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A Tryst of Ecological Implications: Tagore's Red Oleanders and Knut Hamsun's Growth of the Soil

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Abstract : Ecological implications and attitudes are the focal explorations in Knut Hamsun's Growth of the Soil and Tagore's Red Oleanders. Both of the authors present mining to bring in front the hazardous effects of resource exploitation of nature as a whole and of human's benign virtues. Growth of the Soil and red Oleanders parade fearlessly towards critiquing the capitalist exploitation and its resultant effects; notwithstanding they also project some sort of solutions to the prevalent problems mining generates.

Key words : Ecological implication, small mindedness, humble agent, alarming and unpredicable spread.

Introduction :

Knut Hamsun showcases a georgic rootedness for his turn, whereas Tagore takes up a poetic Romanticism. In spite of belonging to different territorial platforms Hamsun and Tagore the two Nobel Prize winners have shared a tryst to voice against the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. The present essay attempts to uncork various implications and significance of mining in Hamsun's novel Growth of the Soil and Tagore's play Red Oleanders, hinging upon the wide window of meaning mining stands for and the offshoot of meaning the authors provide. For Hamsun, it is the localized georgic dwelling which vies against the globalized capitalism; Tagore establishes an allegorical front between materialistic, authoritarian control and poetic, nature-inflected freedom.

Growth of the Soil centres around the character of Isak, whom Hamsun describes as a "tiller of the soil" (75) and a " toler in the fields" (341). The novel gives accounts of the establishment and growth of Isak's farm, Selanraa, which commences its journey as an isolated outpost in the wilderness and later appears as the location of a growing community of farmers and pioneers. In the trajectory of its narrative the most symbolic event is the character of Geissler in the mining subplot. The mining comes to represent the imbecility of industry and the small-mindedness of modern means of production, in sharp contrast to the georgic ideals Isak embodies.

Geissler is found in the novel from the very onset as the lensmand, or sheriff's officer, who visits Isak with the purpose of valuating the land on which Isak has established his farm.

Isak is dumbfounded to know that he has to pay the State for the land he has worked. His wife Inger identifies it as " common land," saying that Isak has added the " sweat of his brow to every spade of it" (43). Geissler's first words are : " Why, this is a whole big farm you've got. You don't expect to get all this for nothing?" (46). This question reveals a major difference between Geissler and Isak; Geissler thinks of the farm as something to be paid for in cash, while Isak thinks of it as something to cultivate. In his mind, Isak has "paid" for the farmland with his hard work, and his return come in the form of bountiful crops. At this early point in the novel, the story's main ideological conflict is established: the self-sufficient, barter-based lifestyle of Isak versus the money-driven model of development backed by the state, and later, the mining interests.

In this same scene, Geissler notices Isak's son Sivert playing with a stone; Geissler, in a brief utterance that has great importance for the novel, recognizes it as " some kind of ore" (47). Again, the thoughts of Geisslr and Isak's family are juxtaposed; what Sivert sees as toy, Geissler sees as a means of making money. Geissler returns years later with metal experts to once again valuate Isak's land, this time from a mining perspective. Isak and Geissler talk about Inger, who at this point in the novel is in prison for infanticide, but Geissler quickly changes the subject to the ore, saying, " If there's a decent percentage of copper, you'll be a rich man" (84). In a later episode, Geissler does indeed help Inger reduce her prison sentence, using his knowledge of city ways, but he only tells Isak of this after inquiring, " You haven't sold that copper tract yet" (106).

Over the course of the novel, Geissler buys a piece of Isak's copper-rich land, buys the surrounding property from the State, sells Isak's former land to Swedish relatives of his wife (who in turn sell the land to a larger mining concern), refuses to sell his remaining land to the mining concern (halting their operations), changes heart and sells his land, and -- as the novel closes-- considers buying back the land. To make matters even more complicated, Geissler reveals that he's also been buying the copper coming from the mines, thus manipulating the price of the copper from both ends. In this frenetic parody of capitalism, the prophetic Geissler takes advantage of the greed and shortsightedness of his business associates. As he says, " I knew well enough that those bits of stone were worth exactly as much as men would give for them, no more; well and good, I set a price on them myself, and bought them" (427).

Geissler says of his role in the mining sage, " I'm the humble agent in the workings of fate" (427). This statement reveals the way Hamsun uses Geissler to represent the capricious nature of capitalist expansion, and the arbitrary boom-and-bust cycles by which it operates. Unlike the various characters who stake their livelihood on the mine's success, whom Hamsun portrays with clear contempt, Geissler is painted in more ambiguous terms. He realizes that those investing in the mine are "mad, diseased," and driven by fear, and-- although he is happy to profit from their madness -- he does not condone the very way of life that make him wealthy. He condemns those that pursue wealth for wealth's sake, mocking those who turn "the means to an end in itself and [are] proud of it" (430).

Indeed, the main pu[illegible] of the mining subplot is to show the morally deleterious effect of the mine on the larger community. The mine comes represent the insidious effects of capitalism, and confusions of means and ends. After the mine closes, Hamsun comments, "They had grown accustomed to better food, finer bread, store-bought clothes and higher wages, general extravagance-- aye, folks had learned to reckon with money more, that was the matter" (365). This "general extravagance" is a constant target for Hamsun, who throughout the novel dismisses, sometimes playfully, sometimes bitterly, the preoccupations of those in the money-based economy.

Tagore, in Red Oleanders, similarly condemns those who would make an end out of the means of wealth accumulation. The play, which tells the story of a rapacious King and his conflict with a free-spirited woman named Nandini, is clearly allegorical, in contrast to Hamsun's realist style. The characters exist more as type than as fully-developed individuals, with the King representing the oppressive power of the profit-driven elite and Nandini representing the creative freedom to overcome this power.

Within the play, the conceit of the mine is used to comment on capitalism's harmful moral effects and to condemn the ways of thinking and knowing that lead to capitalist exploitation in the first place. Throughout the play, there is a strong critique of the . The King serves as a grotesque parody of the "scientific" way of knowing ushered in by these figures. He first appears in the play as a disembodied voice, thus satirizing the Cartesian split between the material world (which is soulless and mechanical and hence can be exploited without moral consequence) and the spiritual world (which includes the human minds that can dispassionately evaluate and manipulate the material world).

The King's voice says of the mysterious Nandini: "I want to...grasp you within my closed fist, to handle you, scrutinize you,-- or else to break you to pieces" (247). His only way of confronting Nandini' ineffable beauty is to examine it, violently if necessary. Objects are only knowable to the King if they yield to his forceful examinations. Knowledge is thus linked to acquisition, which is in turn inked to violence. In a telling outburst, the King says, "Breaking is a fierce kind of getting", (269) thus reinforcing the connection between a grasping way of knowing and a violence that is both epistemic and practical.

Throughout the play, the King's way of knowing is tied to his pursuit of profit. The King presides over Yaksha Town, the site of a huge gold mine. Villagers from around the town are forced to work in the mines, accumulating ever-greater wealth for the King. Tagore underscores the King's unending thirst for profit and the havoc it wreaks. As the mad sage Bishu says, "There's always an end to things of need, no doubt; so we stop when we've had enough to eat. But we don't need drunkenness, therefore there's no need to it. These nuggets are the drink-- the solid drink-of Gold King" (255).

The quest for gold brings suffering to the villagers, to the King and to the earth. The tunnel-diggers are described as "insects in a hole in this solid toil...creeping out of the holes like worms" (243). One of the villagers expresses the exploitative nature of their task when he rhetorically asks, "But are wee closely fitted to their profit only,--like husks to grains of corn,--with nothing of us left over?" (251). Disconnected by their normal life above ground, the villagers turn weak and dispirited. Bishu, a dispenser of unpopular wisdom throughout the play, describes his own condition thus: "I come to this place: I am set to work burgling the underworld: from me nature's own ratio of spirits has stopped; so my inner man craves artificial wine in the marketplace" (253). Here nature is portrayed as a generous provider of "spirits", whose supply has been cut off due to the King's greed. In this dire situation, some villagers even take on the King's rapaciousness; as Bishu says of the women in the town, "you are all slavering for gold" (253).

The King, for all the wealth he gains from the villager's toil, is not happy either. He is portrayed by Tagore as pathetic in the original sense of the term; he evokes pathos, especially as he becomes increasingly conscious of his own predicament. He tells Nandini, "I am parched, I am bare, I am weary" (249). He even realizes the sources of his unhappiness, saying, "Overgrown power crushes itself inwardly by its own weight" (249). As Simon Weil would later famously argue, force - such as the King asserts - does irreparable damage both to the perpetrator and the victim.2

Finally, Tagore shows an awareness, largely absent in Hamsun's work, that mining may bring suffering to the earth as well. The name of the town is significant; yakshah are nature-spirits or demons that traditionally guard treasures. Nandini suggest that the King is incurring the wrath of the yaksha by doing violence to the earth, saying, "The living heart of the earth itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom and disturb the dead, you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious" (247). This echoes Bishu's statement about nature's spirits, and expresses Tagore's Romantic appreciation of the earth's bounty. Tagore combines his Romanticism, though , with a strong sense of social justice, and the suffering of humans is the main focus of his critique of mining and the rapacious mindset it represents.

The mine in Growth of the Soil comes to represent the alarming and unpredictable spread of global capitalism; whereas Isak represents the intensely local. For Isak, even the nearby town is foreign. His son's succumbing to town ways is further proof of the enervating effect of capitalist centres, no matter how minor. In a crucial passage that contains the novel's only explicit reference to its title, Hamsun clearly distinguishes between the world of money and high society represented by the mines, and the world of the farmer represented by Isak:

A man of the was not put out by the thought of great things he could not get; art, newspapers, luxuries, politics and such-like were worth just what folk were willing to pay for them, no more Growth of the soil was something different, a thing to be procured at any cost; the only source, the origin of all. (376)

In this remarkable passage, Hamsun cursorily dismisses hallmarks of human achievement like art and politics, echoing the words Geissler uses to dismiss the mining business, valuing instead, and exclusively, the cultivation of land. Ironically, it is Geissler, the bringer of modernity, who waxes most nostalgic about the georgic, saying,

Look at you folks in Sellanraa... No new-fangled invention... but field and rock peaks, rooted deep in the past... Look, Nature's there, for you and yours to have an enjoy. Man and Nature don't bombard each other, but agree... 'Tis you that maintain life. Generation to generation, breeding ever anew; and when you die, the new goes on. That's the meaning of eternal life. (428-9)

This is Hamsun at his most grandiloquent, equating farming tradition with the "eternal life" usually associated with Christianity; by naturalizing religion, Hamsun attributes the highest value to the farming lifestyle and the communion with nature such a life allows.

Tagore similarly uses metaphors to contrast the underground and the surface of the Earth; however, his contrast is more universal than Hamsun's. The allegorical nature of his plays gives Tagore's metaphors broader resonance. In King's words telling words, "Underground there are blocks of stone, iron, gold,--there you have the image of strength. On the surface grows the grass, the flower blossoms,--there you have the play of magic" (242). Given Tagore's critique of the King's grasping kind of strength, it is clear that the value lies with the flowers. Unlike Hamsun, Tagore finds metaphorical value in the sky as well. Indeed, the sky, and the light that shines forth from it, is frequently associated with Nandini, and thus with freedom and beauty. For instance, the King's loyal professor contrasts Nandini with the gold of the mines, saying to her, "But the gold which is you, beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light, which never owns any bond" (242). While the rest of the town is wrapped up in the metaphorical and literal darkness of the mines, Nandini is "the light that startles" the townspeople out of their complacency (242).

This sort of airy beauty is often associated with song; unlike Hamsun, Tagore is not dismissive of art. The heroes of Red Oleanders are the ones able to use song both to convey the beauty of the earth and to sway the political edifice. After Nandini tells Bishu, "In this closed fort a bit of sky survives only between you and me," Bishu responds, "Through that sky my song can fly towards you" (262). The songs Nandini and Bishu sing are full of rich natural and agrarian imagery: "the bosom of the earth and water cry out"(267); "birds come home to rest" (262); "the sky broods like an aching heart" (27); and "the earth's mantle is filled with corn" (298). Through these songs, Tagore suggests that the more-than-human world is best understood, not by reductive scientific analysis, but by poetic contemplation.

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