

Nature, the Elixir of Life: A Critique of Rahul Varma's *Land Where the Trees Talk*

By

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Nature, the breath and finer spirit of the Universe lies "like the folds of a bright girdle furled" protecting, guiding, nourishing and nurturing millions of human lives. In an era of scientific advancement, men out of their pride and greed lay siege upon the sacred citadel of their pristine environment. Modern masses are proud people who pride themselves in their false and unjust actions. Environmental preservation and sustainable development are the need of the hour. Many creative artists inspired by the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "there is enough of nature for everybody's need and not for anybody's greed" have avidly penned the injustice being done to Mother Earth. Varma, an Indian voice in the Canadian pastures has won wide acclaim by blowing the lid off a plethora of social evils that are hidden in the dark pools of injustice. Land Where the Trees Talk has emerged from the grassroots of the Canadian Society. Varma's play probes into Native land rights in the midst of environmental awareness "are we inheriting the earth from our ancestors or stealing it from our children?" Varma terms the environmental injustice as 'Ecotage' or 'Ecological Sabotage.' The James Bay hydro-electric project, the brain child of the White imperialists acted as death knell to Native existence, destroying their eco-system by felling forests and polluting rivers with mercury.

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Mother Earth is a goddess, venerated by indigenous peoples. Mother Earth is much more than the soil we walk on. It is the wind, the fire, the water, the element that we breathe and that sustains life and prosperity.

Edia López

But surely, surely, when a wrong thing has been done, and you feel it, to suppress your resentment and to stifle protest is to let evil grow unchecked. Civilization and humanity call for the free expression of one's resentment.

Rajaji

C. Rajagopalachari, an ardent advocate of nature in his essay "The Tree Speaks," reminds mankind of their bounden duty to raise their voice against unjust actions. Rajaji's words perhaps ignited the creative realm of the theatre artist Rahul Varma who is a great champion fighting the cause of social injustices. Varma, an Indian voice in the Canadian pastures has won wide acclaim by blowing the lid off a plethora of social evils that are hidden in the dark pools of injustice. Conservation of nature is the need of the hour as environmental genocide has become rampant in this modern age. Varma's heart bleeds when he sees the manifold creations of mother earth destroyed and decimated for human progress in the name of advancement. His words have the power to ignite fires and kindle the eco-consciousness of human minds which has been wittingly hidden in the recesses of their hearts. Glen Love, in his essay, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism" states, "nature oriented literature offers a needed corrective to our narrowly anthropocentric view of life, nature writing shows regard for the non-human and privileges "eco-consciousness" over "ego-consciousness" (205).

Colonizers, in their mad rush over name, fame and material prosperity conveniently forget that human life is ephemeral. By hook or crook or by fair or foul means they accomplish their goal of colonization. Compassion, benevolence, humanity and fellow feeling have become anachronisms as they transform the colonized soil into “a darkling plain/swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight” (35-36). The so-called denizens of the brave new e-world lacerate the Native souls by grabbing their land and its pristine environment. Nature is part and parcel of Native Canadian life and the Whites with their cold-blooded strategies destroy and pollute Mother Earth in the name of advancement and globalization. They plundered, looted and exploited the natural resources of the Native soil that resulted in environmental colonialism, one of the well-designed ploys of the colonizers. Concepción defines environmental colonization thus:

Environmental colonialism was the consequence of the technology that had been located on the island, which consumed a great deal of energy and generated high levels of contamination. The problem is that those renewable resources that have been damaged and overused are essential not only for production activities but also for all forms of life. Therefore, what is at stake is biological survival as well as economic survival. This policy may be considered a new form of subordination and oppression. (128)

Varma’s full-length play *Land Where the Trees Talk* mirrors the unheard anguish of the Native people of Canada under the British yoke. The sons of the soil grew up in the beloved lap of Mother Earth, worshipping and adoring each and every facet of nature. The speech of the Native American Chief Seattle highlights the eco-centric life of the aboriginals:

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. . . . We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not water, but the blood of our ancestors. The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. This we know the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to earth. (qtd. in Gore 159)

The 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal is the inspiration for the play. Varma correlates the Quebec incident with Bhopal tragedy. In 1984 in Bhopal, Union Carbide’s pesticide plant blew up, and deadly contaminous fumes engulfed the city. Varma poignantly states, “small children fell like flies, and men and women vainly scurried for safety only to collapse, breathless and blinded by the gas.” In the tragedy 5000 were dead, 80,000 disabled and more than 2, 00,000 were injured and uprooted. Human race had to pay the price for progress and development.

Varma’s play probes into Native land rights in the midst of environmental awareness “are we inheriting the earth from our ancestors or stealing it from our children?” Varma terms the environmental injustice as ‘Ecotage’ or ‘Ecological Sabotage.’ The James Bay hydro-electric project, the brain child of the White imperialists acted as death knell to Native existence destroying their eco-system by felling forests and polluting rivers with mercury. Huge chunks of Native land near James Bay, an area bigger than France had been appropriated by Quebec for hydro development. The area residents of James Bay become victims of mercury poisoning after the first phase of the project. Colonialism has altered the eco-balance of the Native planet. By ramming through James Bay Hydro project, the government of Quebec has denied the Native people the right to their land and its resources. While the hydro project has earned dollars to the government of Quebec, it has displaced and uprooted the Native people making them refugees in their own land. The Native people are denied political power and they are the direct victims of the project. .

The Megawatt project is a metaphor for the callous and inhuman attitude of the Whites towards the Natives. It is also a classic instance of the environmental destruction caused by the superior race. The Prime Minister is all praise for the project as he feels that it will save the land from economic crisis. He dreams of a new world and enlists the achievements of the land, “200 dams and dikes, half a million ton of concrete, 200 million cubic meters of reservoir, 1500 km long road, bar, airport, investors from all over the world. Just a few years ago it was a virgin territory with just a few trappers and hunters. Today, it produces 10000 megawatt hydro-power (70).

The Prime Minister is not bothered about the environmental consequences of the project. The rap song of the industrialists Diox, Tox and Rob glorify the Megawatt:

Let me tell you a story about Megawatt,
It's a big bucks project we love a lot, Hunh, hunh.
Megawatt, Megawatt, rah, rah, rah,
If you're really good we'll give some stock to you Hunh, hunh.
I said M-E-G-A-W-A and a double yah, a double Tee
It's the biggest money maker for the movers and the shakers in all of history. Hunh
(72).

The saga of Thomas and Lubna, is an effective rendering of the revelation of man's inhumanity to man and nature. Thomas, seduced by the vision of glamorous life promised by the Whites is excited at the idea of getting a job in the Megawatt project. Unable to earn a livelihood due to his nativity, he wishes to make hay while the sun shines. He declares his intention to Lubna:

Remember the time you applied for the job in the bar . . . who got it Lubna, the Indian? No. It was either Maria the Italian, Holly, the Irish girl or Maria France, the French Canadian. It's never us. We're always the last ones. We always get the short end of the stick. Now we finally have an opportunity to move up, and I am not going to miss it (76).

Discarding the much cherished age-old spiritual beliefs of yesteryears, Thomas wishes to join the world of progress and work for self-improvement. Thomas wants Lubna to assimilate herself into the mainstream society. Lubna, very proud of her own soil and culture can never fit into Whiteman's shoes. She lives in close communion with nature that imparts great wisdom and teaches her the art of living. The Natives regard Nature as the Scripture of their lives.

Motherhood, the most sublime form of femininity makes women wholesome. Lubna is in seventh heaven when she learns that she is pregnant. But her happiness is short lived. Dr. Karuna Cate confirms Lubna's pregnancy but to her dismay she finds unusually high levels of mercury in her blood report. Karuna laments, “I found that every two patients out of three who live at the mouth of the river and derive their fish diet from it, are showing signs of mercury poisoning” (81).

The eco-terrorists with their avarice have succeeded in colonizing even the baby in the womb. Lubna is heartbroken when she listens to the mourning of her own child in the womb who questions her about its disabled condition. Lubna's disabled child is the gift of the megawatt. When a deformed, disabled or dead baby is born due to environmental or industrial damages, it is an infringement of human rights and on justice. Thomas blames her, “You're trying to make me feel guilty/ This is not. You had a hand in this too. You were told not to eat the fish. Why did you eat fish? Why didn't you stop eating fish?” (92). Thomas does not want a child that may be disabled or poisoned. Thomas fears that the child will grow up hating him all his life. Thomas expresses his agony. “All my life, I've worked to leave behind the fear – the fear of despair, the fear of my ancestor's past - the fear of uncertainty. And now when I'm to be a father, I have to live in fear of the uncertainty of my own child. No! I can't. You could have”(95).

Lubna has become an environmental refugee. She feels that her fate is akin to the destiny of nature because both are devastated by patriarchal forces. In “The Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice,” Birkeland defines ecofeminism as:

. . . value system, a social movement, and a practice... (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is an “awareness” that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal culture. (18)

Lubna is not prepared to destroy her child. She gives vent to her heart’s agony to mother Earth, “I am not performing my most sacred duty. I don’t feed my child a mother’s milk. I feed him mercury. It’s in my blood . . . my milk (96). Women and nature share a divine communion since time immemorial. Susan Griffin, in *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* states “He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her” (45). Lubna is shattered to pieces when she realizes that the baby in her womb is no more. The baby does not wish to come to this darkling plain which is polluted and contaminated to the core. During moments of her emotional turmoil, Mother Earth becomes her guardian angel and fairy godmother who guides her, “Hopes live while people die. Why not live when you’re alive?” (97). Karuna cannot imagine that a conversation can take place between Earth and Lubna. Lubna highlights the significance of Native spirituality , “You may not hear but she talks and we talk back. Your people don’t talk to us but the earth does” (97). The earth and the Natives thus become victims of imperial oppression.

Varma resorts to the technique of anthropomorphism, making Mother Earth voice forth the hazards of environmental destruction. She becomes an important character and the agony of mother earth is indeed heart rending. She mourns her fate, the blow given to here by greedy men with myopic vision. By manipulating the flow of the river with bulldozers, they are taking the earth away and will not leave anything for the children. Mother Earth feels that the Whites are breaking her back:

I am the Earth, the mother. Today I am struck by men of greed and with myopic visions. They gather in their corporate rooms, in pious garbs and recruit the innocent and command strike. Like maniacs they do. They manipulate the flow of the river will bulldozers and backhoes, drowning tons of rocks and soil where from time immemorial the beaver had ruled. Don’t you realize that taking the earth away won’t leave anything – not even for your own children. So you think rivers can wash away your industrial sins. Why don’t you listen? I’m your mother, Earth. Step on a crack, break your Mother’s back. Step on a crack, break your Mother’s back. Step on a crack; break your Mother’s back (75).

Though the era of colonialism has withered away, imperial superiority is still ubiquitous. Racial discrimination and environmental destruction are still raising their ugly heads in every nook and corner of the world. There is a hue and cry all over the world for preservation of nature. But what exists in reality is brutal destruction of nature. Environment is polluted by man’s inhumanity and mad rush after industrialization and technological advancement. Varma’s drama presents a nightmarish vision where the future generations are bound to suffer. We have inherited Mother Earth from our ancestors and we have no right to steal it from the future generations. But the modern men have mercilessly destroyed nature for their selfish motives and luxurious living. Technological advancements have happened due to the brain work of the modern men which has ultimately resulted in the accumulation of e-wastes that pollute the environment. As years unroll, world will become a reservoir of non degradable garbage. Varma’s text serves as an eye opener in awakening the minds of the readers to face the greatest challenge that hangs like a Damocles sword over their heads. It is

hoped that the present generation will strive hard to set up a clean environment so that posterity can thrive in a serene and unpolluted world.

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