

Exploring the Sacredness of Nature: Eco-spiritual Realization in Gopinath Mohanty's *High Tide, Ebb Tide*

*Narayan Jena, SRM University, Chennai**

*Swagatika Parida, SRM University, Chennai***

*Pramod Kumar Das, KIIT, Bhubaneswar****

Abstract

The central concern of the paper is to show that nature plays a significant role in shaping the spiritual self of a modern man. It tries to explore the possibility of the realization of the unity of life and integrated order in the world outside the confined territory of narrow human self. Such realization as the substratum of eco-spirituality, results in the extension of love and ascribing meaning to every object of nature. In the backdrop of such ideas the present paper intends to examine Gopinath Mohanty's *High Tide, Ebb Tide* to show the fundamental ground of varied human consciousness being integrated with the unified principles of nature, and the possibilities of the

realization of nature's sacredness in the process of the realization of the 'self' as an extension of the unity of nature.

Keywords

Words: Nature, self-realization, ecology, spiritualism

Introduction

James Cameron's 2009 movie *Avtar* unleashes a metonymic world of interconnected webs, where the blue-skinned Na'vi people express their love, reverence, humility to an integrated biological force that unifies their planet and all its life forms. In other words, that force makes the objects one with the biological system and the system expresses itself in all forms of that world. The force is so strong that it enables the Na'vi people to make electro-chemical communication with the animals and the plants by plugging the tip of their long tails in to the front of the sacred trees and the tails of the animals. By that process they dwell in a same plane of thought, with shared consciousness by making harmonious communication. This visual representation of eco-spiritual communication and the sacred unity of beings in the world ascribe religious and spiritual qualities to the world. Such spirituality in the world is different from the spirituality in a conventional way of understanding or religious way of practice.

Eco-spiritualism and the holistic viewing the world

Customarily, Spirituality is a condition or state in which renunciation or the transcendence of the material world is the sole quest, because through renunciation the ultimate attainment of God or Truth is thought to be possible. Such quest is non-institutional, meta-political and religious. On the other hand eco-spiritualism is the quest for life that is in harmony with the world.¹ It is based on a fundamental idea and experience of the sanctity of the natural world, and it focuses on the realization of the supreme reality in the natural system. In this sense, it is the eco-spiritual proclamation that God is not a transcendental reality, controlling the universe from a vantage point; rather God is the supreme cause expressing itself in all matter and events. And the abandonment of the present world by being indifferent with it is not in any way a spiritual act; rather living in this world, experiencing the complex natural phenomena and understanding human induced problems and work accordingly by realizing the responsibility and stewardship conferred on human beings for the safeguard of the fellow creatures, moreover the universe are essentially spiritual acts. Eco-spiritualism, as an indigenous practice, in traditional India, was enacted through rituals, festivities, worship, rigorous penance etc and was directed to nature or natural elements. History says this practice is as old as human civilization, started perhaps with the Vedic and Puranic tradition in India. Even

nature was at the center of all religious enactments of indigenous people of the country. But as a part of western metaphysics, ecospiritualism got institutionalized and made way into modern academic research in the recent years. Having been reinforced by the 'Ignatian Spirituality' and drawing much from the 'Benedictines' and 'the Franciscans' Eco-spiritualism has traversed to reorient human consciousness towards the spiritual dimension of ecology. Albert Fritsch S.J says "Eco-spirituality is based on 'the laws of ecology and must be spiritually uplifting by exhibiting glory in the goodness of creation'.² In "Ignatian" vein eco-spiritualism finds profound subtlety in the divine architecture of nature, and develops the understanding that nature is divine because the "spiritual energy" being coupled with "material principles" of the earth gets expressive in all forms of life (Berry 69-71). In a similar vein, the spiritual part of eco-feminism personifies nature as "a Goddess, as mother earth" and is "concerned about the sacredness in nature and the holism in humanity and everything living" (Tollefsen 92). Mention may be made of Vandana Siva who has equated nature with 'the embodiment of the feminine principles' by focusing on its life-giving and life-supporting and -sustaining qualities' (as qtd. in Tollefsen 92). In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1998), Siva has ascribed *prakriti*, (the eternal principle that permeates in all forms to make life happen) to nature as it fosters and preserves the harmony of life and as itself is

the life force. In this sense, 'attentiveness' and 'responsiveness' to the "spiritual energy" can possibly happen with deep sense of identification with all forms of life.

Idea of the unity of being in the living world

In eco-spiritual understanding the position of human beings is 'inextricably related to all other life forms' in an intricately interrelated and interconnected web of life.³ Again in eco-spiritual sense, man as a consciousness, a living energy, having self-awareness and memory, is not limited within the territory of the body. Such a human consciousness evolves through a developing order in expressing itself in self-realization. Here the question arises 'What is self-realization?' whether it is having religious orientation or having scientific and objective validity? In this regard the ecophilosophical idea serves the possible answer. In Deep ecological view all living beings are one at very fundamental level or at the ultimate plane. And Self-realization is a process to contemplate oneness of all life, to view the individual selves in connection to 'the larger scheme of things', to sense the essential life force as pervading all living beings and to realize the complex bond between human being and the living world (Naess 38; Webber 349). In other words realization is a form of awareness or process of knowing in which the individual self ventures to recognize the supreme qualities and values pervades in other beings as

it pervades in it. Our study of English mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, makes it clear that the knowledge or awareness of such highest truth is possible through the extension of 'sense perception' of the natural agents, and through intellectual engagement with the natural phenomena; the subjective experience of highest level may be acclaimed as the base of objective and scientific truth.⁴

If in Wordsworthian sense everything is related to everything else, man is not an isolated body, alienated from the natural order. His identity is well determined by his relations with 'Others' (both animate and inanimate) in a certain *Umwelt*⁵ (Naess, "Identification" 37). As Hettinger says "the earth is our creator: it brought us and all other life forms in to existence. The earth's life process- evolution, speciation, natural selection- are causally responsible for who we are" (Ecospirituality 93). It implies that human as a social and cultural being is fundamentally, essentially a natural category, moreover, his consciousness is constituted by "the enactment of natural categories" (Ortner 73; Skolimowski 49). In other words, human consciousness is the consciousness of the world. With exploration and experience of the world consciousness expands. As earthlings, human beings with extended consciousness, can realize that at fundamental level, their self are equal to innumerable multitude of living beings in Nature (Naess, "Self-realization" 38). Naess views that the infinite task of "self-realization" is

possible when human consciousness transcends the confined boundary of his ego-self, and participates in the cosmic celebration of life in nature. In the process of such realization, the anthropocentric idea of the domination of human being as a superior force on nature gets progressively diminished, and realization of the ecoharmonic relation between man and nature develops. The central focus of this paper is to explicate the dimensions and possibilities of human life, which is not a mere biological process, rather as a holocoenotic process, guided by infinite and timeless values, attains substance, meaning and fulfillment under the influence of the exuberant agencies of nature, like the Sun, the moon, the sky, the sea etc.. Moreover, these agents play a vital role in shaping and expanding the consciousness to understand the cosmic equation. In the light of such conception the prominent postcolonial Odia novelist Gopinath Mohanty's *High Tide, Ebb Tide* is analyzed to substantiate the argument.

The novel presents an account of a pilgrimage to Puri, the celestial land of Lord Jagannath (Lord of the Universe), by a middle class Indian family, hailing from Kolkata. It shows the pattern of thought and perception of the protagonist while getting exposed to the cosmic pattern of natural phenomena, and describes the changing of experiences of the protagonist with his spiritual progress, what Keats call "true voice of feeling"(as qtd. in Mohanty XII). In other words, the novel describes a psychological journey of the

protagonist, and shows how he identifies his self as the part of and integrated with the greater self of nature and community. So, to study the central ideas of eco-spiritualism in the novel, it is imperative to study the mental scheme of things and the sense perception of the protagonist, Tarun Roy. In this novel Gopinath Mohanty has underlined the essential values of human life and postulates the idea that the augmentation of such values is possible through human relation with the greater realities of nature and biotic community.

Puri, the geo-physical location with divine connection

In *High tide, Ebb Tide*, Tarun Roy's odyssey is to attain the spiritual and mystical substance in life from the aesthetic values of beautiful natural surroundings of Puri. It is the place, being "ensouled by divinity", epitomizes the core of nature (Kar 31). Being a physical territory, a small city, lies beyond physicality (Patnaik 56-57). It is the sacred and mysterious place, considered as the abode of all Hindu gods and the meeting point of heaven and earth (Patnaik 154-155). Here, the physical body gets association with the greater Self of humanity and nature (Kruna Devi 64-67). As the place of sanctity and reverence Puri has attracted sages, saints, devotees, pilgrims and others all through history and beyond history. They have completely lost themselves in this sacred land, in the process of searching for eternal bliss, timeless beauty and profound mystery of

the land. Salabega, an Islamic devotee in Orissa, lost himself completely in this land in the process of devotion for Lord Jagannatha. Kabir, Adi Sankaracharya, Chaitanya and other savants have visited Puri, and being enamored of the Triad, have gone to set up monasteries in this sacred land. Finally they found divinity in the pulsating ambiance of the masses of pilgrims, as the epitome of humanity. Such is the greatness of Puri, on the heart of which stands an age-old temple of Lord of the Universe. This sanctum-sanctorum, as a cultural artifact exemplifies natural beauty and profound affluence of Indian Culture. The unique art and beauty of the temple being in tune with nature exist with time, through time and beyond time. Thus, it suggests the perfect blending of nature and culture which are beyond temporality. And Lord Jagannatha, 'the pivot of Hindu Culture' and the 'Soul of Odisha' is the blending of the divinity and beauty of nature (Karuna Devi 68). In Him truth, tradition, culture, beauty, eternity, etc. meet. It is mere Tarun Roy seeing the deity, on this sacred land, has got overwhelmed with sear divinity, and participated in the cosmic drama of Spirituality. Studying the effect of a temple on a devotee seeking proximity with the deity, E.M. Forster has posited: The architectural rhythms of the Hindu temple evoke in the devotee an adjustment of his person to its structure: his subtle body responds to the proportion of the temple by inner rhythmical movement. By this aesthetic emotion the devotee is one with the temple; and qualified to realize

the presence of God" (as qtd. in Mohanty XIV). To Tarun Roy, this temple is a 'monument to faith' that can grant him 'paradise', 'salvation', 'happiness', and the realization of the infinite.

It is true that when human sensitivity, 'holiness of heart' touch profound height, man longs for getting the unification through his universal association and by renouncing the allurements of material confinement. The sense of association, as mentioned above, comes with a sense of being fundamentally and ultimately identified with nature. Such critical hypothesis has been given systematization in the philosophy of Naess (Weber 352-353). The 'Feeble and humble' Tarun Roy hailing from a middle class family based in Kolkata, perhaps being enamored by the recorded historical glory of the place, has come with his wife and daughter to enjoy the serene beauty and peace of the city-Puri, by taking a break from the languid and jaded cosmopolitan city life. In this regard it may be mentioned that Puri can be best considered as 'The Jerusalem of Hinduism'. And the pilgrimage, including that of Roy, is like the essential journey of the Christians from "the city of discord and destruction to the celestial city", what we find in John Bunyan's classic oeuvre, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Mohanty vii). But, Roy's journey to Puri is unlike the journey of the oriental mystics to the sacred land of the divinity to realize the heavenly grace and salvation. Rather his retreat to Puri with his family is to get refreshment. This has a materialistic

purpose of regaining new strength and enthusiasm to work for existence which is reflected in Tarun Roy's words while answering the question of his wife regarding the stereotyped life pattern in Kolkota. When he says "who will feed me if I do not work?" (21) It suggests that he is certainly not in a state to renounce the responsibility of his life, rather he attempts to explore the spiritual dimension of the life, which can be accumulated from the living cosmos.

Realization of self as an extension of nature's divinity

Coming in touch with the agents of nature- sea, air, sky etc., the whole Roy family has undergone complete metamorphosis. The mere Tarun Roy has turned in to a spiritual consciousness. He realizes a sacrosanct unity with these elements of nature, or the living and non-leaving 'others'. He gets to discover his self, the ontological and epistemological basis of his life in relation to the self of the others and to the Absolute- Lord Jagannath. As the name suggest Jagannath, as the lord of the universe administers the living cosmos not by pronouncing commandments but by pervading in all beings. So, the beings in the world happen to hold the divine properties, moreover the beings are the expressions of the 'divine cause' in different forms. With a sense of integration with all beings, one can possibly understand that he is not incarcerated or controlled by anyone else, because the world is not

governed with power structure, rather organized and designed through intricate correlation. With the rise of such consciousness, one can realize himself/herself as a liberated being, or the universe belongs to him or he himself is the universe. Such a state of mental liberation and profound joy have been experienced by Tarun Roy. In this state, he realizes the transcendence of his self from the ego-self and “a harmony between his inner self and the world outside” (Mohanty 4). In the end of the day his heart is filled with myriads of thought and love for the unknown land, the glorious multi coloured sky reflects the spectrum of his thoughts and he feels “tangibly connected to everyone he sees” and he realizes his presence not only as the part of human community but also of “the sky, the light, wind, trees, animals. He belongs everywhere. He is powerful. An indispensable part of the crowd, without them he would have been incomplete; without him creation would be unfulfilled. He is necessary” (15). In the process of his realization of the cosmic union, he appreciates the value of his own existence as well as the importance of others. An individual, as an extension of the world, needs “maximum unfolding” to explore the spiritual dimension of life. And the maximum realization of his existence is an ecological right given in the holistic democratic system of nature. Thus, the negation of Tarun Roy’s existence can be ecologically erroneous. His realization of his being as a part of the greater community of nature is a ‘spiritual unfolding’ of his self.

In Spinozistic sense this holistic, infinite knowledge of Tarun Roy gathered in Puri is an intuitive and mystical kind of knowing where subject and object, self and other, human and non-human distinctions vanish, as the body mind and spirit gets unification with the whole of the infinite nature. Again as Naess has pointed out that our realization of our “deep relation” with nature can be extended in human society, community or culture, and that can lead to non-violence, fellow-feelings and a sense of interrelation (Drengson 111). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur in his argument on the hermeneutics of self, in the book *Oneself as Another* (1992) has posited the constitutive nature of the self and the other, for which the conceptual binaries of self and other no longer exists. Ricoeur with a conceptual semblance with ecosophy implies that the individual and the multitude being in correlation contribute to the greater community of nature. And to reiterate, when human thought and sensibility touch the supreme height human being contemplates intimacy in the world. Tarun Roy with spiritually elevated thoughts finds intimacy, unity and silent communication among the numerous multitudes of people, place and the whole ‘living community’ (Mohanty 28). Roy with the expansion of his consciousness contemplates the mystery of the world that one substance permeates in all beings, which is quite similar to Spinoza’s ‘monistic substance’. And for Tarun Roy, there is the presence of *Brahman* in the universe which binds everything together (61).

Nature in creating divine sensibility

In a Thoreauvian sense influence of nature on human mind is immense. The forces and resources of nature elevate human thoughts to the highest level of creativity. In a Wordsworthian way Tarun Roy goes on describing the beauty and mystery of the sky, the sea, the land etc. and the emotive language of the writer has tried to express Roy's feelings and thoughts to the fullest. In the feast of nature's joy Tarun has 'lost' his ego self. Not only Tarun but also his wife and daughter got overwhelmed with the joy of the sea and the sky. In their celestial joy ordinary objects get alive and inspire "symbols out of the commonplace" and being surrounded by "mystic play all around" they stand undisturbed as if they have lost themselves in meditation (24). Roy's family cannot restrain themselves appreciating the beauty of everything in Puri. To them everything is new with a touch of mystery and beauty. To them the sun, the tree, the sand, the sea are majestic, have attained sublimity that inspires awe in the observers. In the course of narrative Mohanty has tried to show the spiritual connection of a modern man, whose life is punctuate with existential sufferings. Roy is a person, who has seen the rays of hope and courage in Jagannath, the center of his faith, to be the part of the phenomena of life. The faith, moreover religion that inspires to live a life with dignity, and that justifies a life with respect for the living world can be the substratum of eco-spiritualism. As Hettenger says, "our spiritual attitudes towards the earth,

its teeming life forms and human presence, has had and will have powerful effects on the human-nature relation" (Ecospirituality 83). Similarly, Lyne White observes that human action toward nature is directed by their attitude towards themselves in relation to things around them and "conditioned by religion" (White 1205). So, a respectful view of the ecology of being can create respect for the world. In other words, the discernment of individual being as a part of nature orients human mind to think nature in terms of intrinsic religious and spiritual values more over to locate goodness and oneness in all creation. Such attitude comes when the boundary of individual sense perception, experiences and consciousness of the world are infinitely stretched. In phenomenological understanding such act is possible through the subjective participation with nature.

Tarun Roy's discernment about the infinite world, under the influence of the sublimity of nature, makes him to realize a new life, greater than the life confined within the territory of the family. His pride goes and substituted by "absolute humbleness and peace", as a result of which he expresses his love and reverence for everything (Mohanty 34-35). As the author writes "Tarun Roy, broke free, found peace, floating in the vast ocean of human consciousness, floating to the music of waves" (41). Again Roy feels "the sacred message" that comes out of the sea, the sand would renew him, "transform him like a philosopher's stone" and he would find "the hidden seeds" of his

elevated life (48). In the voice of the sea and the howling of wind he listens “the poetry of life which does not need the prop of language, only echo of heart to heart” (150). With his liberation from his self-ego he identifies himself in “the eternal, the infinite” (74). He realizes eternal mingling of everything in everything else (53). So that the distance between objects, beings, landscapes etc reduces (73). And he forgets his own individual identity, begins to ask question himself “who am I?”(176). As he realizes his self everywhere in the sea-shells, crabs, coconut trees, sand, ocean etc., Roy gets confused with his biological body, which has a very limited space in his spiritual-ecological consciousness. In this way he attains “original virtue of humanity” as a part of “living community”.

Not only Tarun, but also his wife Kantimoyee has realized the unity of life in the novel. In the novel Mohanty has presented her as woman of typical Indian household, with all feminine tenderness and immense responsibility. Kantimoyee, due to immense responsibility, is incapable of going out of the four walls of her house, within which all feminine emotion and exuberance get suppressed. Here Mohanty has presented how the emancipated woman mind, in the midst of eternity of nature's bounty recognizes the eternal feminine principle (procreative ceremony) going on in the nature. She feels the nature outside is the metaphorical extension of her own feminine qualities. Moreover she finds nature present within her and she is present in nature. As Mohanty writes “She was

benign like a mother” and “she felt herself aspiring for the happiness of all; not just her own” (126). Thus she is the eternal mother.

If it is true that human mind moves in different planes, Tarun Roy is incapable of keeping his mind constant in the spiritual plane. The worn-out spirit Tarun Roy, with fifty years old memory of difficult life can't get the purpose of his journey fulfilled by getting the uninterrupted blissful joy. Rather series of distorted and fleeting thoughts related to his historical past and middle class life disturb his mind's order. In the novel Mohanty has made it clear that the agents of nature respond to human senses and thought according to the orientation of mind. The natural agents bring the past to present in Roy's consciousness. They bring in to his mind “the glimpse of his past and undistinguished history of meaningless unwilling existence” (40). But as soon as he comes nearer to the vast territory of the sea with elevated thoughts, he got his mind opened to the ‘new life’ where only profusion of joy and excitement prevails. The ‘mystic rhythm’ of the sea which overflows with excitement brings about unification in his inner self. He feels excitement in parallel with the perennial excitement of the sea. “The sea had spread out its feast of joys for so many to harvest” (Mohanty 23). And Roy perceives- “The sea was forcing its will on him, it would not let him think of his own affairs, his problems, would not allow him to feel dejected, to accept old age...” (22). Here Roy makes a substantial elevation from his own

existential plane to a greater plane. Like the sea, the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars amid the floating clouds act as the catalysts in bringing about spiritual awakening to Roy. Similarly Kantimoyee, looking at the sunset in Puri feels that she is a part of the heavenly phenomenon. To her it is a unique experience. "Everything appeared newborn, tender; mingled together, inseparable." (130)

Conclusion

From the study of *High Tide, Ebb Tide*, we possibly get a deep understanding that there is 'one life' permeating everywhere. This life is built by our relations with others, even with the tiny creatures and all animate and inanimate objects. We realize our sense of being and the value of human life in terms of the bond with others, as has been delineated in Wordsworth's celebrated poem *The Excursion*. This perception of oneness in the multitude renders eternal bliss and divine pleasure. To conclude, this novel is more a philosophical and spiritual writing than a social drama by Gopinath Mohanty. Here the central idea of the novel seems to be parallel to the philosophical ideas of Arne Naess, Skolimowski and other ecophilosophers. This is the novel in which Mohanty has attempted to define the nature of self-realization and describe its possibility in the social plane. Finally in this novel the meaning of Self-realization transcends the limit of religious connotation, and it implies the recognition of the unity of life in the world. Perhaps the genesis of this

writing is to inspire love and reverence for every natural agent which can be the substratum for the conservation of nature.

End Notes:

1. Refer to Neol Preston's essay "Exploring Eco-theology, Eco-spirituality and Eco-Justice" addressed at the Common Dreams Conference, Sydney, in August 2007.
2. Refer to "Towards an authentic ecospirituality" by Albret Fritsch. s.j, online.
3. Extracted from Addrian Harris' writings on Sacred ecology and 'Defining Eco-spirituality'.
4. Extracted from the English philosopher and mathematician Alfred Whitehead's 1919 lecture entitled "The Concept of Nature", which he delivered in Trinity College.
5. The English equivalence of the German term 'Umwelt' is environment which has been used by the ecophilosophical thinkers like Arne Naess and Skolimowski to suggest the relation of an animal with its environment.

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*Narayan Jena is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM University, Chennai. His areas of interest include Postcolonial Ecocritical Studies, Postmodern Literary Studies, Ecopolitical theories and Ecocultural Studies.

**Swagatika Parida is an assistant professor in the Department of Business Administration, SRM University Cennai, Her area of research includes Island narrative, sociology of tribal life, cross-cultural communication and business communication.

***Pramod Kumar Das is an Assistant Professor the Department of English, KIIT Bhubaneswar. He translates Oriya literary pieces into English and vice-versa. His areas of interest include Historiography, Postmodern studies, Green Studies and Indian Writing in English.

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