorial. Woman is also named prakriti (Nature) in Hinduism. So violation of a lady’s honour is the subordination of nature. It is also an Indian concept and belief that the dishonour of a woman must bring one a tragic doom as evident in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and also in D.L. Roy’s play Chandragupta. The Bengali critics were almost always concerned with feministic aspects in literature. Mr. Purna Chandra Basu in his article *Sahitye Khoon* (Murder in Literature) criticizes Shakespeare’s Othello from a feministic as well as oriental point of view. He says that even when the wife is really guilty, she deserves not capital punishment but banishment only. In the article Basu expresses the tone of an eco-feminist and evaluates Shakespeare from an Indian point of view. Haranchandra Rakshit was the first to translate the complete works of Shakespeare into Bengali. He also wrote a critical essay on Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Othello, King Lear and Hamlet in 1898 whereas A.C. Bradley’s famous book *Shakespearean Tragedy* appeared in 1904. Rakshit in his essay interprets

the character of Lady Macbeth from feministic point of view. He sympathizes with her as he knows the miserable position of a lady who somehow committed a mistake in a male dominated society. The characters of Ophelia, Cordelia may also be interpreted from this point of view. So it is evident that feminism or ecofeminism is not something new in Bengal.

Bengal's eco-critical point of view may also be sub-divided into several branches i.e. eco-feminism, eco-Marxism, eco-imperialism, eco-casteism and so on. So in Bengal's point of view eco-feminism is also viewed as a part of eco-criticism and naturally it encompasses both physical environment and human environment, as Greg Garrard also thinks.

Eco-feminism as a specific critical literary theory in Bengal is still to be recognized well. Some eminent authors and scholars attempted to evaluate Shakespeare from eco-feminist point of view. The foremost name that comes to my mind is that of Rabindranath Tagore. But before Tagore Rishi Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had written his famous essay, *Sakuntala*, *Miranda* *O Desdemona* where we find the tone of an eco-feminist. Mr. Purna Chandra Basu, D.L. Roy also attempted to interpret Shakespearean plays from Bengal's eco-feminist point of view. One of the epoch making writings that may influence any 'green' researcher is Simon C. Estok in his paper titled "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of 'Home' and 'Power' in *King Lear*" explains the key terms like 'Anthropocentrism' 'Ecocriticism' and 'Ecophobia' and he brought about a radical change in our concept of ecocriticism. Agreeing with Greg Garrard, Estok says that ecocriticism

"is not simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise— the natural environment, or aspects of it, represents in documents that contribute to material practices in material world".

'Ecophobia', according to Estok, is all about fear of a loss of agency and control to Nature. It is ecophobia that sets the Old Testament God declaring that 'man' is to have dominion over everything. It is ecophobia that allows 'man' unquestioned use of land and animals. And it is ecophobia that posits Nature as the scapegoat for social problems such as overcrowding and the diseases that such overcrowding encourages). Control of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in Western culture, seems to imply ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism. Similarly, misogyny is to rape as ecophobia is to environmental looting and plundering. Like racism and misogyny, with which it is often allied, ecophobia is all about power.

The term 'ecophobia' may be interpreted in our ecofeminist study of Kalidasa's and Shakespeare's plays. In *The Tempest* ecophobia gives birth to various conflicts, both inner and outer, or, to say more explicitly, psychological and social and this sociological aspect of the plays justifies the contemporaneity of the Bard. But in *Sakuntala* there is no question of ecophobia in the tapoban (hermitage in the forest). Rather we find peaceful cohabitation there. But subordination of woman is done by the King who had not grown friendly relationship with nature and so an eco-feminist would bring the charge of subordinating nature against King Dushmanta whose amorous relationship with *Sakuntala* was established from an anthropocentric point of view; this is why he forgot her later on.

Tagore wrote not a single critical of creative piece, save a sonnet, on Shakespeare, in particular. Still as an ecofeminist critic of Shakespeare and Kalidasa his contribution may certainly claim wide acclamation. Tagore finds dominance as the chief theme of the play *The*

Tempest. Tagore also finds out that the main cause of conflict between man and nature, man and man is lust for power. But in the play there is just the struggle for existence and no dominance only for sake of dominance. Tagore also finds Miranda's lack of love for nature but he finds love relationship between man and Nature in Sakuntala (Prachin Sahitya/ Sakuntala; Siksha/ Tapoban). But Tagore here does not remember the basic difference between the ancient world of Sakuntala where there were some human beings free to mix with nature and the seventeenth century world of Miranda where security was as necessary as food and it was almost impossible for Miranda to mix with nature freely as even now the women have to obey various conservative social taboos. Moreover, free mixing with nature might invite danger to Miranda, as Caliban, the embodiment of the evil force of nature was always present there with his malicious intension. Here the emancipation of women is prevented by both external malicious forces and the caring guardian, Prospero. That Tagore was vehemently opposed to the subjugation of Nature is evident in his own writings also. Mention may be made of his play Red Oleanders, Post Office, Sacrifice etc.

Desdemona: Tagore's comments on the character of Desdemona may be considered to be the throwing of stone at beehive. Here Tagore, in very limited number of words points out the oppression of women as licensed by religious belief, because the emancipation of women is hindered very often by religious taboos.

Let us have (for instance) a work of a world famous author— Shakespeare's Othello. Questioned about the purpose of the play Othello, Shakespeare would face difficulty. If he answered after much pondering, the answer would be wrong. If we are the members of the Brahmin Sabha we will hold the view that the purpose of the play is to advice the world to maintain casteism. If we are against the emancipation of women we would hold that Shakespeare's purpose is to advise the women not to see men other than husband. If we are doubtful about the poet's intelligence or sense of religion we will say that he had chopped down the wife's constancy in love or cruelly ridiculed simplicity by making Iago's cunningness win. But to say plainly, he wrote a play which reveals the poet's liking and disliking, even his place and time, but not as advice but as art. (Ghare Baire: Grantha Parichay). (Translation mine)
Again,

In the play Othello a Muslim army commander murdered his wife out of undue suspicion. In Shakespeare's work there is an ugly hint that if there is a marriage between a Muslim and a Christian, the Muslim Husband's horrible behaviour is quite natural. On this allegation what punishment will the Muslim members of the education board fix? Engaged in communal riots we are beating one another, and will the literature begin to receive stroke at last? (Prabasi, Asharh, In Reply to Criticism in Monthly Mohammadi Patrika). (Translation mine).

What is conspicuous here is that Tagore does not directly comment; rather he uses some 'if' clauses which mean that various people would interpret the character and her situation from their own viewpoints. But he points out that judged from the viewpoint of the human ecology of Indian caste system the character of Desdemona is a victim of her racial identity (religion), i.e. she disobeyed the social taboo against inter-religious marriage and this is why she met her tragic doom at the hand of her husband who also dies; but Othello's punishment was given by nobody else but by himself and his punishment is not considered to the result of the 'sin' of inter-religious marriage. But a woman is given the 'punishment' and the men in a patriarchal society consider themselves as the authority both to lodge the complaint and to judge and punish; and the women are given little chance of self-defence. Here Tagore notices the subordination of woman

and the anthropocentric nature of Othello, as if Desdemona was solely a property of Othello; she must have no other identity but the faithful, loyal and humble wife of Othello, not for her own sake but for sake of Othello. When her constancy was a little bit suspected only, not proved, she lost her right to live any more. Naturally there is an unuttered question: “Would Desdemona kill Othello if she suspected him or even if he were guilty?” Again, Tagore also hints that whoever may be the sinner, the punishment is given to the woman.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay draws a comparison between Miranda and Desdemona. He highlights the role of Nature in building the personality. He is also of Tagore’s view that there is no bondage of love between Miranda and Nature whereas in Sakuntala there is. The love was so profound in Sakuntala that while going to her in-laws’ house she was prevented by the natural objects: “When Sakuntala is going to leave Dushmanta her barks (clothes) are hooked by the trees, the thorny grasses prick her feet.” In king Dushmanta’s activities Bankim Chandra detects the subordination of Nature and woman. He compares him with a crazy elephant lifting Sakuntala, the lotus bud, with his trunk and thereby satisfying his desire of jungle sport. Considering a woman as a plaything, without thinking of her emotions, her joys and sorrows, her likings and her disliking is undoubtedly an ecofeminist concern and Bankim Chandra points out this aspect in *Abhijnam Sakuntalam*:

The shadow of the large Dushmanta tree has darkened Sakuntala— she is unable to bloom her face properly. It is not an amorous address— but a royal sport, the lord of the world has started playing love game as a hobby in the earthly bower; like a crazy elephant, by lifting up the bud of Sakuntala-lotus on his trunk, is quenching his thirst for jungle sport; will the lotus bloom by this? (Translation mine).

Here Bankim Chandra points out the anthropocentric attitude of King Dushmanta who considers Sakuntala a mere plaything; their relationship was not really a mutual love affair but an occasional enjoyment of the king and this is why he forgot her later on. Although the forgetfulness of Dushmanta is justified by some, as it was predestined by the curse of the Saint Durbasa, the injustice to a woman should not be missed here because Sakuntala was cursed in spite of her innocence, since absorbed in the thought of her beloved husband she could not hear the saint; yet she was the victim. It very often happens in a patriarchal society that whatever may be the situation, the woman has to suffer. The author Bankim Chandra, from an ecocentric point of view, sympathizes with Sakuntala. Then he refers to the emancipated and revolting self of the ancient heroine:

The Sakuntala who, a few months later, rebuking Dushmanta told at the court of the Paurab, “You non-Aryan (uncivilized) do you judge others in comparison with your own heart?” remained a girl under the thatched roof; its reason is not the maidenly shame. Its reason is the expanse of the character of Dushmanta. When Sakuntala is rejected at the king’s court, she is a wife, a queen, on the verge of ascending the seat of motherhood. So then Sakuntala is a lady. Here, in the hermitage, Sakuntala is the daughter of a saint, unduly desirous of the palace— who is Sakuntala here? Merely a lotus on the elephant trunk is she? I rendered labour here in order to show that the poet of Sakuntala is not less illuminating than the poet of *The Tempest*. (Translation mine).

Bankim Chandra also attempts an ecofeministic comparison between Sakuntala and Desdemona. He disapproves of the great poet Byasdeva’s presentation of the relegated female character Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*:

the illusion of heroism is not perceptible in Sakuntala as perceptible in Desdemona. Othello is dark complexioned and so is not considerable as beautiful to the Italian girls, but the attraction of heroism is stronger than the attraction of beauty, to the women's heart. The great poet who deprived the five's (Judhisthir, Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadeb) wife Draupadi of reaching heaven physically, with an allegation of being more inclined to Arjun, knew this theory and who created Desdemona has revealed its secret theory. (Translation mine).

The ecocritical thoughts of the Bengalee authors are found not only in the critical writings but in the creative pieces of many authors also. D.L. Roy in his book Kalidas O Bhababhooti attempts a comparative study between the two great Indian dramatists and refers to Shakespeare but he as a dramatist was influenced by Shakespeare's presentation of eco-casteism (racism) in *The Merchant of Venice*, as found in his presentation of the character of Mura as a strong feminist in his play *Chandragupta*. As Shylock is a victim of his race (Jew), Mura in D.L. Roy's play is a caste victim because of her lower caste (Sudra, the lowest caste in Hindu religious hierarchy) and her son Chandragupta's protesting voice echoes that of Shylock:

Shylock: I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? (A-s)

Chandragupta: Sudrani (female Sudra)! Is not a Sudra a human being? Does he have no hands and legs, as a Kshatriya has? No mind? No heart? (Act-I, s-i). (Trans. Mine).

She is relegated but she cannot accept her relegation because of her racial identity, an identity ascribed to her by the socio-religious environment. Chandragupta's speech makes us question, who should have been the hero of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock or Antonio; whether Shakespeare's purpose was to show the cruelty of Shylock or to show how a man might be transformed into the embodiment of cruelty. The ecocritical interpretation of the Bengalee critics makes us re-read the Shakespearean plays.

The Bengalee very often appears to be forerunner of modern literary movements. The critics mentioned above contributed a great deal to ecocriticism in Shakespeare but unfortunately the Indian movements are paid attention only when they somehow get a western stamp. As mentioned already Mr. Haran Chandra Rakshit presented a brief interpretation of the four great Shakespearean tragedies *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, with the third volume of his Shakespeare translations (1898). In this we find Rakshit anticipating A.C. Bradley. But unfortunately Rakshit is yet to win recognition as a Shakespeare critic. It would not be an overstatement to say that the Bengalee were very often the forerunners of many literary movements and some of the critical notes on Shakespeare by the Bengalee authors are superior to their western counterparts.

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