

## PSYCHO-SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES IN TANYA MENDONSA'S THE DREAMING HOUSE

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### ABSTRACT

Tanya Mendonsa is a prolific contemporary writer, an abstract painter and more than everything, a lover. Two volumes of her poems entitled *The Dreaming House*, *All the Answer I Shall Ever Get* and an enchanting narration *The Book of Joshua* are published so far. A writer's role to his/her role is inevitably a contributing one to her society.

The object of "peeling back the layers of personal memory and experience" helps in understanding "the often irrational roots of human motivation, thoughts, and behaviour" (Kandel). In coordination with personal memory, Mendonsa's early life and way of upbringing can be considered with relevance to the context of psycho social impact of nature in literature. In *The Dreaming House* she records the pattern of a true nature lover throughout her poems. In other words, "[T]he near and the remote are yoked together" in the poems of Tanya Mendonsa (Prasad 104).

**Keywords:** psycho-social, man-animal conflict, Tanya, Nilgiris.

*I am a walking illustration of all that I love*  
(DH 122).

Tanya Mendonsa is a prolific contemporary writer, an abstract painter and more than everything, she is a nature lover. Two volumes of her poems entitled *The Dreaming House*, *All the Answer I Shall Ever Get* and an enchanting narration *The Book of Joshua* are published so far. A writer's role to his/her role is inevitably a contributing one to her society. More than writing, every literary piece functions as a medium for teaching, over which Maya Angelou appropriately reflects in the following manner, "When you learn, teach" (Winfrey viii). When the objectives and the subject matter of teaching has been so far conceived by the act of learning, the prime objects that make one learn should be taken into consideration. There are so many aspects in this universe that makes an individual undergo the process of learning. When narrowed towards ecocriticism and its salient features, nature has always been one's teacher. One's environment plays a significant role in enhancing human capability to understand things. Further, "[I]t is now accepted in the scientific community that our environment shapes the expression of our genes and that specific experiences of interactions with the environment affect the laying down of the neural circuitry of the developing brain" (Benoit).

Human psychology is influenced by varied factors among which the most prominent one is personal memory. The object of "peeling back the

layers of personal memory and experience" helps in understanding "the often irrational roots of human motivation, thoughts, and behaviour" (Kandel<sup>1</sup>). In coordination with personal memory, Mendonsa's early life and way of upbringing can be considered with relevance to the context of psycho social impact of nature in literature. Apart from her rich experiences as a painter and a founder of a language school in France, her childhood experiences determine her present life in the Nilgiris. Her frequent visits to tea estates owned by some family friends in Darjeeling inspired her a lot. She demarcated the buzzing streets of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and the peaceful tea estates in Darjeeling that made her to decide upon her destination. Further, her interest in literature can be seen in her efforts to set up a lending library in Bangalore. She combines the wishes of her soul for a peaceful life and her interest towards literature into a perfect blend which is being expressed through her nature poems.

Mendonsa seeks asylum in nature and wishes to see the diminishing image of cities. Nature in its vast design is known for its plurality and there are several instances where man has lost in its wilderness. Rabindranath Tagore realises the Almighty in every aspect of nature. He says, "Like a rain-cloud of July hung low with its burden of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee". A momentous view of woods on a snowy evening demands Robert Frost to halt and withdraw from his everyday duties, of which he

utters, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep". In the case of Mendonsa's poems, the poetess feels the other way around. She senses herself complete amidst nature but when she goes into cities she feels "like a lost text" (*DH* 122). Her expressions in the poem "When I Go into Cities" highlights the psychological barriers to get mingled with the abstract aspects of mechanised life. It is evident from her personal experience where she abandoned the over-developed cities of Bangalore and Goa in order to settle on the pleasant blue coloured hills of the Nilgiris.

Meanwhile, Mendonsa adheres to hedonism<sup>2</sup> which is claimed to be a prominent characteristic of a postmodern man. Terry Eagleton comments that, "[R]ightly or wrongly, Freudian theory regards the fundamental motivation of all human behaviour as the avoidance of pain and the gaining of pleasure; it is a form of what is philosophically known as hedonism" (166). In spite of the negative façade of postmodernist hedonism, the aspect of seeking pleasure through nature proves to be a positive one. The features of hedonism are revealed in many of her poems, say, "Oblomov"<sup>3</sup>. The major character Oblomov is reluctant to get off his childhood days. He is not fit to be as realistic as others are. However, Mendonsa represents him to be a happy man. The following expression illustrates how Oblomov seeks pleasure in his own ways which are of course the features of nature:

There, he is caught forever in that golden moment  
 where it is always summer.  
 Always the dacha in the country.  
 Always the blissful boy with arms flung wide  
 in his white shirt,  
 running through the sunflowers,  
 running home to perfect peace... (*DH* 9)

Mendonsa's objectives and her reflections towards nature are clear from her free verses. In "Divorced from Green", she throws light upon the crucial time while man parted himself from the objects of nature. The core idea of her poem is expressed from the following lines, "The feet meet cement / and are forever divorced from green" (*DH* 5). From the above illustration, it is evident that man deserts one means when he is efficient enough to explore other with less efforts. Similarly, Winston Churchill reflected on this tendency of a postmodern man by claiming that "food will be produced without recourse to sunlight. Vast cellars in which artificial radiation is generated may replace the cornfields or potato-patches of the world" (291).

Mendonsa's experience in Nilgiris makes her also to reflect man animal conflict. Man's aggressive tendencies are often expressed whenever he feels insecure. His insecurity can be witnessed when his boundaries are shared by someone else about whom he is uncertain. For instance, when a snake enters his garden he is rather scared that makes him grow furious against it. He acts even weirder than ever when the species of his own trespasses or occupies his boundary. In this way, man retains his animalistic tendency which he inherits as a descended species as a part of evolution. Henceforth, it is an ordinate fact than each living being should have its own territory to live within. This makes one to understand that a perfect balance should be maintained in order to ensure a peaceful living. It is clear from Mendonsa's statement claiming love towards animals is essential in order to respect them: "I'm not afraid of the "wild animals" but, as an animal lover, I respect them, which means I keep them at a safe distance, unlike our mountain mongrel Ninotchka, who is fearless and has learned to rue her bravery after being charged by a baby bear" (Sibal). She registers a concrete opinion that is psychologically influenced by the society of man as well as animals. Her expression on her beloved pet shows that mutual understanding also exists between a human and a non-human being:

We both laugh with joy at nothing: just  
 happy to be alive.  
 Who will laugh with me, in perfect unison,  
 when two becomes one?  
 If I gave you half my lifespan, we could go  
 out together:  
 close our eyes and leap the chasm together,  
 into that other world  
 where two into one  
 is one for evermore. (*The Book of Joshua* x)

The above poetic expression can also be analysed by depriving the man-centred notions. In the world where a lot of animals are being slaughtered for various purposes, a dog named as Joshua has influenced Mendonsa's life to a very great extent. Jilly Cooper comments that "[A]ll dog lovers will rejoice in this charming and funny book" (...). Therefore the book is not confined to the thoughts of an individual but a representation of animal lovers, especially of dogs. This shows that when a non-human like Joshua deserves love of a human like Mendonsa, there is no doubt that Joshua also has a tendency to love back, to play with, to inspire and to stay in harmony with human beings. From an ecocritical perspective, it can be said that rather than human beings, animals deserve the love of animals. It

is because love is not reserved to mankind but also an inevitable component of animal societies.

Poetry of the twenty-first century is a mixture of war poetry, romanticism, postmodernism, supernaturalism and evidently a conglomerate mixture. Mendonsa shares a common way of perception with Ruskin Bond but exempting his lighter vein in expressing serious aspects of life including culture, poverty and death. Bond says, "My life has been one long love story, and I have loved people, I have loved books, I have loved flowers, the sun, moon and stars, old roads, old tress, children, grannies, butterflies, seashells, fairies... And of course I keep falling in love, for where love begins, there is the border of heaven" (Bond x). Similarly, Mendonsa's interest and knowledge in various things are expressed throughout her poems. For instance, she speaks of human relationships in "The First Lie", illustrates the negativity of scientific advancements in "Oblomov" and "Divorced from Green". She includes supernatural elements in "The Queen's Bath" and "Moon Struck" where she also uses transcendental ideas and her poems "Night Voyage in Middle", "The Past is a Foreign Country". However, she records the pattern of a true nature lover throughout her poems. In other words, "[T]he near and the remote are yoked together" in the poems of Tanya Mendonsa (Prasad 104).

Psycho social is ultimately an analysis of the relationship between the individual's emotional needs and the social and emotional environment around the individual. In the light of the personal and social life of Mendonsa, one can analyse *The Dreaming House* alongside Erikson's point of view. He has stressed the importance of social interactions in the development of a person's life. According to him, "a psychosocial moratorium during which extremes of subjective experience, alternatives of ideological choice, and potentialities of realistic commitment can become the subject of social play and of joint mastery." (Erikson) Mendonsa's choice of leading a nature filled life is an example to it. Further, Erikson also warns that if the attribute turns to be negative, what Erikson calls as dystonic, it "may manifest itself in impaired self-concept, adjustment problems, and possibly, psychopathology". ("Erik Erikson's Theory of Identity Development" 46) . Mendonsa's poems "Divorced from Green", "The Scarlet Thread", "The Past is a Foreign Country" are examples of her aches of an artificial chaotic life. On the other hand, the "subjective experience" in Bangalore and Goa has led to "alternative" of Nilgiris which helped Mendonsa to gain mastery in her life. "The Delectable Blue

Mountains" and "Alone in the Jungle" are examples to prove how Mendonsa was able to delve into the proper channel of life. The psychological and the social in her life have culminated in the writer settling down in Nilgiris and authoring books on her psycho social travel.

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