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An Eco-spiritual Approach to Gerard Manley Hopkins

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Abstract:

In olden days, people were seen more and more dependent and sensitive on/to nature. They bore different attitudes towards nature. Unless the attitude of people changes towards nature, no positive change in environmental health can be expected in spite of several government and non-government initiatives spreading awareness about the idea of co-existence. Boundless potential of religion if it is put in use for spiritual awakening towards nature, hopefully our attempts would bring in tremendous success. Religion has always played very crucial in human lives across the world, and therefore it may be a milestone in transforming attitudes of people towards ecology. Eco-spiritual literary approach links ecology to spirituality so as to make nature and human bonding more solid, effective and friendly. It looks for the intersectional relationship of science, religion, and literature while examining nature as sketched up in various literary texts. In this paper, the present author attempts to analyse and evaluate a few most appealing and essential pieces showing up his spiritual stand on/towards nature.

Key Words:

Ecology, spirituality, religion, anthropocentricity, Hopkins.

It has been always very interesting to examine works of any author of bygone days in the light of current public demand and attitude. People around the world are getting more or less responsible for fall in environment health due to their more and more interests in material growth and thinking. In eco-spiritual context, poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) may be seen as highlighting the spiritual strand of nature. Among English poets, Hopkins seems to me most contemporary poet in the light of eco-spiritual approach. His attitude and approach towards nature can inspire and teach globally.

Spirituality does not approve categorization of things - seen and unseen into high and low strata. It subscribes to cosmic interrelatedness of all. It believes in co-existence and mutual respect. Everything is of nature and hence it must not be subjected to imperfect anthropic attitude. Ecology is the branch of biology that deals with the reciprocal relationships between living organisms and their environment. Ecology studies interdependent nature of the whole world. Spirituality and Ecology believe in inter-relationship. Eco-spiritual approach like its parent form is interdisciplinary. Spiritual patterns and practices differ from nation to nation. Western modernity dissuaded people and prevented them from realizing grace and benevolence of nature. Such people look for having control over nature. Gerard Manley Hopkins was unlike them. To him, the whole world is an expression of God. This is what John Pick termed 'sacramental view of nature wherein the poet and the priest reach through the things of sense to hidden beauties.' (Pick 35) Hopkins in his poems, sermons, and devotional essays presented nature toned with spirituality.

In an article titled "Ecocriticism: Return to Hinduism" I wrote about Indian view of life and cosmos: "Spirituality of the East never taught schemes of exploitation and appropriation. In the ancient Hindu traditions, man was looked upon as part of nature, linked inextricably with elements around him. The Hindu tradition is the oldest living religious tradition in the world. It believes in the all-

inclusive world-view. It sees divine presence in all living and non-living objects. Hinduism is a theory and practice in compliance with principles of Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Smritis, and many more sacred Hindu texts. Since Hindus feel the Supreme Being's presence in everything around them, they feel obliged to honour all living creatures and organic things on the earth. They know how to live in harmony with His creation including earth, fire, rivers, forests, pet and non-pet animals and birds, trees, plants, sun, air etc. No other religion lays as much emphasis on the superiority of nature as does Hinduism. In fact Hinduism is an argument for reverence towards all things in the cosmos." (Mishra 47-48) I further explained, "According to Hindu thought, there is no gap between the Divine and the world of nature. Physical world is just the manifestation of Him. All things and beings are just manifestations. Hindu sacred texts stress on the fact that human beings cannot separate themselves from nature. Hindus adore divine forces hidden in nature." (Mishra 48)

The beauty of nature, education of nature, and delight of nature is impeccable and will remain so forever. Whoever believes in her vital schemes, cannot feel interested in the anthropic systems of greed, pride, and self-indulgence. The anthropic idea of beauty, teaching, and pleasure appear, if closely examined, mere distortions of heavenly schemes of nature. All anthropic plans take birth in the crucible of sheer confusions, and therefore they cannot emulate with divine schemes. The anthropic beauty appears to average people attractive for its grounding in materiality but celestial beauty appeals only rare souls. Hopkins was one of them. It was his deep-seated spirituality or faith in celestial plans made him pierce into the inner beauty of everything. Those who believe in divine schemes do not see anything unsacred. They are called eco-spiritualists. They hold sacramental view of environment. They realize the presence of God in everything and everything in God.

On the face of ecological crisis of global sweep, environmentalists find religion more powerful and effective medium for spreading awareness regarding the sustainability of life and nature on the earth. The eco-spiritualists conflate ecology with spirituality. They believe in the oneness of all lives. They believe in giving respect to them indiscriminately. They spread the message of interconnectedness of everything in the cycle of universe. To them, ecological imbalance is moral or ethical ill of anthropic thinking. Rana P. B. Singh feels eco-spirituality as the immediate solution for the global ecological ills. He writes:

Modernization and messages contained in ancient wisdom should be allowed to coexist to help realize humanity's link with nature. This ideology should be taken as an environmental ethic having sacrality and deep attachment at the core. One may also hope for a revival of the sense of belongingness in the light of "ecoethics", preserving the age-old intangible spirit of sustainability and recognizing our ecological identity in the cosmic web of interconnectedness of all beings-a message of ecospirituality. (Singh 161)

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born on the 28th of July, 1844 at Stratford, Essex (now in Greater London) to an Anglican couple Manley and Catherine. In 1866 under the influence of Cardinal John Henry Newman, he joined the Roman Catholic Church and converted to Catholicism. After completing graduation, he accepted the post of a teacher which Newman had offered him in 1867. On becoming Jesuit (one who is a member of the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus established by St. Ignatius Loyola in 1534, dedicated to missionary and educational work), he burnt all his poem written before except a few. Gerard Manley Hopkins had great passion to see divine presence in everything what he called technically 'in-scape'. He has strong perceptibility what he termed 'in-stress'. To him nature is not an object. Nature to him is a spiritual entity. It is to be worshipped, honoured and revered. Nature is seen phenomena of divinity. One can link up one's soul with God through nature. So seems the vision of Hopkins in his various poems and prose works. Divinity manifests itself through indefinite transformations of nature. Nothing is beyond nature. Everything

is subjected to nature. He glorifies spiritual aspect of nature. His poetry is rich in spiritual energy and nature-imagery. It seems to me pertinent to quote Elizabeth Liebert, who cited a paragraph from Hopkins' "Principle or Foundation" to justify her idea of spirituality:

The sun and the stars shining glorify God. They stand where he placed them, they move where he bid them. "The heavens tell the glory of God." They glorify God *but they do not know it*. The birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength, the sea is like his greatness, the honey like his sweetness; they are something like him, they make him known, they tell of him, they give him glory, but they do not know they do, they do not know him, they never can, they are brute things that only think of food or think of nothing. This then is poor praise, faint reverence, slight service, dull glory. Nevertheless, what they can *they always do*. (Cole Jr. 80)

The poem *Heaven-Haven*, Hopkins wrote during his stay in Oxford sometime in July or August, 1864. Hopkins explains his idea of heaven or heavenly refuge where celestial bodies or spiritually awakened souls inhabit. It is far away from earthly frets and fevers. It is where springs of water ceaselessly gurgle. In heaven, rivers, brooks, ponds, and fountains never dry up. The poet realizes the presence of God in nature. Spring had been most loved season of Hopkins. In the poem *Spring*, he declares- *Nothing is so beautiful as spring*. The poet relates the season to the innocence of the Eden of Garden and of children:

A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. -- Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

In the sonnet *God's Grandeur* which was written in 1877, the poet praises God for the creation of the world. In this poem he talks of God-man-nature inter-relationship. In the opening line of the poem, the poet declares-

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.

God's creative power manifests itself through various forms in the physical world. Those who do not accept omnipresence of divinity, they disobey divine law of God. They try to besmear nature. They exploit nature. Spiritually un-awakened hands over the generations could not exhaust nature. It is ever fresh at the core. Still it continues gracing humanity. God is indwelling everything in the cosmos whether human beings accept His presence in everything or not. He is underlying cause of all natural graces. Everything is unique for its individuality. Nature reflects the power of God; it is an utterance of Him:

God's utterance of himself in himself is God the Word outside himself is this world.
This world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God and its life or work to name and praise him. (Devlin 129)

Binsey Poplars is another poem dealing with human being's insensitive attitudes towards nature. It was written sometime in 1879. Binsey is a village near Oxford. It was written after the cutting down of a row of aspen trees. Aspen is noted for its light leaves that tremble in the lightest wind. In this poem, the poet seems asserting that harm done to nature is harm done to God. He laments the loss

of aspen trees. He calls them “My aspens dear”. In the name of development “All felled, felled, are all felled.” He laments people’s inability to guess beforehand the outcome of their destroying activities. He writes:

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew —
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,

The poet forecasts that the ongoing cruelty of human beings towards nature within a decade of time will destroy even the traces of beauty:

When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselfe
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene.

In the summer of 1877, the poem *Pied Beauty* was composed. It is a song of praise for everything in Nature that is parti-colored. It was the occasion when he was studying theology at Pantasaph in North Wales. The countryside beauty of North Wales lightened him up and he turned to muse on Nature and its art of beautifying itself. He appreciates colorfulness of it through some beautiful visual examples. In this poem, Hopkins emerges as a keen observer of Nature and as a religious man relatively in happy and delightful mood. Let us see the first six lines of the poem:

Glory be to God for dappled things-
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced- fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

As a typical Jesuit priest, Hopkins opens the poem with a proclamation: “Glory be to God for dappled things” which is the variation of Jesuit motto ‘to the greater glory of God’ and the last line ‘Praise Him’ is the variation of another motto ‘praise be to God always’. Thus the poet extols God for the creation of things of different colours and qualities. In the following lines the poet gives examples. First, there is the blue sky where sun, moon, stars, and clouds appear and their presence makes the sky of twin-colour or colourful. Here the word ‘skies’ may mean climate or atmosphere. The twin-colour of the sky, the poet likens to a cow of light brown fur with light dark spots. He gives another example of trout fish that swims in the water have pink spots on their backs. These pink spots in the water appear as a pattern or design of roses. In the fourth line, the poet gives an image of a fresh chestnut fruit appearing dark and dull by its outer crust when falls down from the

tree and breaks open; it looks as fresh and bright as a glowing piece of coal. The poet gives another example of finch bird. Finch is a small song bird but it has eye-catching wing of contrasting colours.

The poet turns to a landscape in fifth line. How is it made beautiful and distinct by God? Let us see, the division and distinction of a landscape or an area into 'fold' that is, an enclosure for sheep; 'fallow' that is, a land left idle after tilling for cattle to graze upon; and 'plough' that is, a cultivated land with harvest, the poet thinks as the part of God's work. This is the way God colours a particular region variedly. In the sixth line, the poet holds God responsible for making available various occupations along with their separate tools. The poet thanks God for providing men with various tools as natural wonders. Such is the approach of a man of religion who usually sees the presence of God in each and every thing around.

The rest lines (four and a half) exemplify poet's devotion to God and they establish and justify that God is indwelling or inherent into everything:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

The poet sees everything differential by its own divine nature. And hence everything is of its own type. Everything is rare, original, unique, unusual, and singular. In fact it becomes the matter of constant query how things distinguish themselves from other co-things and who should be held responsible for all this. There are certain things that change easily. There are certain spotted or coloured things, certain things grow fast, certain slow, certain sweet in taste, certain bitter in taste, certain appear glowing, and certain look faint and dark. For all these creative variations, the poet holds God as the begetter. It is God who is the father of colourful nature of everything. In fact it is God who is the very essence of beauty. The nature and colour of natural things is beyond change. Change is effected into man-made things. Man only imitates things made by God. God creates everything colourful by the magic of His own prepared unchangeable colour and grace and so the poet asks all to praise and seek shelter in God and religion.

Hopkins emerges as the truest eco-spiritualist wherever he dealt the theme of God, man and nature. To him, all biotic and a-biotic manifestations are outward signs of inward divinity. All earthly manifestations stay interconnected through inward hidden divinity in them. The poet in "Nondum" requests to people to realize the hand that created all natural graces. In "The Starlight Night" exclaims at the rising of stars at the night that we can enjoy the beauty of nature if we pay Him back by prayers and devotions. "The Windhover" which is the masterpiece of Hopkins as he himself accepted to his friend Robert Bridges. According to his vision, the windhover bird is doing prayer in its own way.

Hopkins by his poems responded to all those who did not have faith in the existence of God. He in his ways proved that God is all-pervading authority. The need is to develop one's skill to see Him. The seen-beauty of everything in the material world is subjected to the nature of soil and clime but the inner beauty of the cosmos is completely immune to them. The poet not only realizes the inner beauty of nature but reveres high also in the form poems. The realization of heavenliness of all the things and sincere respect to them connect him to the idea of eco-spirituality. The Indian Vedantic philosophy fully subscribes to eco-spiritualism. This is of course an awakening of enlightened soul. In the light of a few poems of Hopkins studied, he can be called a noble eco-spiritual priest. Nowhere is found better expressed the idea of immanence and transcendence of God than in Hopkins poems and sermons. He has astounding spiritual insight into nature.

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