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## Human-Nature Interactions in the Poetry of Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Rabindranath Tagore

Dilu Gurung 

An Independent Researcher Based in Pokhara, Nepal

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**Corresponding Author:** Dilu Gurung, Email: [gurungdilu7@gmail.com](mailto:gurungdilu7@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to show what ecocriticism is and how it is applied to the poems of Laxmi Prasad Devkota, a great poet of Nepal, and Rabindranath Tagore, a great poet of Bengali in India. Although they belong to two different South Asian countries, they deal with love and concern of nature in their poems. In this study, I have explored some literary attributes and ecocritical aspects of the poems of these poets. Some of their similarities have been discussed in this paper. Even though both the poets are popular in other genres of literature, the focus of this paper is to analyze the poems from the perspective of ecocriticism. These poets wrote the poems about nature even before the word 'Ecocriticism' came into existence and got defined. However, Devkota and Tagore were using the ecocritical standpoint to write their poems before the term was coined. The two poems of Devkota: "The Swallow and Devkota" and "The Brook" have been undertaken for the textual analysis. Similarly, the two poems of Tagore: "The Tame Bird Was in a Cage" and "The Banyan Tree" have been selected for textual analysis. Overall, this paper has shown the connection between the human world and the natural world and the ecocritical aspect in the poems of Devkota and Tagore.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, environment, nature, human world

### Introduction

This paper discusses the poets – Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Rabindranath Tagore, and analyzes their poems that describe the nature in connection with the human world. Devkota is considered to be the greatest poet of Nepal. He is entitled as the *Mahakabi* ("Great Poet") in Nepali poetry because of the great contribution he has made in the field of literature including poetry. He was a brilliant student and had good knowledge of both Nepali and English languages. He started writing poems from the early age of ten. He was a versatile writer. He wrote poems, plays, short stories, fiction and prose. However, he is recognized as a poet more than others. He has written many ecological poems but this paper analyzes only two of them.

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The ecological poems are the poems that are written about the nature, especially the relationship between ecology and human life. Ecocriticism is a new approach that relates human and nature. This approach regards nature equal to human beings. The themes of the ecological poems are quite different in comparison to the other poems. Such poems highlight nothing but the nature. Devkota, in the poem "The Swallow and Devkota," opines that he and the swallow share the same nest and same trait. Both share the same ecology as their home and they have the same kind of traits, too. The nature sews the heart of the poet and the swallow together. Both sing the same song of Gaurishankar. Similarly, in the poem "The Brook," he says that the brook is happy to meet an ocean and goes on the journey by singing. It shines when the sunbeams fall on it. In these poems, he explores the natural resources and feels grateful to the kindness of the nature on humankind.

Tagore is a Bengali poet, playwright, philosopher and painter. He is also a multitalented writer. He is the writer of the epic *Gitanjali*. He is the first non-European writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. His poems are of varied subjects and themes. But this paper studies only two of his poems. In his poem "The Tame Bird Was in a Cage," Devkota describes two birds. One is a caged bird and the other is a free bird that lives in the forest. The poem is a conversation between these two birds. Both of them try to convince each other to come and live with them. Similarly, in the poem "The Banyan Tree," the poet asks the tree whether it remembers the child who used to sit on its branches. He also asks whether the banyan tree remembers the women who used to come in the pond to fill up water in the jugs, the sunlight dancing on the water and the animals playing as the children.

### The Concept of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism, also known as green criticism, is one of the recent fields that has emerged in the field of literature. It analyzes the relationship between the natural environment and humans in literature. All the activities of humans in connection with the nature are studied in ecocriticism. Many scholars have defined and explained the term "ecocriticism". Some of the definitions and explanations are mentioned here. Bimal Kishore Shrivastava notes:

Ecocriticism, a concept first arose in the late 1970's at the meeting of Western Literature Association (WLA). It began developing in 1990's which focuses on the relationship between human and nature, which tells us man belongs to the earth in much the same way as animals and plants do. The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. (2)

According to Shrivastava, William Rueckert was the person to propound the term 'ecocriticism'. He argues that the earth is the common home of all the living creatures. The living creatures and the nature commonly form the earth (qtd. in Jimmy 370).

Rabindra Das defines ecocriticism etymologically and argues: "The word 'eco' comes from the Greek root word 'oikos' which etymologically means household or earth and 'logy' from 'logos' means logical discourse. Together they mean criticism of the house – the environment as represented in literature" (18). He suggests that ecocriticism is the representation of the environment in literary writings.

Some scholars take ecocriticism as the relation between the nature and literature. The nature and the literature are the subject matters of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (138). Lawrence's definition of ecocriticism prioritizes the relationship between literature and environment

and the role of the nature in the production of literature that works on the preservation of environment mentioning its importance to human kinds.

Some take ecocriticism as the relationship between human beings and the nature. They show the interconnection and interdependence on each other. Greg Garrard views ecocriticism as "the relationship between humanity and nature is best described as asymmetrically co-independent" (155). He writes about the interdependence on each other. The nature's existence is fulfilled when it serves the living creatures on the earth and humanity cannot live without nature as everything a human needs for living comes from the generous earth. In the same way, Bimal Kishore Shrivastava suggests:

It is inescapable to human for the harmonious relationship with the non-human world. Down through ages, nature is a subject which has fascinated too many writers. Many writers have become eco-conscious or environment conscious. Literature has become a mode of expression about environment and its importance in human life and universe environment protection is a hot issue of present time. Due to the eco-imbalance and the environment pollution, the whole world is under the curse of global warming. (1)

Shrivastava expresses his view that through literature the importance of nature can be shown and it is the literature and the laureates who could raise consciousness about the problems that the environment is facing due to the increasing intervention of the humans.

While some take ecocriticism as the relationship between the nature and environment, the nature and literature and literature as a means to create environmental awareness, some take it as the study of literature through the ecological aspects. Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological principles to the scholarly study of literary works" (qtd. in Jimmy 370). According to Rueckert, ecocriticism is the theory that deals with the ecological aspects in a piece of literature. Ecology becomes the centre in the literary writing and discussion. Everything goes around ecology.

However, according to Peter Barry, "For the eco-critic, nature really exists out there beyond us, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (114). Barry makes people aware that nature has the fatal consequences for them if they do not take care of the nature while consuming its resources.

There are two different types of ecology: social ecology and deep ecology. Michael Benett postulates that social ecology must have the approach to nature in connection with human needs and the well-being of the society whereas deep ecology is independent and it has its own value without having to give to the society (8). Social ecology focuses on society and human beings while deep ecology focuses on the nature itself independently.

Ecocriticism is a new term and a new trend in literature. Because of the growing population and pollution, and the overuse of natural resources is in increasing ratio. This is directly hampering the beauty and the source of the nature. Therefore, ecocriticism has emerged in the field of literature. It has been a new fashion in literary writings. There has been a paradigm shift in literary criticism. In this case, Shakuntala Kunwar and Pooja Kali state:

Eco-criticism is the latest trend in the field of critical theory which studies the relationship between the literature and physical environment which is why it deserves more observations and discovery. Up to now, the critical studies have been human-centric, but eco-critical studies are nature centric. Therefore, the critical studies have taken paradigm-shift with the emergence of a new critical

angle popularly known as eco-criticism. After all the world is habited not only by human beings, but by the thousands of creatures that live in nature. And human being is heavily dependent upon nature in various ways. Living becomes possible when he takes oxygen and oxygen is exhaled by trees. But, owing to the cut-throat competition in the guise of culture, man does not hesitate even to destroy the green trees. In other words, eco-critical studies have broadened the circumference of criticism by including the vital aspect of nature and environment into it. (343)

Therefore, ecocriticism is the new trend in the field of literature. The earlier literature mainly focused on humans while the later literature has its focus on nature. There has been a paradigm shift in the studies. Furthermore, Sandip Kumar Mishra claims:

Ecocriticism is one of the youngest revisionist movements, which has swept the humanities over the past few decades. The present world is facing eco-disasters and our environment is now at stake. Only science and technology are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis. We should make change in our attitude to nature. Literature does not float above life, so it has its role to play. For a long time, nature was not given due consideration by the literary critics, so ecologically oriented literature pleads for a better understanding of nature in its wider significance. (168)

Ecocriticism talks about the troubles that the earth is facing. Science is not enough to fight with the problems that the earth is facing. Thus, ecocriticism has emerged in literature.

The critics argue that literature has served humanity in its best possible way but ecocriticism is the only theory in literature that has tried to deal with the problems of the environment. Ursula K. Heise asserts: "To date, environmental-justice ecocriticism is the only branch of the field that has addressed globalization issues in any depth" (513). In some degree, ecocriticism in literature has been able to deal with the environment, its beauty, its problems, its effects and its solutions.

In sum, ecocriticism is a branch of science that creates awareness among readers about the nature and the nature's issues. In order to meet with the present environmental crisis, ecocriticism plays an important role in building up the eco-consciousness among readers.

### **An Ecocritical Reading of Devkota's Poems**

The poets who write about nature deal with ecological aspects in their writing. They praise the beauty of the nature: the mountains, the hills, the clouds, the rainbow, the rivers, etc. These beautiful natural objects attract the writers. The writers then try to find the mysteries of such beauty and its importance in the life of people. If the writers see the nature facing troubles, they repent and write about the human interference on the nature. Devkota has praised the nature in his poems. About Devkota and his poems, Nabaraj Dhungel opines:

Man-nature relationship is one of the central themes of great poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota. This relationship is both analogous and Antithetical. Nature is source of life, knowledge and pleasure for human beings. But at the same time it is cruel and angry giving pain and suffering to human beings. Similarly, man both loves and exploits the nature. On the one hand, they worship nature as god but on the other hand, they make it the source of earning deteriorating it. Instead of enjoying its beauty and positively using nature, human beings try to get maximum profit from nature irrationally utilizing it which causes adverse effects

in the ecosystem and the whole universe. Many of his poems focus on mundane elements of the human and the natural world. (61)

Dhungal explains how people take nature and asserts that many of Devkota's poems contain the elements of both natural and human worlds. Similarly, Mohan Raj Gouli opines:

Laxmi Prasad Devkota, a Nepali poet, is famous to insert romantic spirit into his poetry and consequently he occupies special position in the realm of Nepali poetry who deal with such subject matter in their poems. Devkota's love for nature is significantly displayed throughout his nature poems and he treats nature as the source inspiration, happiness, compassion and nourishment. Because of his benevolent thought regarding helpless and downtrodden people, he naturally cultivated strong and positive attitudes toward nature and natural elements. While portraying nature in his poetry, Devkota discusses different forms of nature such as divinity, living, obedient, supporting and nourishing. He also represents nature as a sight of celebrations and offerings. Sometime, Devkota treats nature as an agent of obedient and victory over miseries. (45)

Devkota has a special space in the history of Nepali poetry. He has the celebration of nature in his poems.

There is a manifestation of ecological beauty and awareness in his "The Swallow and Devkota," and "The Brook." These poems show the relationship between the nature and humans. In the poem, "The Swallow and Devkota," Devkota writes, "The swallow and Devkota /Share the same nest and the same trait" (lines 1-2). The poet compares himself with the swallow, the part of nature. He says that both share the same nest-the earth and have the same qualities. The following stanza of the poem further clarifies Devkota's love for the nature:

To pass your honeymoon you chose Nepal  
The place that is healthy and high.  
Silently does the tie spiritual  
Between the swallow and Devkota weep.  
Seeing our creative pain  
The starry sky like the eyes of compassion,  
Peeping through a crack in the window,  
Falls down rolling in a star. (lines 34-41)

Here, the poet explains that Nepal is a beautiful place and is the choice of everyone. The newly married couple come here to enjoy their honeymoon. They want the nature to be the part of their happy moment. The swallow and Devkota share the same pain and cry together. The starry sky seeing them cry peeps through the sky, and falls down as a rolling star to console both the poet and the bird. Devkota further writes:

The swallow and Devkota  
Share the same nest and the same trait.  
We came chasing the spring  
The dream flowers become real!  
We sang the song of Gauri-Shankar,  
The song that's the duet of Prakriti and Purush.  
The melodious creation of that beak and this taste-bud  
Is our own abode. (lines 42-49)

In this stanza too, Devkota expresses that he and the swallow have the same abode and characters. Both like the spring and sing the song of Gauri-Shankar, *Prakriti* and *Purush*. In this regard, Roopali Das comments: "At the Microcosmic level, the Prakriti or Nature comprises the personality of the individual in existence whereas the Static and

immutable Purusha is the individual soul within (201). *Prakriti* is the individual existence whereas *Purush* is the soul of an individual. In the poem, the poet and the swallow sing the song of their existence and their soul. The beak of the bird and the taste-bud of the poet is the abode of the melodious creation.

In the next poem, "The Brook," Devkota writes: "Down lines of pine and eglantine/ Serpentine in my falling/ I touch the woodbines and the vines/Mellifluously calling" (lines 1-4). The speaker of the poem is the brook, an element of nature. The brook says that it falls like a serpent in an irregular shape and goes through the pine and eglantine, the woodbines and the vines. They softly call the brook to pass through it. The poet here expresses the way a brook falls and has its journey to the ocean.

The poet further writes: "I linger as a singer/ Gingerly in my saree/ Of silver threads and leap adown/Singing my charivari" (lines 13-16). The brook says that he is a singer. It puts on the saree of water which is made of silver threads and jumps down singing the song. The brook goes through the mountain with the sunbeams on it. The water glitters. It goes on its journey to the ocean happily. While the poet describes the brook, he has used different other natural elements that are beautifully presented while describing the journey of the brook.

Laxmi Prasad takes the swallow and him as the same element of the nature in the poem "The Swallow and Devkota." He has beautifully expressed the ways that show the beautiful comparison between him and the bird. The poet describes that his characters and attributes match with the bird. Similarly, in the poem "The Brook," the poet praises a beautiful gift of the nature- the brook. He has described the journey the brook undertakes. In both the poems, Devkota has focused on the nature and the human and nature relationship. He has been able to include the ecocritical aspect in both poems.

### **An Ecocritical Reading of Tagore's Poems**

Tagore has written some outstanding poems that are written about nature, especially the relationship between the environment and human. His poems have qualities of the great English Romantic poets. Alka Sharma observes:

Tagore's poems on nature are loaded with his intrinsic twisted of romanticism.

He is pulled in by the sights, sounds and colors objects of nature. In his affection for nature, there is a characteristic of mysticism. His inclination poetry reminds us of Keats, Shelly, Tennyson, and Wordsworth.... Tagore's poetry permeates biological elements. These eminences of his characteristic made Tagore part of the disciplinary study of Ecocriticism. He was not mindful of this recently shaped discipline but rather his works by its merits, to be sure turned into a vital part of the discipline. (3-4)

Tagore's poems are compared with the poems of famous romantic poets like Keats, Shelly, Tennyson and Wordsworth. His poems are mystical in nature.

Shakuntala Kunwar and Pooja Kali alludes:

Tagore loved nature, but it was nature which, for him, was close to the habitations of men. His rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces; they flow by meadows and pastures. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His fellow-men are a necessity to him. Even so, it remains noteworthy that we hear very little of mountains in his verse, but rains and rivers, trees and clouds and moonlight and dawn are very much spoken of. (342)

Tagore talks about different parts of nature like rivers, flowers, mountains, trees, clouds and moonlight in his poems. He enjoys writing about them in his poems.

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In the poem "The Tame Bird Was in a Cage," the two birds - one free bird and a caged bird fall in love and want to live together. The free bird asks the caged bird to come to the forest where they could fly together freely. The caged bird then asks the free bird to come and live in the cage together. The following lines show the conversation between the birds:

The tame bird was in a cage, the free bird was in the forest.  
They met when the time came, it was a decree of fate.  
The free bird cries, "O my love, let us fly to the wood."  
The cage bird whispers, "Come hither, let us both live in the cage."  
Says the free bird, "Among bars, where is there room to spread one's wings?"  
"Alas," cries the caged bird, "I should not know where to sit perched in the sky."  
(lines 1-6)

The free bird speaks aloud in freedom whereas the caged bird only whispers in fear and domination. One bird does not like to live in the cage and the next bird does not know how to sit perched in the vast sky.

Birds are freedom-loving creatures. They are meant to fly in the sky and live in the forest. The poem depicts the plight of the natural being captured in a man-made cage. The freedom of the bird is withheld for the human's petty pleasure. The following lines of the poem show the contrasting views of the two birds:

The free bird cries, "My darling, sing the songs of the woodlands."  
The cage bird says, "Sit by my side, I'll teach you the speech of the learned."  
The forest bird cries, "No, ah no! Songs can never be taught."  
The cage bird says, "Alas for me, I know not the songs of the woodlands." (lines 7-10)

Here, the human has taught the caged bird his language. The free bird sings the songs of the forests while the caged bird wants to teach the free bird the human language. The natural being has been converted into an artificial object by the humans. One is habituated with the forest as the real natural home and the next is habituated with the confined cage, which is the artificial one. The poet implies that humans have confined the bird (as nature) for their own pleasure.

In the poem "The Banyan Tree," the poet communicates with the banyan tree. The following lines clearly clarify the same:

O you shaggy-headed banyan tree standing on the bank of the pond,  
have you forgotten the little child, like the birds that have  
nested in your branches and left you?  
Do you not remember how he sat at the window and wondered at  
the tangle of your roots and plunged underground?  
The women would come to fill their jars in the pond, and your  
huge black shadow would wriggle on the water like sleep struggling  
to wake up.  
Sunlight danced on the ripples like restless tiny shuttles  
weaving golden tapestry. (lines 1-10)

The poet asks the banyan tree as the part of nature whether he remembers a child who used to sit and rest on its branches, the women who used to come to the pond near the tree to fetch water, the dance of the sun on the water and the animals that played near the tree. The speaker wishes to enjoy as he did in the past when he was a child.

These two poems of Tagore are enough examples to support that he was a nature lover and he liked writing poems about nature. He has shown what effect the destruction of nature and the natural element have resulted in.

### Conclusion

Despite the fact that Devkota and Tagore were born in different contexts and different periods, they wrote about nature including other subject matters in their poems. They are similar in the sense that they wrote about the relationship between the natural world and human world. They applied ecocriticism in their poems without being aware of using it. Both of them wrote about the similar naturally beautiful things like flowers, water, river, birds, sky, etc. They have not regretted much on the degradation of the nature because there was not much environmental deterioration in their lifetime in comparison to today's world.

Devkota and Tagore could be recognized as ecocritical poets through the study of Devkota's two poems "The Swallow and Devkota" and "The Brook" and Tagore's two poems "The Tame Bird Was in a Cage" and "The Banyan Tree." They used ecocriticism in their writings even before the term 'ecocriticism' was termed. Both the poems of both the poets that have been discussed in this paper have clearly supported them to present themselves as ecocritical poets. Ecology has been kept at the centre of their poems. Both the poets wrote about the entire nature taking it as a wholesome. Their poems reflect the pleasure of communicating with the nature and being part of it.

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