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NATURE MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF MARY WEBB

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ABSTRACT

Essentially a Shropshire poet, but, beyond that, a contemporary mystic, Mary Webb holds a distinguishable position in the literary canon of the early twentieth century. Even though her works blur the boundaries between religious poetry and mystic profusions, they do vividly transcend the limits of temporal demarcations. Webb probably would have been both a revolutionary as well as a visionary in declaring the need to be able to commune with nature and encounter the divine presence in the latter. In a society where she could be termed a rebel and ostracised for not conforming to religious obligations, Webb set out to present a brave model to the posterity by pronouncing through her works that the divine did indeed dwell in the natural world around. She clearly possessed an 'ecological self' that took her to the extent of realising that communing with nature could be a means of conversing with the Almighty. As evident from her meditative and evocative poems, realising the 'oneness' of all beings and approaching nature with this attitude, could be akin to gaining a mystical union with the omnipotent. Thus, she clearly opposes 'speciesism', which is the idea that engenders the authority that human species exercises over other species. In the present scenario, where the current generation is yet to seriously consider the grave implications of the pressing environmental issues the humanity faces today, the verses of this nature mystic seems to hold great relevance.

Keywords: ecological self, oneness of all beings, speciesism

As a child, especially due to the inspiration from her father, Mary Webb maintained a close contact with the intricate details of her countryside. The splendor and divinity that Webb associated with the locales she acquainted herself with, is evident in her enlightening verses as well as novels such as *The Spring of Joy*, *The House in the Dormer Forest*, *The Golden Arrow*, *Precious Bane* and so on. All of these depict a harmonious and intense relationship with the natural world which vividly transcends the limits of temporal demarcations. For the nature mystics, nature as a whole becomes the basis of finding the eternal such that it gains significance as a purely blissful aesthetic experience. In the case of Mary Webb too this proved true as for her "to commune with nature was to encounter the divine which then became an act of worship" (Khan 1). This reveals her identity as an evolved nature mystic.

The paper attempts to study selected poems of Mary Webb within the framework of nature mysticism. It intends to show how her verses that describe nature with great eye for detail, also abound in mystical profusions. Her meditative and evocative poems proclaim the need to realise the 'oneness' of all

beings. Approaching nature with this attitude could be akin to gaining a mystical union with the omnipotent. Thus, Webb clearly opposes 'speciesism', which is the idea that engenders the authority that human species exercises over other species. The paper also seeks to prove that she clearly possessed an 'ecological self' to be able to understand that entering into a profound, harmonious relationship with the natural world could be a means of conversing and merging with the Almighty.

In poems such as "The Ancient Gods", "A Hawthorn Berry", "In April" and "Colomen", Webb makes explicit declarations regarding the divine presence dwelling within the natural world. When she utters in "The Ancient Gods" that the "...catkin-covered sallow/With her illusive, glimmering surprise,/Pale golden-tinted as a tall young goddess" (5-7), and "the white birches wading in the margin,/Each one a naked and a radiant god" (9-10), dazzled her eyes, she is literally vesting them with divine qualities. The overwhelming divine presence that envelops the natural world is depicted through the images of an invisible being which stirs a number of activities: As she remarks: "the foam was flung by currents/ Where no feet trod"... "They woke amid the shallow, singing water/They left no trail for any beast to follow,/ No track upon the moss for man to trace" (15-18). However, the poet persona is able to attribute these actions to 'ancient gods' as she utters: "But I know well that I beheld to-day/The ancient gods, unheralded, majestic,/Upon their way"(42-44). The fact that they remained invisible to the outside world, but was easily identified by the persona, points to the 'ecological consciousness' that brims within the speaker. It seems like Webb wants to assert that only the ones who are ready to shed their 'ecological consciousness' and are ready to imbibe an 'eco-self' can discern the theory of 'oneness' that underlies all beings. She makes it clear in her poem " Colomen" too, where she remarks "The doves that coo in Colomen/ Are never heard by mortal men" (1-2). It calls forth the need of total surrender and humility as pre-requisites of any mystical experience.

In "The Ancient Gods", perhaps, the persona has successfully crossed this phase through utter surrender as she is now capable of seeing the once invisible beings, "stately, comely,/Within the leafy shadows of the stream" (13-14). At a metaphorical level, this may refer to the deep insight that the speaker has gained in close communion with nature, which is that the entire natural world brims with the energy of the omnipotent. Such an idea is particularly relevant while considering the role of nature as the producer and sustainer of life. Webb is probably trying to initiate a world view that moves from 'anthropocentrism' to 'ecocentrism'. The latter perspective would help one realise that "everything is connected to everything else" as Barry Commoner suggests, and eliminate the Cartesian perspective that is reigning the world today (29). In the words of Vandana Shiva, according to the Cartesian world view, "the environment is seen as separate from and inferior to man. The dualism between man and nature has allowed the subjugation of the latter by man"(39). To counter this ideology Shiva, herself suggests, the need to imbibe a non-dualistic philosophy that endorses the idea of 'duality in unity' which would enable the harmonious co-existence of the human and non-human species.

In this respect, trying to understand and to perceive the underlying divine presence in the natural world as Webb does seems to be along similar lines. It also echoes the philosophy of 'advaita' especially 'vishishtadvaita' integral to Indian cosmology which exhorts the need for an 'organic synthesis'. This "organic synthesis explains the unity of all forms of the dialectic and it will enable us to emphasis the interrelated characteristics of all elements constituting the totality (Varadachari 9).As it also entails the notion that the Supreme Reality has entered the created world without undergoing any change in the process, thereby allowing himself to be manifest inHis creation, it calls for a reverent attitude towards all beings existing in the created world.

Similar attitudes too pervade the poems 'A Hawthorn Berry' and 'In April'. This becomes evident in the way the persona marvels at the beauty of the created world and the magnificence of its Creator in 'A Hawthorn Berry'. She exclaims in the opening lines: " How sweet a thought,/How strange a deed,/ To house such glory in a seed" (1-3). The persona is able to grasp that the seed indeed harbours life within it such that it becomes akin to the creator of life. She remarks: "So round, it harbours everything" (7). Metaphorically, it also extends to the Mother Earth who nurtures and nourishes life. However, the speaker is keen to go beyond the superficial elements and perceive God who inhabits the created beings, which is why she is capable of seeing "on the wintry heaven,/A white, immortal hawthorn-tree" (12-13). By calling the tree 'immortal', she bestows

it with divinely qualities. This is in sharp contrast to the idea of 'speciesism' where humans assert authority over other species, claiming their superiority as much evolved beings and considering themselves as the pinnacle of creation. As Peter Singer notes in "Speciesism and Moral Status", many "believe that all human beings have a moral status superior to that of non-human species"...owing to "the superior cognitive capacity of humans" (567). It is this notion embedded in the psyche of mankind that persuades him to undertake activities that ruthlessly exploit and devour the non-human species to suit the former's selfish pursuits. It also turns him into a megalomaniac capable of manipulating these 'inferior' species according to his will. This distorted perspective would ultimately spell the doom of humans as well as the rest of the world. Fritjof Capra has written that major problems of our times such as war, poverty, and environmental devastation-all stem from one single crisis, "a crisis of perception" (19). Similarly, Lawrence Buell also suggests that "the success of all environmental efforts finally hinges on the "state of mind""(1). The example that Mary Webb has set through her life as well as works is worth emulating in this regard.

A study of "In April" by Webb, shows the significance of what Peter Berg calls "bioregionalism". However, Webb goes even beyond that in her interactions with the natural world. In the essay "What is Bioregionalism?" Berg suggests that it denotes the various modes of political, social, cultural and scientific arrangement with bioregions (a geographic area having the common characteristics of soil, watershed, climate, endemic plants and animals) and it's often considered to be the process of becoming native to a place. It specifically implies "learning to live in a place via becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships" that define that place (6). This is clear in the words of Webb where she goes on to say that she has evolved beyond herself and has seamlessly become one with nature as she finds that her:

Heart is set
Where the pansy and the violet
And the daffodil,
And close-folded lilies grow
In borders dark with melted snow (2-6).

The persona here finds herself listening to the "velvet bees" and cradled by the "empurpled crocuses". She has merged very closely with her surroundings that she is able to even share the "conflict, fierce and quick" of the "sharp-pointed grasses" that embrace the earth. The speaker is so "submerged within their beauty" that she says therefore, "I transcend my poor mortality" (32-34). Thus, Webb evidently perceives the realm of nature as that which initiates her into a life beyond this world. In communion with her environment, she is able to break the shackles of time and space that the temporal world forces upon her and enter into a more sublime field of existence. Her words also echo that of Richard Jefferies who notes in "The Story of My Heart", "it is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air"(30).

In "Colomen" as in "The Ancient Gods", Webb seems to insist that an underlying 'feminine principle' pervades the natural world. In the words of Vandana Shiva, "nature is an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" (37). Webb attempts to equate an unnamed female (may be her own self) to the landscapes that she describes. The lady mentioned in "Colomen" whose voice was as soft as the doves and to whom "whence, as she called/ doves would float/ Softly, on arm and shoulder rest" represents any individual who has been able to go beyond a superficial level of connection with nature, to successfully attain a seamless union with her and therefore, the Eternal (15-16). By making direct comparisons with the lady figure and nature as in the idea that she "was like a slim tree bent with bloom" and that, later, she was found standing "like a tree bent down with blossom..." ,perhaps Webb intends to show that there is practically no difference between the lives of nature and humans as both are intricately connected (155). Webb, in "The Ancient Gods" identifies the initially invisible beings as those similar to women, "with deep hair of willows,/Bare breasts and gracious arms and long, smooth hips" (25-26), but at the same time, she notes, they" were massive-browed and massive-shouldered/ And taller than the common height of men" (29-30). It seems to resonate the non-gendered based philosophy advocated by Vandana Shiva, where, the "feminine principle is not exclusively embodied in women, but is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women and men" (50). She goes on to explain that one cannot actually "distinguish the masculine from the feminine,

person from nature, Purusha from Prakriti" (50). She also reminds that in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti dons the role of the creator. Webb too seems to adhere to this notion in the above lines.

Thus, as in the above poems, by presenting her firm conviction of being able to encounter divinity through her immediate surroundings, Webb is reinforcing the need to consider nature with reverence and awe. In the present scenario, where the current generation is yet to seriously consider the grave implications of the pressing environmental issues the humanity faces today, the verses of this nature mystic seems to hold great relevance.

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