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Dialogue between Silent Woman and Silent Nature:

An Ecofeminist Reading of Tagore's "Subha"

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Abstract: Tagore's conception and portrayal of nature is so vast and all-encompassing that it would be futile to capture it within few words. Like innumerable rewards towards Tagore, the great nature lover my article is just another tribute to his lifelong meditation on nature. Tagore offers before his readers Nature with its multidimensional forms with all its sensitivity and brilliance. He was so much engrossed in Nature and imbibed the purity of Nature in core of his heart only to reflect the Truth of Nature through each and every genre of art (poems, paintings, plays, novels, short stories, songs etc). Tagore perceives Nature in her multifaceted characters like mother, daughter, beloved etc. Outside Bengal Tagore is mainly recognized for his poetry and as only Noble Laureate for Literature in India but his short stories are as enchanting and enthralling as his poetry and songs. Through his short stories Tagore portrays the then socio-cultural background and age old practices which hinder the progress of society with his dexterous sagacity and empathetic quality. He not only meditates upon Nature outside but nature within which makes his writings all the more profound and complex. Assimilation of Nature within oneself is represented in the eponymous character of Tagore's short story "Subha" silently and saliently. Within the short dimension of a short story Tagore reflectively represents a dumb girl's connection with Nature. Language of Nature and language of Subha gets mingled in a silent way. Nature is so imbued in Subha that it seems Nature speaks to her and also speaks for her. Universal union of silent language can be found in the interaction of Subha and her Mother Nature. Nature becomes ally and confederate to Subha. The silent girl's language finds its form in multifaceted nature of the magnanimous Nature. Synthesis of sound and soundlessness finds its expression in Subha's sign, signal, sob and sigh towards the universe. The sensitivity of Nature and selfless love of silent world can hold the



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universe. The strength of solitude reigns supreme in the silent world of Nature and Woman. The entire story reverberates with the theme that pure love needs no language and the universal love which links all creatures is beyond any language.

Keywords: Tagore, Ecofeminism, Nature, Woman.

The Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's conception and portrayal of nature in his entire canon is so vast and all-encompassing that it would be futile to capture it within a few words. My article, by focusing on a single short story of Tagore, is an attempt to offer a tribute to this great nature-lover's lifelong meditation on Nature. Tagore offers before his readers Nature with its multidimensional forms - with all its sensitivity and brilliance. His writings are deeply engrossed with Nature and the entire canon imbibes the purity of Nature only to reflect the Truth of Nature through each and every genre of art (poems, paintings, plays, novels, short stories, songs etc). Tagore perceives Nature in her multifaceted characters like mother, daughter, beloved etc.

Tagore is mainly recognized for his poetry and as only Noble Laureate for Literature in India but his short stories are as enchanting and enthralling as his poetry and songs. Through his scintillating short stories Tagore portrays the then socio-cultural background and age old practices which hinder the progress of society with his dexterous sagacity and empathetic quality. He not only meditates upon the outward Nature but upon that Nature which lies within each and every living and non-living beings. The assimilation of Nature within oneself is represented in the eponymous character of Tagore's short story "Subha" silently and saliently. Within the short, apt and compact dimension of a short story Tagore reflectively represents a dumb girl's strong connection with Nature. The story is situated in the village named Chandipur. Banikantha has three daughters - Sukeshini (a girl with beautiful hair), Suhashini (a girl with sweet smile) and Subhashini (a girl who talks sweetly). Ironically Subhashini (she is called Subha for short) unfortunately turns out to be dumb. Subha's two other sisters get married with dowry but Subha's deformity hangs like a curse upon her parents. By bringing in the issue of marriage Tagore aptly points out the heinous customs of child marriage and dowry system in the then crippled society. People around Subha are



so insensitive that they discuss their perturbation regarding Subha's speechlessness before her. They cannot even think that a person without speech can have a heart to feel. Subha's father loves more than his other daughters but her mother takes Subha's inability to speak as a blemish on her motherhood. Subha does not get absolute love and sympathy from her biological mother but she gets the purity of love from her Mother earth. By taking recourse to Ranjay Pratap Singh's essay "Environment and Vedic Literature", we can aptly say that Vedic literature rightly propounds the concept that Mother Earth (*Bhumi*) and Father Sky (*Dyau*) nourish all the creatures as their children.

Throughout the story Subha is identified with Nature. Subha's eyelashes are compared with long leaves and her thin lips are like tiny leaves. In this way effortlessly Tagore connects Subha physically and figuratively with Nature. Human language needs translation and other assistance to express one's thoughts but a dumb girl like Subha needs no language as her face and large bright black eyes divulge everything. The mind imprints its innermost thoughts on the face. To express oneself one must not have the medium of language because silence has its own way of expression which is much more vocal than language itself. Expressions on Subha's face are endlessly compared with different elements of Nature like a dim setting moon or ever-sparkling thunder. Nature has her own diversified strong as well as demure elements like human expressions and emotions to demonstrate herself as a living being. Subha's wordless and companionless existence relates her with the clear endless sky as well as with the shadowy silent noontide with all the vigour of its calmness.

Being in tune with the age-old comparison, Tagore here compares the river with a girl and a girl's behavior with different objects of Nature. In Indian culture the concept of river is always associated with women, which can be found in the depiction and portrayal of India's most of the rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Krishna, Kaveri etc as goddesses. The river which runs by the village Chandipur is compared with a tireless modest girl of a middleclass family who knows her boundary well. The river has a connection with the two villages on its bank. It indicates man's sheer



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dependency on Nature. The busy benevolent river serves the humankind in its own cheerful way. Subha's integration of Nature within herself is indicated by her spending time by the river bank whenever she gets time. The renowned critic in the field of ecocriticism Kate Soper in her essay "Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature" has rightly pointed out that Nature has been represented as 'a woman in two rather differing senses': 'she' can easily be identified with the 'body of laws, principles and processes' that is the 'object of scientific scrutiny and experimentation'. In addition, 'she' can also be read in terms of "nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed or tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape-trees, woodlands, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body)" (141). Language of Nature and language of Subha gets mingled in a silent way. Nature is so imbued in Subha that it seems Nature speaks to her and also speaks for her. The variegated objects of Nature like the murmuring river, song of a boatman, chirping of birds, rustling of leaves all come to a universal union to form a language which the so-called dumb Nature and the dumb girl can understand. At this critical juncture, it would be relevant to mention Ranjay Pratap Singh's observation in the celebrated essay titled "Environment and Vedic Literature": "Indian folk culture does not attach human sentiments only to earth, water, air, sky, fire, sun, etc., but also extends them to rivers, ponds, hills, animals, trees, and plants as well" (110). Nature becomes ally and confederate to Subha. The silent girl's language finds its form in multifaceted nature of the magnanimous Nature. Synthesis of sound and soundlessness finds its expression in Subha's sign, signal, sob and sigh towards the universe. Confrontation between silent Nature and silent woman tends to be intense in noontide when the clamorous world gets drowsy. The amalgamation of nugatory nature of human world and the vast universe finds its form in the silent conversation between Subha and compassionate cosmos.

Language is too futile a medium to communicate with Nature and its objects can be grasped from the friendship of Subha and her two cows named Sarbashi and Panguli. They never hear their names from her mouth but, being too sensitive, they can understand the language of love, fondling,



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derision of another silent creature of the universe. This bonding between human and non-human being aptly demonstrates the power of evocation and utterance which silence possess within itself. At this moot point, it would be apt to recount Val Plumwood's quote from Warwick Fox's essay "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?": "We can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence ... there is no bifurcation of reality between the human and non-human realms ... to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness" (Elliot 158). Silence has its own resonance and reverberation. Tagore has minutely observed the language of compassion which reigns in this silent world where Subha finds a shelter of assurance and warmth of love which the human world with their power of speech fails to offer. Sensitivity in the world of solitude reigns supreme. Apart from two cows, Subha has a cat which needs her warm lap to sleep on. The caring nature of Subha aligns her more with the Nature.

Among the speaking human beings Subha has one friend named Pratap, who is also regarded as worthless by his family and neighbours. His hobby is to catch fishes by the riverside. Their friendship blossoms in the dotting Nature. Nature turns out to be a safe solicitous and sensitive shelter for Subha. Vapid verbosity of human beings versus silent sensitivity of Nature becomes clear in Subha's futile interaction with the world. Pythagoras' proverbial observation is indeed true that Silence is better than unmeaning words. Tagore has indispensably relates Subha's blossoming phase of adolescent with Different objects of Nature. The inevitable awareness of adolescent lashes on the coast of Subha's heart like turbulent tides. Confrontation of an earnest speechless girl with the earnest full moon night makes the woman-Nature bonding stronger. The desire of Subha's heart as if wants to reach the endless cosmos. Subha absorbs Nature into herself in delightful as well as deplorable times. The writer compares Subha with a wounded doe when Subha gets the news of her own marriage from Pratap. The comparison between Nature and Subha goes on side by side. Before taking leave from her two cows, her true friends for all day she fondles them and looks at them with eyes full of words which the denizens of the silent world can read. Subha's parting scene from her cows inevitably reminds us of Shakuntala's parting scene from her deers in the forest. The bonding between Nature and woman is solely dependent on pure love. The night before leaving for Kolkata



Subha lies on the ground by hugging it as if she is begging the Mother Earth to hold her tightly and not to leave her. The concept of '*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' is reflected in Subha's acceptance of Mother Earth (*Vasudha*) as her only relation. This instance of urging of a silent child before a silent parent raises the value and depth of their selfless love which connects us to the unending universe. As Tagore is deeply enlightened with the thoughts of *Vedas Puranas* and *Upanishads*, he envisions the unbreakable connection between universe and man. As Srivastava rightly observes: "Acceptance of sentimental relations between man and environment is a hall mark of Vedic concept ... Feeling of love and attachment towards environment, expression of belief, gratitude and sacrifice in special circumstances for environmental conservation are true human sentiments" (108).

Subha's mother decks her ostensibly with jewellery but as she is the very daughter of Mother Nature all jewellerys become unbecoming on her. The role of patriarchy is crystal clear in every system of society. It becomes all the more prominent when the would-be bridegroom is compared with God and Subha is compared with a sacrificial animal. The vulnerable quality of Nature and Woman is unambiguously demonstrated by this comparison. Subha's parents arranges her marriage by covering the truth but the truthful girl Subha's tears want to divulge it. The shameful deception of the speaking world emerges with its vapid vulgarity before the vibrant veracity of the silent world. The cultural critic Patrick D. Murphy has rightly observes in the essay "Ecofeminist Dialogues":

An ecofeminist dialogics requires this effort to render the other, primarily constituted by androcentrism as women and nature (and actually as the two intertwined: nature-as-woman and woman-as -nature), as speaking subject within patriarchy in order to subvert that patriarchy not only by decentering it but also by proposing other centres... (Coupe 196)

After discovering the truth of Subha's dumbness husband again gets married to a woman with words. It is evident here that the language of the silent world whether it be Nature or Woman cannot be deciphered by the speaking world. To comprehend the depth of silence one has to be compassionate and rich within heart. Tagore has created a beautiful dialogue between Nature and



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Woman as well as between two different silent zones inhabited by so-called speaking and non-speaking creatures with assiduity and dexterity. Murphy has rightly pointed out:

If emotion and instinct arise from historical natural influences upon the evolution of the species, then their impact on our behavior, their entry into consciousness, are a form by which the nonhuman world speaks to us through signs that our conscious renders verbally. To deny emotion as feminine and/or instinct as primitive nature is to reserve the role of speaking subject only for the ego and to deny a voice to the other, which is in reality a part of ourselves. (Coupe 196)

Tagore has created a wonderful world of silence with so many signs within it. Subha finds friend, mother, nurturer, nourisher, empathiser in Nature. Silence here in this story emerges as a true friend who never betrays. Silence becomes a mode of dialogue and a great art of conversation between two silent speakers - Nature and Woman.

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