The Magnificence of Mother Nature in the Poems of Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das

Babitha B. Nair

Research Scholar, Research and Development Centre, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu Email: nairb83@gmail.com

Dr. T. R. Muralikrishnan

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, MES Asmabi College, Kodungalloor, Thrissur, Kerala

ABSTRACT

Many writers have depicted the relationship between human beings and Mother Nature. Our harmonious life with nature offers us the power to develop as individuals with unusual power. This paper tries to analyse the magnificence of Mother Nature in the poems of two women poets, Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das. This study makes a comparative assessment of a few poems of both the poets to decipher the differences and resemblances in their representation of landscapes. Dickinson tries to view nature from a mystical standpoint and associates it with Divinity. Though Das' poems do not show the manifestation of God in nature, she reveals how she experiences solace in the hands of nature during her life in cities.

KEYWORDS:

Mother Nature; mystical; divinity; manifestation; solace.

Introduction

Literature has shown the gentleness of Mother Nature in several ways. The Romantic poets have drawn their inspiration from nature to illustrate their imagination. It is doubtless that nature has played the role of a motivator to inspire gifted writers Emerson, Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Robert Frost. Mother Nature protects its offsprings and offers comfort to them. She, in fact, acts as a splendid source of energy. Both Dickinson and Das approach nature in diverse ways.

Nature plays a significant role in Dickinson's poems. Since she was the

inhabitant of the nineteenth-century New England, the spirit of American Renaissance is visible in her verses. Her attraction towards the natural objects shows us that she has been an extensive reader of writers like Keats, Shelley, Emerson and Thoreau. "Thoreau's influence on the work of the other poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, has been noted . . ." (Witherell 28). She demonstrates the vitality of human relations when unified with nature and personifies nature as a caring mother. "Nature- the Gentlest Mother", keeps an eye on her children when they are asleep. She saves them from all perils and offers her

tender care and warmth. In the following poem, Dickinson depicts the benevolence of the natural world to pamper and protect its progeny. She utters:

> Nature– the Gentlest Mother is, Impatient of no Child, The feeblest–or the waywardest– Her Admonition mild– (lines 1-4, Poem 790 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 385)

Dickinson evokes compound emotions in readers with her dominant nature imageries. Her poems allow the space for manifold readings and they hurl questions to the readers which enable them to ponder over the subtleties of nature, society and the spirit of human beings. Her idea of nature and environment is truly linked to God and human beings. Dickinson proposes the idea of divine growth that one attains when unified with the natural world. In fact, she appreciates the simplicity of natural world:

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill-the Afternoon—
Squirre1— Eclipse — the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven —
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink — the Sea—
Thunder — the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony— (lines 1-8,
Poem 668 The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 332)

She talks about the omnipotence of nature that its inhabitants ignore. As a poet, she reveals the magnificence of Mother Nature in offering an ideal condition for mankind to live in this world. She says that nature is exactly like a "heaven". The poet wants everyone to appreciate the splendor that Mother Earth shows us. Nature presents us the delightful music of the "Bobolink" and the "cricket". Here, the poet talks about the harmonious relationship among natural objects. Dickinson truly the follower of American Renaissance. She says that the vivacity of nature is inexplicable and mankind can never undervalue it. This knowledge makes her say:

Nature is what we know— Yet have no art to say— So impotent Our Wisdom is To her Simplicity. (9-12, Poem 668 *The*

Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 332)

Dickinson finds solace in Nature. "Indeed, during her lifetime, Emily Dickinson was known more widely as a gardener, perhaps, than as a poet" (Carter and Farr 3). Apart from narrating the majesty of Mother Earth, she depicts the loveliness of the natural objects as well. She establishes a strong connection with nature and its living things. She presents the beauty of the flowers that wither away without being seen and says:

How many Flowers fail in Wood Or perish from the Hill– Without the privilege to know That they are Beautiful– (lines 1-4, Poem 404 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 192)

As an appreciator of nature and its splendor, Dickinson has shown her skepticism towards the process of scientific discoveries and industrialization. During her time, "[S]cience...was overtaking natural mysteries and turning them into intelligible phenomena" (Vendler 380). When we try to reach and discover the secrets of Mother Nature, she herself unveils her mystifying stature which we can never disregard. The light in springtime is ahead of science and that can be experienced by mankind. She stunningly narrates the timid arrival of the springtime in the poem "A light exists in Spring". The "light" she mentions here is none but God or Heaven. Her spiritual understanding enables her to perceive the presence of God in nature. The manifestation of God in nature is clear in the following lines:

> A light exists in Spring Not present on the Year At any other period

When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake,
But Human Nature feels. (lines 1-8,
Poem 812 The Complete Poems of Emily
Dickinson 395)

"Nature, according to Miss Dickinson, remains mysterious and elusive, the more we scrutinize Nature's process, the more complex and bewildering they become... [H]er attitude is wide apart from that of visionary pantheists like Wordsworth" (Tandon and Trivedi 38). However. Dickinson's nature imageries enhance her creativity and offer tranquility. Being nurtured on the ground of New England, she was attracted towards the seasons and she created unique symbols for all these in her psyche. The following lines show her close observation of nature, seasons and creatures: "These are the days when Birds come back-/ A very few-a Bird or two-/ To take a backward look." (lines 1-3, Poem 130, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 61). She looks at the meadows, hills, birds, bees and flora with intense interest and presents them with great warmth.

Unlike Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das depicts both urban and rural landscapes in her poems. Though she enjoys the magnificence of nature, it is impossible to call her a nature poet. Most of the time, her critics have noticed her pursuit for individuality and physical gratification instead of the beauty of nature and sceneries depicted in her poems. She represents the post-colonial and cultural aspects of India associated with urban living. In many of her poems, she acknowledges that the summer vacations during her adolescence were the most enjoyable days in her life. She writes about the majesty and serenity of Nalapat house, her ancestral house, in her poems. The poem "A Hot Noon in Malabar" portrays the splendor of an intense noon in Malabar. Here, she describes her village, vagrants, caged parrots, Kurava girls, bangle sellers and strangers. She writes:

This is a noon for beggars with whining Voices, a noon for men who come from hills

With parrots in a cage and fortune-cards,

All stained with time, for brown Kurava girls

With old eyes, who read palms in light singsong

Voices, for bangle-sellers who spread On the cool black floor those red and green and blue

Bangles, all covered with the dust of roads,

For all of them, whose feet, devouring rough

Miles, grow cracks on the heels, so that when they

Clambered up our porch, the noise was grating,

Strange . . . (lines 1-12 *Summer in Calcutta* 49)

The poet continues to describe the beauty of Malabar and its landscapes. In the poem, she closely observes nature and draws the activities of a usual midday in her village and relishes the splendor of noontime. She knows that the city life offers her pain and suffering. Now, she realises that she is far away from her "home in Malabar". She says:

......Yes this is
A noon for wild men, wild thoughts,
wild love. To

Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet
Stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at
my Home in Malabar, and I so
far away... (lines 20-24 Summer
in Calcutta 49)

In another poem "My Grandmother's House", she describes her memories associated with her ancestral house. She talks about how the house has withdrawn into

silence after her grandmother's death. She says that she has received unconditional love from her grandmother. After her death, snakes have started to crawl in between books. Even after years, the poet desires to listen to and enjoy the frozen air. "[H]er childhood experiences and little joys sustains her in the cities...There is a possible contrast between the village life and the city life in many of her poems" (Thomas 39).

There is a house now far away where once received love...That woman died, The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved Among books. I was then too young To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon How often I think of going There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or Just listen to the frozen air,

Or in wild despair, pick an armful of Darkness to bring it here to lie Behind my bedroom door like a brooding dog... (lines 1-12 Summer in Calcutta 13)

The poet feels proud that she is a member of an aristocratic family in Malabar. Now, she finds it difficult to adapt to urban life and yearns for her grandmother's love and affection. Having been pulled into the land of the urban life, she feels disturbed. She has lost her way and now requests strangers for love and friendliness. However, she is so proud of her lineage and joyfully talks about Nalapat house. She utters:

... you cannot believe, darling,

Can you, that I lived in such a house and Was proud, and loved... I who have lost My way and beg now at strangers' doors to

Receive love, at least in small change?

(lines 12-16 Summer in Calcutta 13)

Das' representation of nature is unlike Dickinson's, for she is the descendant of an urban life. She does not find the existence of God in nature. She knows that she had a marvelous life with her grandmother in her village. Her poems express the inevitability of being unified with the natural world which she enjoyed during her adolescence. She appreciates the splendor of nature in the poem "Anamalai Hills". She portrays the splendor of the hills that are covered in morning mist. The enjoyment of being one with nature is visible in the following lines:

no cock crowing
the morning in, as the muezzin's call
from cold mosques,
only the mist so absentmindedly
lingering on, long past
the dawn's legitimate hours and the
invisible
bird's crazed crazy, occasionally from
the mosquito tree.
From somewhere within my heart the
mist ascends, the mountains
awake, perhaps the rains are over and
the swamps are dry again. (lines
1-9 The Best of Kamala Das 149)

There are no clocks here at Anamalai,

Nature's lively presence is visible in Das' other poems as well. In the poem "For Cleo Pascal" she reveals how she finds relief in her company of Mother Nature. The poet establishes her affinity with nature. She says that the trees admit her as their family member. Her intimacy with nature enables her to wear landscape as a garment. Her oneness with Mother Nature makes her say:

Only the trees seem glad to see me as if I were their kith and kin I take on their characteristics as the days one after another pass by while I wear this land as an over coat warming my breasts and belly I begin to look like its trees my skin dries like the bark of a birch

my hair smells of spruce

There are creatures in the undergrowth I smell the swamp and the loam (lines 20-30 *Selected Poems* 153-54)

Though Dickinson and Das represent the majesty of nature in different ways, the images of the sea and the sun profusely appear in their poems. Both the poets try to find solace when united with the sea. Dickinson portrays herself as a river that runs to the sea. She implores the sea, her lover, to accept her and says:

My River runs to thee–
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?
My River waits reply–
Oh Sea –look graciously–
I'll fetch thee Brooks
From spotted nooks–
Say – Sea – Take Me! (lines 1-7, Poem

Say - Sea - Take Me! (lines 1-7, Poem 162 The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 76)

Like Dickinson, Das is also attracted to the magnificence and warmth of the sea. In the poem "The Suicide", she expresses her desire to be one with the deep sea by embracing death. She even talks about the warmth that the sea possesses in its inner chambers. She sings:

The sea's inner chambers are all very warm.

There must be a sun slumbering at the vortex of the sea. (lines 60-63

The Descendants 8-9)

The image of the sun appears in the poems of Dickinson and Das. In the following

poem, Dickinson praises the splendor of the sun that washes the banks of the yellow sea. The mysterious appearance of the Mother Nature is revealed in these lines:

> This – is the land – the Sunset washes– These – are the Banks of the Yellow Sea

Where is rose –or whither it rushes– These – are the Western Mystery! (lines 1-4, Poem 266 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 122)

Like Dickinson, Das, in her poem, "Summer in Calcutta", describes the beauty of the April Sun that appears to be crushed like an orange in her glass. The image of the orange sun is clear when she asks:

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass? (lines 1-4 Summer in
Calcutta 50)

Conclusion

Both Dickinson and Das emphasise the magnanimous character of Mother Nature and they portray the diverse aspects of nature. They depict nature as a gentle mother who pacifies them in miserable conditions. Mother Nature acts as a protector in their lives. She accepts her children and alleviates the mental torments they experience in their lives. When the former tries to find God in nature, the latter reveals the lively traits of nature. To them, nature appears as a pool of happiness, solace, gentleness, wisdom, and divinity.

Works Cited

Carter, Louise, and Judith Farr. "Introduction." *Gardens of Emily Dickinson*. London: Harvard UP, 2005. 1-12. Print.

Das, Kamala. The Descendants. Calcutta: Writers Workshop. 1991. Print.

- ---. Kottayam: D C Books, 2004, 49. Print.
- ---. Selected Poems. Ed. Devindra Kohli. Haryana: Penguin Books India. 2014. Print.
- ---. The Best of Kamala Das. Ed. P. P. Raveendran. Kozhikode: Bodhi Pub. House. 1991. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960. Print.

- Tandon, Neeru, and Anjana Trivedi. *Thematic Patterns of Emily Dickinson's Poetry*. New Delhi: Atlantic and Distributors, 2008. 38. Print.
- Thomas, O j. "Kamala Das: 'The Tragedy of Life is Not Death but Growth'." *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*. Ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. 37–57. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP. 2010. 380. Print.
- Witherell, Elizabeth Hall. "Henry David Thoreau." *Prospects for the Study of American Literature: A Guide for Scholars and Students*. Ed. Richard Kopley. New York: New York UP, 1997. 21-39. Print.
- **Babitha B. Nair** is a Ph.D. research scholar in the Research and Development Centre, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Her areas of interest include American Literature, Indian English Literature and Women's Writing.
- **Dr. T. R. Muralikrishnan** is the Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, MES Asmabi College, Kodungalloor, Thrissur, Kerala.