

AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND
JIBANANANDA DAS

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“Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
Can green and open buds like infant’s fists...” (Heaney, *Field Work* 5).

In the drives of the last few decades to protect our planet, one crucial factor which is overlooked is the study of our ecological identity which refers to “all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self” (Thomashow 3). However, it is very difficult to define the phrase ecological or environmental identity as it is a compound of two elusive terms. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams found the word ‘nature’ to be the most complex word in English language as the term has several, incompatible meanings. In the broadest sense, nature includes everything, so even a pollutant is as natural as sunshine as it could not but be a part of nature. While some critics see nature as a construct, others retort “it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer” (Soper 151). Nature as pure wilderness untouched and uncontrolled by human beings no longer exists as the whole world has become a built environment. In this sense culture and nature are opposed and it is due to human beings’ over-exploitation of the natural resources that today not a single part of the world is unaffected by climate change or global warming. Like nature, identity, too, is a slippery term. It would sound very naïve at a time after Lacan and Derrida to claim that such a thing as essentially human identity exists. However, in the “symbolic order” where we are willy-nilly posited, there is no escape from a continuous effort to form and sustain identities for ourselves (Lacan 184). The process of identity formation involves acts of negation, i.e. we try to formulate a self-image by persuading ourselves to believe what we are not. The act substantiates itself by relying on a plethora of binary oppositions of which two, namely nature/culture and human/animal, would be our present concern.

The way we interpret nature affects some aspects of who we are and “whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sights and fore-conceptions” (Heidegger 368). So it is necessary to look into the way people, both as individuals and members of a community relate to the natural world as a whole and how they see themselves in the context of nature. There is no generalized, uniform and static human view point towards nature. In different cultures and different ages, nature has been viewed differently. While some worship it as god, others see it as a gift of god to be exploited freely. However, we can trace some stereotypical attitudes throughout ages. Nature as resource is perhaps the most primordial perception of nature. Nature has always remained a mystery that human beings feel the urge to decipher. Glorification of natural beauty is a common aspect in every culture. Nature poses a lot of challenges for survival and in the way of overcoming them; human beings are led to believe that they are moving beyond nature. Consistent attempts to master, control and manage nature with apparent success to a great extent through

technological developments brought forth the idea of human beings as superior to nature. Whatever could not be tamed is labelled as wild or savage as opposed to culture, the rationale of their superiority. Gradually we have moved away from nature. In our present condition of environmental degradation, environment has become almost a grand narrative creating a global awareness of our (ir)responsibility in making it endangered. Ironically, the solution to this was believed to be technological innovations but failure of all such projects has led to the realization that it is our attitude towards nature which should be reformed. Efforts to reestablish the close relation between the two have started. From the earliest phase of complete identification with nature, human beings have played the roles of, roughly speaking, dependants, worshippers, masters, colonizers, degraders and again redeemers driven by emotions like wonder, awe, fear, angst, apathy and desire to rule. The diversity and contradictions in these innumerable attitudes point out that it is environment that determines our unstable and dependant identities. Ecocritical perspectives can be useful in the study of the psychological significance of nature in the formation of human identity as ecocriticism is, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” and in literature we find but different ways of human beings of looking at nature (Glotfelty xix). The aim of this project is to study the poetry of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and the Bengali poet Jibanananda Das in order to look into the human identity in relation to the non-human, with ideas of the wild nature, of nature as resource or refuge, nature as a space of metamorphosis and redemption. There is a striking resemblance in their eco-consciousness which is formative of identities, both individual and collective. The poets examine the relationship between people and nature in such diverse contexts as people’s perceived similarities to animals, people’s connection to plants in their communities and people’s sense of a place. The study will not merely be a comparative study between two poets; rather it seeks to find the common stream of eco-consciousness that may characterize two different poets writing in two different languages, countries and ages, without overlooking the ensuing subtle difference in their understanding of ecological identity. This study the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Jibanananda Das from the perspective of ecocriticism to look into the psychological significance of environment in identity formation will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Ecology, Identity, and Poetry.

Chapter 2: Identification, Ecological Consciousness and Redemption.

Chapter 3: Negation, Anthropomorphism and the Animal Other.

Chapter 4: Childhood, Memory and Digging.

Chapter 5: Sense of a Place: Home and Nation.

Chapter 6: Community and Ecological Worldview

In their poetry, the ideal human identity is constructed not in contrast with the environment; rather it is subsumed in nature. Instead of metaphors (comparison), on many occasions, we find the use of metonymy (identification). Arne Naess, in *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, elaborates a philosophy that “The ecosophical outlook is developed through an identification so deep that one’s own self is no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or the organism. One experiences oneself to be a genuine part of all life” (174). Both the poets try to be identified with the macrocosm through

assimilation with the ever pulsating life in their parochial surroundings. Their ego which is a fragment of a larger whole gets identified with greater wholes and it leads to the realization that we are more than just our egos, but aspects of a more inclusive process, the biosphere itself. Their sensibility that the whole world is a vast eco-system and we are merely part of it like any other animate or inanimate element subverts the stereotypical binaries. Jibanananda often equates human beings with the non-human by laying bare the presence in us of the drives that are often negated as animalistic. In this context, we can account for the allegations of obscenity (animalistic) directed against Jibanananda by some of his contemporaries as a violent reaction elicited by a blow on to their self-image. Metamorphosis is another tool of subversion that we find in Jibanananda's desire of rebirth in the form of non-human creatures. Similarly, the central voice in Heaney's *Station Island* is Sweeney, the king transformed into a bird that serves as his parallel self. When the poets challenge the tradition of othering animals in order to form human identity as 'civilized', 'rational' as against 'merely animal', the illusory line between the supposedly two different worlds gets blurred and the readers are made to sympathize with the nonhuman world.

Human beings are often cruel to the non-human world without any sense of guilt. This indifference is an offspring of anthropomorphism that leads us to accept our dominion over nature as justified. The issue of anthropomorphism, positioned on the hazy borderlines between the human and the nonhuman, can become a powerful tool for questioning the complacency of dominant human self-conceptions. Such complacency is questioned in Jibanananda's celebration, as we find in Ted Hughes, of the animal world bubbling with vitality and life force as opposed to weariness and morbidity in human beings. Such animalistic life is often despised as violent but this violence for sustenance is in no way comparable to the violence of human beings. Heaney shows how violence has always been an integral part of human culture in his "*Bog Poems*." Heaney's eco-consciousness can also be traced in his presenting the peat bogs, the archetypal memory of the nation's past, as a symbol of Ireland as opposed to the American Prairies where the indigenous fauna was almost totally obliterated by state sponsored hunting. Here, the identity of a nation is merged in its nature.

As human identity can be shaped by the process of identifying with or othering the animal, so also trees have an equally effective role in the formation of ecological identity. The connection between trees and a human beings helps to shape both individual and collective identities. Apart from their physical and economic values trees have a deeper psychological and aesthetic influence on human lives. Trees are not only an ornamental part of a landscape; rather, they form an integral part of the spirit of a particular place. In order to capture the spirit of Bengal, Jibanananda Das has depicted the local plants and trees so comprehensively that one can easily prepare a catalogue of the trees of Bengal from his poems. As a result of his spiritual attachment to the trees they attain almost a mythic status and a similar treatment can be found in Heaney's poem "Sweeney praises the Trees" where the greenery of Ireland serves as a symbol of the spirit of the country. Even the Ireland degraded by sectarian violence and capitalist venality of the people is described in the image of a "helmeted and bleeding tree" which must "green and open buds like infants' fists" to save the nation. This beautiful expression which is no less than a motto of any environmentalist movement shows Heaney's concern over the present environmental crisis.

Exploring the childhood memories of special places or experience of the wild helps to understand how people learn about themselves through learning about nature and how an understanding of ecology changes the way people learn about themselves. The hypersensitive speaker in Jibanananda's poems and the boy-poet in Heaney's early collections are delicately reciprocal with the manifold textures, sounds, tastes, smells, and shapes of an animate earth. As Mitchell Thomashow finds it: "To explore memory you have to be a good archaeologist, knowing where and how to dig" and if the poetics of any poet can be metaphorically summarized as digging, it is Heaney's (9). His first two collections contain poems on "spots of time" to use Wordsworth's phrase. Poems like "The Barn", "Death of a Naturalist", "Blackberry Picking", or "Personal Helicon", are childhood reminiscences of a particular incidents when the boy-poet acquired a new knowledge preceded, in most of the cases, by a peculiar sense of fear which are figments of guilty fantasy. "The great slime kings/ Were gathered there for vengeance, and I knew/ That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it" (Heaney, *Death* 4). The boy, who used to fill jampots with frogspawn, became afraid of the "obscene threats" of "gross-bellied frogs." The language of these poems is loaded with sexual connotations leading to their interpretation as poems about gaining knowledge about sexuality and the loss of innocence but what is more important is the birth of a person with an ecological sensibility at the cost of the "death of a naturalist." The stance of a scientific quest for knowledge had made him insensitive to the animals' suffering inflicted by him in the course of an experiment. His sense of guilt shows that he has now learnt the importance of every form of life which is not a mere object of scientific study. There are no specific Wordsworthian "spots of time" found in Jibanananda's poetry as nature had always something new to offer to him and every moment of his boyhood was spent in close contact with nature acquiring knowledge about the ecology around him. The thirty fourth sonnet of *Bengal the Beautiful* ends with the question "...Poet, do you know anything about this child?" and the whole sequence is about the growth of this child lost in the rural landscape. It captures the symbiotic growth of the artistic self and the ecological worldview of the poet. Jibanananda found the smell of childhood on the fresh and green grass-turfs and even claims "I have got my body from the heart of the grass" (53). The boy scatters "*khoi*-grain for yard-*shaliks*" (52) and rows on the *Rupsa* in "a boat with a torn white sail" (24). Bengal's grass and plants, birds and fruits and rivers and villages have moulded the way the poet sees himself in relation to nature and the resultant ecological consciousness enables him to address a bird like the owl as "my grandpa profound"(Das, *Selected Poems*: 56).

Heaney also creates personal myths around very ordinary objects associated with his childhood experiences as in his "Personal Helicon", the wells become the springs of the Muses inspiring him to write poetry. Jibanananda, too, imparts the aura of myth on the very trivial, commonplace objects of nature, all of which contribute to the growth of the poet's mind. In his book *An Acre of Green Grass*, Buddhadev Bose judged Jibanananda as a "nature-worshipper, but by no means a Platonist or pantheist; he is rather a pagan who loves the things of nature sensuously, not as tokens or symbols, nor as patterns of perfection, but simply because they are what they are" (58). Only a person with ecological consciousness has this ability to enjoy and appreciate things in themselves. Like Jibanananda, Heaney too, relishes the everyday, ordinary encounters with nature. He is enthralled by the "cool hardness" of the potatoes (*Death* 1) and feels

like crying when the blackberries rot (8). His childhood spent in Mossbawn with its open embrace of nature is not marked by any extraordinary experience; rather its very ordinary aspects are revered by the poet almost religiously.

Another aspect of ecological consciousness is “a synergistic orientation in interactions with one’s social and physical environment” (qtd. in Thomashow 19). We can understand someone’s relationship to nature as expressed through specific socio-cultural practices of everyday life, since a variety of personal experiences constitute a collective environmental vision. In Heaney and Jibanananda, we find a desire on the part of the individual to be identified with the collective that represents a community deeply rooted in the soil. As in Bengal, the people of Ireland showed extraordinary allegiance to their rural past with its rituals and traditions of a peasant culture and they continue to do so even today. Though with the introduction of agricultural machines, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, genetically altered seeds and the politics of food production and distribution, the concept of farming has become highly complicated, in Heaney and Jibanananda we find a nostalgic and romantic view of it as a form of human culture — of the farmers in the paddy/potato field, fishermen, thatchers, diggers and other rustic people — whose voice is, perhaps, the most authentic one available that can show the ideal relationship between nature and human beings, if any such thing exists. However, they do not drift into a kind of evasive pastoral retreat as they are aware of their inability, if not unwillingness to be like the farmers, thatchers or fishermen. Heaney and Jibanananda acknowledge these people as their “anonymities”, what they could have been, but, at the same time, the lonely soul is aware of its inability to restore the ideal (Vendler13). Though the “imaginary realm” beckons, it is impossible to move back through the mirror.

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