



**Exploring Eco-poetical Nuances in a Posthuman Robot-World: Tracing  
Postcolonial Ecology in Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's Science Fantasy  
*Forest Goddess and Five Pigeons***

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**Abstract**

Postcolonial literature deals with the resistance in numerous ways against the Eurocentric modes of domination that appropriates the Oriental resources. The seemingly naive and benign aspects of Nature also come within its periphery as there can also be traced some sorts of manipulation. The Sahitya Akademi Award winner novelist Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay in his science fantasy titled as *Forest Goddess and Five Pigeons* pursues the forms of exploitation that is brought about by the trails of colonial encounter as the novel purports to narrate the story of two different cities with their inhabitants in a posthuman world. The novelist addresses the environmental concerns

by relating the anthropocentric views to eco-poetical nuances. The city-space with the aesthetics of alienation gives birth to some pertaining questions that locate the spatial politics by envisaging a post-liberal futuristic world.

**Keywords:** Science fantasy, postcolonial, posthuman, anthropocentric, ecopoetic, city-Space, post-liberal.

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Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Forest Goddess and Five Pigeons* has been an attempt to figure out the supposed tension between several dominant beliefs or ideals that are existent in contemporary world. The societal structure that the novelist envisages is marked by the scientific development geared to the benefit of human race. But the technological advancement which is productive in effect only produces a sharp break in society which is fissured along the line of class difference. The technically advanced city that is affluent in every respect is aptly named as 'New Creation' and the other one 'Low Town' is characteristically less developed with low-bred inhabitants. The people who are fortunately the part of New Creation are always kept in surveillance of guardian insects that hover above and protect them from any harm. The Sahitya Akademi Award winner novelist Sirshendu elaborately documents the difference in terms not only of several modes of pleasure that are intimately associated with the city life but in a way also of the right to knowledge which determines the class difference—"The entire world, everywhere was divided between the Low Towns and the New Creations. The names might be different but everything else was similar. It was not the difference between rich and the poor any more, it was now a matter of knowledge and intelligence. Without them, one could never be in the New Creation. Being in New Creation meant being on the top of the society. Ultramodern

housing, Life cocooned in layers of safety.” (Sirshendu) In the futuristic world of technical expertise the novel harps on the narrative of a neoliberal urban space that reinforces the notion of difference effected by the power/knowledge. The novelist refers to this difference throughout as it recurs incessantly in the text. The girl who the story centres around is aged only nineteen but she is already an expert basketball player, ex-gymnast and excellent swimmer but suffers from an excruciating sense of exhaustion. This is why the novelist perhaps names her central character as Rikta as her name immediately brings in mind the weariness that might have engulfed the girl. However, the eccentric scientist Kahna Rai stands in contrast to the other characters in the fiction because of his sympathetic attitude towards environmental concerns. The time that the fiction portrayed underwent the massive effect of global warming as both the polar ice caps has melted away. This caused an inundation around the world and many islands, coastal cities and low areas disappeared from the world map altogether. This was when Kahna turned out to be the saviour as he invented the famous instrument ‘sweeper’ that could remove the impurities from air and restore normalcy in climate condition. In his private sphere Kahna was a loner as his wife Akshara left him for his crazy demeanour and he always kept himself busy in his science lab being engrossed in ingenious inventions. Rikta who is genetically somehow related to this person is a member of a technically remarkable city where she is able to do all her space walk or eat at space restaurant. But she also gets her chance to come in contact with a girl like Purna who suffers from self-identification and also falls in love with the idea of love itself. This preoccupation with love culminates into the destruction of the watchful insect as she has been asked to do by the man from the low town. Her experiments with facial expressions and meaningful gestures to her robot attendant He-man gradually draw him closer to her as the robot proposes to her eventually. This is how the novelist intends to curve a liminal space within the

textual landscape that legitimizes the eternal recurrence of essential human nature. The way the robot expresses its emotive affections towards the girl anticipates the possible merging of two different cityscapes. Thus there is a spatial politics played within the textual matrix that is directed to the ethical excess. The world where the word love can only be traced in the pages of books or in archives and people are customarily allowed to make love with many partners as frequent as possible without any inhibition the story ends with the proposed marital tie up between the artist named Pranam and Rikta. Shirshendu's love for ethical values is supplemented by the urge of the lunatic scientist Kahna who publicly appealed to get rid of expensive experiments that were conducted by the fellow scientists to search for life in Mars and on the contrary beseeched that this money could be spent properly by feeding the poor children of Ethiopia or making an end to civil war in Africa. This immediately brings in mind the fact that the novelist here urges to dismantle the autonomy of any nation-state in a neo-colonial era. Though this seems to be farfetched and this unprecedented way of relieving the wounds of people from poorer nations in a post-globalized world is more pleasant to ears than made into a practice Sirshendu at least delegitimizes the hegemonic principles that govern the falsified notions of the nation-state in a postcolonial situation. The squandering of public wealth for no reason results in an excruciating angst in this crazy scientist as it prompted him to say to his fellow dignitaries in the Vienna congress of scientists, "My dear colleagues and respected experts, I don't know if there is a life on Mars or not. But do you know if life exists here in Ethiopia? Or Somalia? Have you searched in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh? If you have not, allow me to share with you the most amazing fact of life. I want to tell you, my friends, there IS life! In all those unlikely places, among all the famine, hunger, diseases and civil wars, life exists." (Sirshendu) Egotistic and reactionary as he was Kahna came up with his

razor sharp attack when he continued, “What would you get from millions of dollars in Mars? If you are lucky, you may perhaps find some kind of fungus or some unicellular bacterium. Is it more precious than all the children dying of hunger and diseases in our planet? Hungry, skin and bones babies are dying in their mother’s arms. ... You have Raphael’s fresco on your ceiling, and cockroach-snake-leeches are crawling on your floor. Beethoven’s symphony is drowning out the screams of dying humanity. Why do you not see that Earth is seriously ill? We urgently need to start treatment. The useless science is sucking up all the necessary resources.” (Sirshendu) The scientist was perhaps carried away by the fallacy of his liberal-humanist ideals but he raised few pertinent questions that remained unanswered. The idea of progress was brought under scanner by the scientist who hinted at the supercilious nature of the First World as he deftly pointed out the futility of exorbitant expenditure in the name of scientific experiments. The novelist in this fiction dissolves several disciplinary discourses within the matrix of the text to unveil the state of affairs rampant in his contemporary age as it elicits a postcolonial reading along with contextualizing ontological approach to ecology. Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay tries to locate postcolonial epistemology with environmental concerns as he deals with cultural geography in particular. In his distinction between two cities in the text Shirshendu attempts to figure out the loopholes of Eurocentric notion of progress that is premised on the ideals of Enlightenment by reaffirming the role of collective human agency in this regard. The way the novelist directs to the fact that non-human other is also co-opted in the cultural production of the urban space the fiction somehow inevitably turns out to be on the lookout for the contours of postcolonial ecology. The appropriation of natural resources disrupts the ecological balance and identifies the materiality of nature itself. The consumption of this material nature is undeniably class specific as it is only the privilege of certain chosen people. The novelist also traces the trails of

dehumanization in the text as he purports to re-enact the narrative of colonial enterprise in terms of the injustice meted out to the socially marginalized class. The process of dehumanization operates within certain limit and this is visible when the ‘Low Town’ people who are made to suffer perennially are looked down upon only for the reason that their existence does not conform to the normative principles that reign supreme in the Western construct of ‘humanity’ in general. The girl named Purna in the novel avowedly rebukes the ‘dangerous’ people who belong to the low-bred city—“Their life styles, cities, everything is very different from us. They hate us. They are anti-science, short tempered, aggressive, and violent, they are the enemies of civilization, culture, arts, government.” (Sirshendu) This is ideally how the colonial subject is interpellated within the cultural praxis by referring to the allegory of universal humanism. The people are mercilessly robbed of their right when the colonial invasion sanctions and legitimizes this deprivation. The lived experience in the city is critically examined with a sharp insight that calls into question the pitfalls of colonial modernity. This fictional documentation of everyday life in two different cities is in fact an attempt to recuperate the nuances of spatial politics and also locate the trajectory of spatial production by means of social relations. The urban heterotopias are tracked down by the author who looks for the sites of power and resistance with an ‘intersubjectivist’ spatial thinking and the differential space also legitimizes the conflicts that characterise both cities. The way he deals with this and recognizes several issues in the text it is likely that he is concerned with spatial justice and argues for the ‘right to the city’. Thus the novel rises above the appropriation that has taken place in numerous ways and shapes the everyday existence in the city. In this regard Sirshendu quite successfully explores the city life and introspects into the probable interstitial spaces within the strictly hierarchical rigidity. The dichotomy between two separate existences valorizes the spatial consciousness which is purely a

cultural production. The novelist introspects into the process of selection inherent in the production of culture which determines the worth of existence in the cosmopolitical context as he situates the modes of production within spatial surfaces. The hierarchical structure is undermined by the author who identifies the relation between the individual and society as he brings forth the relation between the social structure and human agency. The textual framework which is embedded within the cosmopolitan discourses of the city is evocative of the displacement of the native folk from the Low Town that characterizes the shift towards the capitalist centre. But this relocation is opposed by the intense urge of few people of the town who remain ever rooted to the place that they ethnically belong. In this way the novelist foregrounds the interplay between environment, ecology, culture and economics in order to historicize nature to uncover the unscrupulous exploitation that readily reminds the colonial encounter in human history.

The dehumanization of marginal life is countered by the novelist who resorts to posthuman creature to take a dig at any essential notion related to the construction of the human. He turns upside down the normative ethics that constitutes the enlightened notions of modernity in this regard. Guided by his utilitarian principle Kahna the scientist reacted specifically to the supposed subjection of human being to the dictates of a machine. He was radically vocal against any such reliance on the part of a human being on a machine as it would inevitably lead towards the absolute submission to automation. In his sole attempt to be engaged with the betterment of humanity at large Kahna appears to be Nietzschean Overman who strides against herd morality to set his own ethical values that are usually emulated by the following generations. The posthumanist world the novelist envisions is technically so advanced that science engulfs everything else. He registers his protest against any form of appropriation as he admits that the dependence on robots will inevitably lead to The automated machines are more capable of

efficiently drawing pictures, playing sitar and composing poetry than their human counterparts as the talented painter Pranam has been coarsely reminded by the teachers at the art college: “You want to learn. We teach you. But know this; there is no profit. Those robots would always draw much better pictures.” (Sirshendu) But the subjection of human being to automation is contravened by the crazy scientist Kahna who observes closely the binding principles that designate a man who remains alive and receptive to his surrounding environment for his subjective consciousness: “A man makes mistakes and corrects himself. That is how his brain remains active and fresh. All the knowledge in this world is created through these mistakes and corrections. That is how the man experiences his environment. But if he gets obsessed with being mechanically perfect, he will never be able to experience the finer beauties of life. He will lose his eyes to see the natural beauty, hear the entrancing effect of music, when the rain clouds arrive after a long scorching summer, his heart will not be moved with joy.” (Sirshendu) The textual space does not explicitly hinge on epistemological certainty of a Cartesian Self but valorizes the master-slave dialectic within its matrix. The futuristic world and its artificial intelligence are vehemently pounced on in order to unveil the futile overdependence on mechanical expertise. Rikta who undergoes an acute exhaustion feels enthralled when she enters the forest in the Low Town and greeted by Jagrata, the caretaker of the forest as the Goddess of the forest. She feels relieved when she is not under the supervision of the guardian insect and holds the little squirrel in hand being surrounded by the friendly pigeons around her. The world in which Rikta eventually finds her match Pranam is divested of any absolute truth but goes on transmuting with due course of time. Here physical attachment with robot is legitimized and even a male robot is seen to express its desire to his mistress. But a lady robot Pritha also at the same time gets severely punished for expressing her feelings towards a man. As a sensitive man Pranam in this



regard is bewildered as he wonders how love withers away from this world. The novelist reckons that beliefs are only to be reinstated after they get shaken in the future as he wraps up his narration with a cherished consummation. In this case those humane feelings within transhumanist bodies that connote the hybrid existence are reinforced by the liberal-humanist ethics of the author who emphasises on the essentialisation of human nature self-reflexively as he sets out to portray the nourishing Mother Nature. The asexual identity of Rikta is the embodiment of the benevolent forces of nature that remain intact and pristine. The lawless Low Town produces a counter-hegemonic space to safeguard the sanctity of benign nature and turns out to be the place of solace to the distressed city folks from New Creation for they remain agonizingly aware of their intense existential angst as ever. The increasing suicidal tendency of the New Creation people who are provided with the immortality vaccine at their early stage of life and thus easily able to fight even death away clearly justify the sense of exhaustion inherent in city-space where life ceases to throb. The narrative thrives along the line of nature/culture binary that it strives to turn inside out as it also ventures to oust the sovereignty of egotistic human from the centre stage. The postcolonial reading of the text comes out of a commitment towards the nature on the part of the novelist who aligns the ecological concerns with the voice of resistance that is usually traced in the postcolonial texts. In their edited book, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* Elizabeth Deloughrey and Georg B. Handley in the introductory article titled as *Towards an Aesthetics of the Earth* voice in favour of the symbiotic relation between postcolonial and ecocritical studies as they are quoted as saying, "...the ecocritical interrogation of anthropocentrism offers the persistent reminder that human political and social inequalities cannot be successfully and sustainably resolved without the engagement with the more than human world and with deep time. Although this challenge to

anthropocentrism is often assumed to directly challenge the human social concerns of postcolonialism, both fields have made it clear that sustainability is a mutual enterprise that pertains as much to human social well-being as to the health of the physical world.” (Deloughrey and Handley 25) Thus they stress upon the interdependence of two different areas altogether by breaking down the barrier between the disciplinary practices. This is elaborated by Robert J. C. Young as he says, “Postcolonialism stands for the right to basic amenities. ... It considers the most productive forms of thought those that interact freely across disciplines and cultures in constructive dialogues that undo the hierarchies of power.” (Young 113-14) The merging of the disciplines is made possible for the indispensable disjunction in spatial projection of two different cultural entities. The city-space transforms into a contested arena which lays bare the tussle between endless oppression and the supposed resistance against it and the novelist aims at de-naturalising the landscape by textual performance to figure out how multiple meaning are inscribed within the material production of landscape and the probable desecration of it at the same time.

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