Nature and Spirituality: An Analysis of the Poems of Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Bharathiyar
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ABSTRACT

Nature has long been a source of inspiration to the poets to compose their poems and has remained as an effective stimulant to reveal their emotions recollected in tranquillity. They have been enthused to set their renderings to the vicissitudes of the landscape, the changes in season, to the chirping of birds, the humming of the bees, to the rustling sound of the leaves and any natural phenomena around them. The phrase ‘Nature Poetry’ at once resonates in the mind the great names, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Emily Dickinson and so on. To each one of them, however, Nature relates itself in a different way. When William Wordsworth says in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”,

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity. (lines 88-91),

He reflects the concept that nature exposes the pain in human life, a theme that Coleridge meditates in “Dejection: An Ode”. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, their experience with nature becomes almost painfully human; they realize that in spite of the poet’s strong connection with nature, he is still separate from it. Both Wordsworth and Shelley wrote in an age that appreciated the sublime in the natural world, the world being fascinated by nature’s power and wonder. Yet the natural world depicted in Shelley’s poetry is wilder and crueler than in Wordsworth’s. To Wordsworth, nature is a gentle, nurturing force that teaches and soothes humanity. Shelley, however, focuses nature’s grandeur that puts him in a trance. Murali Sivaramakrishnan, poet, critic and a specialist in literary theory, remarks in his writing Poetry and Nature: Some Prefatory Remarks

Poetry and Nature have always been interlinked. The poet recognizes the intrinsic value of all and everything and poetry in more than one way is the struggle to find the true expression, a suitable mode of celebrating this unique realization. . . . However, poets the world over had been wise enough to perceive the human nature nexus and the complex web of life from very early ages—but the fate of poetry is such that it has moved away from its essential prime position in human society. We have displaced poetry from our lives with dire consequences. After all, poets have the uncanny knack of reminding us of the bitter sweet truths of life and living. (http://smuralis.wordpress.com)

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Though the celebration of Nature is a common feature of the poets’ community, one finds a distinct mode in some of the Indian poets, that of Spiritualism or to be specific, of Mystical progression realized by the great mystics. Such a feature is denoted as ‘Nature Mysticism’, found actively in the East — in the Upanishads, Taoism and in Zen and this should not be confused with Shamanism or Paganism. Shamanism believes that all elements of the natural world are imbued with spirit; it is occult in its overtone and not transcendent. On the other hand, for the Nature mystic an object like a tree or animal is the basis to find the eternal. Nature as a whole is more important than its constituent elements, and more important as an aesthetic experience than as a means to survival. He also suffers the pangs of separation from it, as Wordsworth and Coleridge do. The aesthetic component of Nature Mysticism is intimately involved with both the nani temperament and with the path of via positiva, that results in an ardent devotion called as ‘Prema bhakti’, the Unitive Life, the pinnacle of ‘Devotional Mysticism’, which has to cross the indispensable step of ‘Viraha bhakti’, ‘Love in Separation’. This is what is found in some of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Bharatiyar. Nevertheless, Bharatiyar conveys that he has transcended this condition and enjoys Union with the One. This paper analyzes this aspect in the poems of these great poets. Rabindranath Tagore popularly known as Gurudev was a rare preceptor and is almost deified at Calcutta. The icon of West Bengal is relevant to the immediate present as Globalisation and Eco-concern have become the watchwords of the Twenty-first century. God, Nature and Man are inseparable entities in his poems. His sensitivity of reception has turned brooks into books and the stones as sermons. The impact of his poems are three dimensional — emotional, intellectual and spiritual. The spiritual appeal of Gitanjali is not new. The echo of its theme in Sarojini Naidu’s Village Song and Subramanija Bharatiyar’s Kaatru Velidyai Kannamma lends room to a new perspective. Spiritual development in its different dimensions is vivid in this interesting comparison. The analysis of these three poems portrays how Nature is an integral aspect in providing a background, suggesting the mood and in enhancing the theme and the meaning symbolically. They also indicate the mystical progression of the soul in terms of ‘Nayika Bhava’, otherwise known as ‘Bridal Mysticism’. 

Song number Eighteen of Gitanjali provides an amalgamation of despair and hope. Nature in this poem is no more a provider of solace; it is gloomy and threatening, indicating the depression that strains the self. In the spiritual voyage towards the Truth, the Soul who has had a glimpse of it, is now caught midway amidst dark apprehensions. The terms ‘clouds’, ‘loneliness’, ‘waiting’; ‘rainy hours’ have spiritual implications. ‘Rainy hours’ and ‘Dark lonely day’ in the empirical level also symbolise man’s inner and the innate vices such as greed, jealousy, pride, lust etc., reflected as commercialism, consumerism, ruthless selfishness and individual supremacy collectively and the spiritual retardation individually. However, the poem means more, as Gurudev personifies the soul or jivatma as a lady love yearning for merger with the Lord, her Lover. It is a typical domestic scene as the anxious lady waits all alone at the doorstep for her love to return. Her fear heightens as it gets darkened because of the black clouds, the gloomy sky, restless wind and the pouring rain. There is no light; she stands sulking, wailing and just gazing far into the dim horizon that does not show any hope to her.

Clouds heap upon clouds, and it darkens. Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?

In the busy moments of the noontime work I am with the crowd, but on this dark lonely day it is only for thee that I hope.

The threatening features noted in the poem point to the doubts and fears of the soul of losing the cherished love of the Lord – the jivatma that has now, a while ago tasted the divine nectar of love. Song Seventeen of the Gitanjali confirms this with the refrain: “I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands”. But, alas! This ‘waiting’ is too long. There are two aspects to ‘Nayika Bhava’ — samslesha, union with the Lord and vislesha, separation from Lord. In the former aspect, the Great Lover unites with the Lord. He is attracted to a moment with the jivatma and conceals Himself, making the soul suffer pangs of separation, the latter aspect. However, the mystics prefer vislesha since it’s the purgatorial fire that burns the remnants of impurities of the soul. Vislesha is itself devotion and contemplation. Such a devotion is known as ‘Viraha Bhakti’, the most palpable form of bhakti of the alvars and nayanmars. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the Father of Indian Writing in English eulogizes Tagore’s Gitanjali:

The current coin of India’s devotional poetry is melted and minted anew by Rabindranath, but the pure gold shines as brightly as ever, even though the inscription on the coin is in English. The imagery, the connotes, the basic experience, the longing, the trial, the promise, the realization — all have the quintessence of Indian experience and taste of. Its familiarity was its recommendation to India; its apparent novelty was its recommendation abroad. (Indian Writing in English 110-111)

A similar note is struck in Sarojini Naidu’s Village Song. The backdrop of the poem is a village perhaps in the Uttar Pradesh. The village belle like any other village woman carries water from river Jamuna, a common sight even today in these parts of India. Satvinder Kaur in her book Sarojini Naidu’s Poetry: Melody of Indianness explains this scenario and says:

Sarojini Naidu with her creative poetic vision presents before us a very realistic picture of an Indian village maiden’s fear on a long and lovely way through her poem ‘Village Song’. She vividly projects the innocent fearful feelings and the inner feminine sensibility of village maiden. (131)

But, the critic does not talk about the poem’s spiritual significance. The village girl symbolises the individual self in quest of self. Her traversing through the forest is the life on a trial. The boatman’s song represents the worldly
temptation that lures the self astray. The seeming pleasure soon ends in disaster. Darkness, thunder, lightening, the fear of snake and the evil spirit are the negative forces that sway the mind of the aspirant. The anxiety of the family members signifies the bondage that binds one to the mundane affairs. Prayer alone uplifts one to the final goal.

Unless Thou succour my foot steps and guide me,  
Ram Re Ram! I shall die.

The poem obviously has metaphysical connotation. It also points to the longing, fear and anxiety of the soul in its spiritual journey to reach the Ultimate. It has for a moment enjoyed the Union, of submitting itself to the divine music of its lover. The Indian mind at once remembers the mesmerising flute music of Lord Krishna that encapsulated the gopas, gopikas, cattle, the Nanda Vraja, the earth, the firmament and the entire universe. No wonder this simple soul is enamoured by the song. However, it has not totally come out of its empirical attachments. She has to go a long way though her ‘pitchers are full’, her soul being replete with love. But, to come out of this predicament, she has to be helped by her own Lord only. In both the poems of Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, Nature frighteningly grins apparently to purify the soul further.

On the contrary, Bharathiyar’s *Karru Veliyidai Kannamma* is a celebration of *samslesha*, the soul declaring that all its sorrows and pangs of separation are now driven off – tuyar poyina, tunpankal poyina. This is the highest stage akin to the philosophy of *Advaita*, when the jivatma merges with the Paramatma, the Supreme One. There is no duality and hence there is no fear, doubt or sorrow. God and Man become one and the same. They exist in each other. So, there is eternal happiness. The soul commemorates this timeless bliss naturally in the Space, the narrator visualizing the One as ‘Kannamma’ – this is Bharathiyar’s Way

Kaarru Veliyidai Kannamma- Ninran
Kaadalai yenni kalikkinren.

And in this magnificent moment, the soul takes pleasure in seeing the Body of the Supreme, each of its parts – the nectarine lips, the moon-like eyes, the golden form, the sweet taste of the tongue when the name is uttered and finally Kannamma is the illumination of the soul’s eternal life – uyir teeyinil valar cotiye – the illumination that grows and lives for ever, an excellent phrase that defies explication. It is an experience to be realized. And happily this is the mind and thought of the poet. In his book *On Bharathi*, K. Kailasapathy, the well-known Sri Lankan Tamil Scholar, critic and also a comparatist, quoting Ananda Coomaraswamy, another famous aesthetic critic, observes:

Bharathi’s poetic imagination with its simultaneous response to the ethereal and the earthy is metaphysical in the Vedantic sense. Ananda Coomaraswamy says, “The ultimate reality of metaphysics is a Supreme Identity in which the opposition of all contraries, even of being and not being is resolved”. Bharathi’s poetry is a reflection of this identity. (10)

Chaitanya Maha Prabhu (1486-1534) an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna, defines this as *Achintya Beda* - an inconceivable and simultaneous oneness and difference. It harmonises monism and dualism into a single system. It is the ‘Madhurya Bhava or Kanta Bhava’, mentioned above as ‘Viraha Bhakti’. It is Atma Samarpanam, the surrender of the soul. They become one, yet maintain a separateness in order to enjoy the bliss of the glory of love between them. This is oneness in separation and separation in oneness. This is ‘Bridal Mysticism’ and ‘Nature Mysticism” of a different order, in which the components of Nature become tools for realization and revelation.

References


