



Representation of Postcolonial Ecological Paradigms in Select Short Stories of Satyajit Ray

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.25>

Abstract:

This paper attempts to look at the representation of environment through the fantasy plants described in the short stories of Satyajit Ray namely, “Septopus’er Kheede”, “Kanai’er Kotha”, and “Bishphul”. For the purpose of writing the paper, a postcolonial ecological perspective has been employed. It is through postcolonialism that the marginalised states of both worlds are taken into consideration with the colonial gaze influencing the minds of those taking the lead. In these stories, nature has been portrayed as a consequence of human intervention, distortion, vengeance, role reversals as well as desolation, hence bridging the gap between the human and the non-human world. A recurring element is the inversion of the binaries of power which leads to macabre punishments and poetic justice. It is through these short stories that the relationship between power and responsibility is portrayed with Ray calling for an awareness concerning the ecology and that of the self.

Keywords: postcolonial, ecological, nature, fantasy, human.

Introduction

Postcolonial studies explore the themes of race, ethnicity, power, authority, and subversion. It is through literature that the imperialistic and colonial views are identified, the existing power dynamics questioned, and concepts renewed. Michelle Reid in her essay, “Postcolonial Science Fiction”, argues that science fiction makes one revise the power relations in terms of identity politics. Apart from the essentialism of humans, postcolonial fiction tends to make space for the figure of the apparent demure with vengeance being used as a significant trope. In the novel, *The Ruins*, a group of tourists are caught up among ravenous and dangerous creatures resembling plants (Smith). It is significant how the aspect of vengeance is not only something that is carried out by the specific victims colonised by humans but nature itself.

It is also through the lens of postcolonial studies that science fiction is employed to challenge the realities of the world (Banerjee 60). This, therefore, is made possible with the introduction of metaphors and allegories that blur the line between the real and the fictional. Nature, therefore, has been one of the primary settings in literature, showcasing the morbid consequences of the power being carried exercised over it.

Despite its significance, postcolonialism is deeply anthropocentric, with its focus revolving around the lasting impacts of colonisation on the cultural legacy of humans and how they respond to it, once influenced by its Western counterpart. The environment, being colonised, undergoes changes, manipulated by the colonisers. At this juncture, ecological perspectives become critical. Cheryll Glotfelty (xix-xx) notes that the premise of ecological criticism is founded on its mutual relation between the physical environment and human culture, with nature acting as an active agent.

The term coloniser refers to anyone who colonises or indoctrinates the space of the colonised. This space, therefore, could be the very nature of the non-humans like trees, a region terrorised by a ruler, or the one preserved by the inhabitants from an outsider. The aforementioned spaces are the ones inhabited by the marginalised communities. One of the crucial elements that makes these three short stories contextual here is the presence of the binaries, namely, the humans and the non-humans, the natural and the supernatural, the coloniser and the colonised, the Self and the Other, the insider and the outsider, and the known and the unknown.

However, what jeopardises the very existence of the binary is the presence of something out of it, hence threatening an apparent law and order of the environment. The threats mentioned in these short stories largely stem from beyond human knowledge. Speculative fiction, therefore, deals with both postcolonialism and nature, with a historical backdrop at its convenience. It also looks at the subgenre, the fantasy, where the good conquers the evil. According to Pichette (247), visibility is a decolonial act with the capability of looking at something which is beyond the real and conventional. The term ‘strange’ could, perhaps, best be implied in terms of Ray’s short stories where he makes his characters cross paths with the Other, the marginalised status of which, marks a conflict with the privileged one of the humans. While the perfidy of the colonial rule is owed to the humans, the ramifications of its impact are not lost on the non-human world which threatens the established paradigms of anthropocentrism, hence postcolonial ecology (Dey and Singh 6). This is reflected in “Septopus’er Kheede” [“Hunger of the Septopus”].¹ “Kanai’er Kotha” [“Kanai’s Story”], on the other hand, also introduces the element of strangeness with the character of an omniscient old man who helps Kanai in his mission for the greater good. However, “Bishphul” [“The Poison Plant”] offers to conjure a strangeness of its own, fabricating horror.

The reason behind the characters, all humans, experiencing an unsettling feeling is due to fear. It is the fear of a possibility of role reversal that the Self shudder at the thought of being positioned as the Other. The attempt to decolonisation, is, as Fanon (35) expounds, “a violent” process claiming a sense of culture and identity, instilling fear in the Self, and establishing an order distinct from the existing one.

This paper attempts to look at Ray’s use of environment through the lens of a postcolonial ecological perspective, which would help understand the relationship between literature and environment.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research approach of Ray’s three short stories “Septopus’er Kheede”, “Kanai’er Kotha”, and “Bishphul”. It attempts to look at the exploitation of the environment through a postcolonial ecological perspective. It focuses on how power dynamics are redefined through a disruption in the conventional hierarchies.

Close textual analysis has been utilised to focus on and interpret the stories in terms of their narrative and descriptive patterns, the environments of urban and rural spaces, the overlap as well as the switch between humans and nature, the spatiotemporal aspect of decentering modernity, and a look at the exploitation of marginalised voices.

Septopus’er Kheede

“Septopus’er Kheede” delves into the story of a man-eating plant raised by a horticulturalist. In reality, several species of insectivorous plants are distributed in their preferred habitats like wet, damp, humid, and acidic environments which are deficient in nutrients across the globe. Over the

years, literary works and movies have depicted tentacled leafy creatures and their grim ways of devouring animals and humans. Short stories like “The American’s Tale” and “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid” imagine the killer plant trope, lulling their victims to doom, often leading to poetic justice (“The American's Tale”; Wells). Such monstrous plants also find mention in Phil Robinson’s “The Man-Eating tree”, and Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi*.

Research indicates that the glands present in the leaf epidermis of Venus flytrap, Sundews and rainbow plants, and the inner lining of pitcher cavity of pitcher plant, among others, trap insects by the process of endocytosis. They digest their prey by secreting acids, fluids, and digestive enzymes, which enable their growth (Freund et al. 44).

Inspired by these creatures of nature, the story describes a plant that possesses features of an aquatic invertebrate animal or an octopus. Ray’s Septopus is an exotic carnivorous plant with seven trunks and a mouth brought back from the forests of Nicaragua, a country located thousands of miles from India. This man-eating plant is enormous and can consume rats, hens, and goats, among others. Before introducing Septopus, the narrator, Parimal, names a few real-life insectivorous plants like Sundews, Pitcher plants, and Bladderworts. Ray suitably chooses a tropical country which is biologically significant, possessing a unique ecosystem, with the environment suiting the survival of such plants.

It is noteworthy how the story employs what would come to be known as the ‘hegemony of the proletariat’ which is used to explain the condition of workers as a unified counter culture (Ramos). Since time immemorial, nature has been colonised by humans in the most brutal ways possible. However, it has been known for its vengeance through natural calamities as well. It is this

normative element of revenge that Ray juxtaposes with fantasy resulting into the hunted being the hunter.

The evolved Septopus lashes out its tentacles in its desperate need for human flesh. Though not a humanoid, Septopus is assumed to have a brain from which the tentacles project and an ability to perceive like humans. This eventually helped save itself when Kanti Babu realised it had gone too far, lacing potassium cyanide with raw meat to kill it off. It is here that the Self and the Other dynamics reverse with the 'man' being Othered, feeling utterly powerless by the powerful Self, the 'plant'. Being threatened with this binary and the lost position of 'Self', therefore, the group of men, especially the horticulturalist in the garb of the coloniser, compels the possibility of an otherwise marginalised turning into the powerful.

However, Septopus's aggression is not only targeted towards its coloniser, Kanti Babu, but the class that is responsible for subjugation and oppression, the humans. Being an apparent flytrap, Kanti Babu expresses his shock while narrating how it had become bigger and displayed a hunger for both mice and cats. This eventually transcends to the desire for the flesh of humans with the tentacles once pouncing on his domestic help, Prayag as well as Kanti Babu's friend, Abhi. Here, the Septopus represents the community of the marginalised, with their lives being subjected to years of tyranny. Dejected with imprisonment and lack of acknowledgement, it turns blind to anything that approaches it, detecting everything as a potential threat. Apart from the mnemonics of the mice and the cat being provided as part of its diet, Septopus also dashes to seize Abhi's dog, Badshah, problematising Septopus's representation of the oppressed community. What seems to be implied here is Septopus's desire to turn like its ruthless conqueror, a human, by vanquishing him from his throne. Septopus's apathetic treatment to the otherwise members of its community like Badshah, is a justification of its urge to reign solely and in its own terms. Therefore, the name

Badshah, referring to the supreme ruler, fails to make an impression here and is toppled to its doom.

The sheer fact that a mere insectivorous plant turns into a man-eating giant goes against the power constraint where a powerless is expected to behave like one. Driven by the quest for fame, human interference eventually wreaks havoc.

Kanai'er Kotha

“Kanai'er Kotha” is the story of a common man, rising to uncommon heights for his dying father and the society. Ray describes here a fragrant medicinal plant, ‘Chandni’, which has pointed violet-coloured leaves, bearing yellow flowers. A Chandni plant, according to the narrator, is used to treat ‘Sukhai’ disease where the affected individual shows symptoms of rickets and in a period of twenty days, the patient becomes completely desiccated. These plants occur in a place called Badra. Chandni is a common name of a plant known as ‘pinwheel plant’ or ‘crepe jasmine’, the botanical name of which is *Tabernaemontana divaricata*. However, Ray’s Chandni plant is morphologically different from the pinwheel plant. In the story, it is mentioned that the weavers of Badra are suffering from Sukhai but they are not allowed to receive the benefit of the plant as the tyrant ruler does not give access of the plant to the weavers.

From selling clothes at a lower price to dehumanisation, worker exploitation to lack of resources, a closer look at the story lays bare its components of class struggle. With a tyrannical king, an imprisoned prince, an elderly helper, and a bright young man to the rescue, “Kanai'er Kotha” creates the enigma of a fairy tale. However, what one almost glosses over are the grim realities encompassing the society at large.

Though power lies in the hands of a few, the large weaver community cannot plan a revolt. Fearing an overthrow and a subsequent democracy, the king hides the Chandni plant to his close quarters, guarded by alligators and a King Cobra leaving his subjects to die. Unlike the archetypal “shonar kathi-rupor kathi”, the golden and silver sticks consisting of a fragment of soul outside the corporeal bodies of the characters of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the magical object, here, is a plant (Majumder 49). This echoes the illegal possession of the powerful for their own selfish means over something that belongs to the community as a whole. The weavers, symbolic of the subaltern group, helplessly give their consent to the king in weaving clothes despite their woe. Ghosh (1) points out that “only permanent victory can break that subordination” which the latter triumphs by hiding the plant. Ray’s ecological outlook leads to a postcolonial interpretation where Kanai not only saves his father and the weavers but also the kingdom from a ruler who thrived by monopolising the handloom industry.

Unlike “Septopus’er Kheede”, it is the lack of appetite owing to the Sukhai disease that seems to debunk the ecological view in “Kanai’er Kotha”. If hunger in the former happens to be a desire for the power struggle, the sheer lack of it refers to the weavers surrendering to the exploitation and being sucked out of their independence in the latter. The motif of hunger, therefore, works as thematic experience for both the stories.

Bishphul

“Bishphul” opens with a strong command, “Odi ke jabenna babu!” (“Don’t go that way, sir!”), which immediately sets the unsettling tone of the story (Ray 219). The command, however, comes from a village boy, Bhagwan, towards the cityite Jaganmoy babu, warning the latter from venturing closer to a plant, ‘Bishphul’, which is rumoured to kill all in its proximity. The forty-two-year-old

Jaganmoy has come to Kathjhumri, a remote rural location. Although out travelling for relieving stress and driving away from the mundane and fast paced environment of the city, he eventually finds himself physically constricted in the countryside.

Even the flowers of the plant possess morphological anomalies exhibiting a polychromatic display ranging from yellow flecked with violet spots, an inverted palette of violet sprayed with yellow spots, orange dusted with discrete black and white spots.

Jaganmoy's entry to the village could be viewed as a quiet space threatened with the prospect of an outside intrusion. Bhagwan's fabrication of the legend of the poison plant serves as a rural resistance to its urban counterpart. While at it, the wealthy and intellectual Jaganmoy recognises the intellect in the boy. This intellect of the urban and modern man, however, falls short in the attempts to preserve the untamed parts of the village locale. The story exposes the anxiety of the urban man towards the unknown realm of the village. Jaganmoy's modern and rational education falls victim to a rural lore where he listens to an allegedly poison plant, with dead animals lying near it, manifesting it in both behavioral and psychosomatic ways, ultimately corroding his own thinking. It is here that the body which prides itself on its colonial education, finds itself disoriented in the hands of a subaltern voice that triumphs on deceiving it with the help of another urban man, Pabitra.

Pabitra, a renowned author who stays at Moor Sahib's bungalow biannually, comes up with the plan with Bhagwan and a few other villagers to evict Jaganmoy. However, the story transcends its simple narrative pattern, achieving broader thematic interpretations. Despite hailing from the city, both Pabitra and Jaganmoy represent the urban educated man differently. According to deep ecology, all living beings and plants have inherent value, something that contradicts Jaganmoy

babu's idea of coming and finding the place beautiful for his own gain: regaining health. To exercise his dominion over the discovery of the plant, he wonders whether the tourist department is aware of its existence and writes a report on it for a scientific journal. Although Jaganmoy's intellectual hubris does not let him believe the humble Bhagwan initially, his obsession with anthropocentrism deludes him into believing in his omnipotence. Dey and Singh (4) write,

“The clash between Eastern and Western ideas of modernity, rooted in the dichotomies established by European Enlightenment, has perpetuated binaries such as primitive and civilized, authentic and hybrid, and tradition and modernity.”

The plant follows Jaganmoy, rejecting his efforts of uprooting it or anything that is deemed unfit for his existence; it is he who gets uprooted instead.

Pabitra, on the other hand, is described as idealistic, delivering English tuitions to Bhagwan, and devoting his youth to writing. However, being an urbanite himself, he senses the arrogance of Jaganmoy, weaponises it through fabrication, and gets back his residence, a move resulting from his knowledge. This knowledge could only be accessible to him through Jaganmoy's air of colonial dismissal of the indigenous, something that Pabitra is aware of.

Conclusion

Through his short stories, Ray makes the clashes between psychological and rational, nature and human, the old and the new, and rural and urban, palpable. With him, one learns to witness the unique forms of the conservation of nature. The mystery regarding the outsider, who it is, and the paranoia of danger associated with the strange are persistent in these works. Ray employs the motif of food to enhance the ecological constructs in both the stories. While food in “Septopus'er Kheede” is mentioned as a need for survival with the story emphasising on the food web, in

“Kanai’er Kotha”, food bridges the gap between reality and fiction. Jagaibabu, the stereotypical helper, hands three magical fruits to Kanai, each helping him reach his goal instead of quenching his hunger. Keeping any thoughts of food at a bay in “Bishphul” is the extension of the dread Jaganmoy possesses where fear overrides hunger, leading him to be vulnerable to trauma. It is the interplay between the expected and the unexpected which becomes paramount here, making one rethink the meanings of the regular.

Note:

1. This and all subsequent title translations are my own.

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