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The Metabolism of Empire: Ecophobia and Nonhuman Agency in Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hungry Stones"

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hungry Stones" (1895) is often interpreted as a psychological ghost story or a postcolonial reflection on colonial anxiety. Scholars provide valuable insights by reading the story in various ways. Yet in most of these readings the palace at Barich appears mainly as a passive background for human experience. In this paper, I examine the palace not simply as a setting but as a material presence which has its own agency that interacts with the human subject. Drawing on Simon C. Estok's concept of ecophobia, David Del Principe's idea of the nonhuman Gothic body and Timothy Morton's reflections on dark ecology, I argue that the palace acts as a predatory organism that physically and psychologically consumes the colonial subject. The narrator's transition from a confident cotton collector to a man trapped by the building's strange charm demonstrates a breakdown of colonial rationality. By repositioning the palace as a nonhuman Gothic body, this research moves beyond anthropocentric interpretations and shows how Tagore's work anticipates contemporary ecological anxieties regarding the loss of human control. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the story's power lies in its depiction of an inescapable entanglement between human history and the predatory vitality of the material world and it places the narrative within the emerging field of the South Asian Ecogothic.

Keywords: *Ecogothic, Rabindranath Tagore, Nonhuman Agency, Ecophobia, The Hungry Stones*

Introduction

Tagore wrote “The Hungry Stones” after spending time at the Moti Shahi Mahal in Ahmedabad. It is a seventeenth century Mughal palace appropriated by the British colonial government. This forms a background undercurrent within the story. It is a story within a story. The main person who tells the story of the palace is the protagonist-narrator. He is the collector of duties on cotton who is transferred to an isolated marble palace at Barich. At the onset of the narrative, he is a man of confidence and logic. He discounts the superstitious stories of the local clerk. Gradually, the collector experiences the strange atmosphere of the palace. When no one is around, he hears footsteps. He sees women from a different century bathing in the river at dusk. Thus, he starts feeling that perhaps his everyday life with all its duties, work and salary is an illusion. He wonders the strange world which is hinted at by the palace has a different kind of truth.

Kshudhita Pashan, later translated as “The Hungry Stones”, has been a subject of critical scrutiny. Early critics pointed out the text’s entanglement with the Romantic orientalist narrative. They compared it with the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Kallol Chowdhury draws attention to this literary connection and notes that Tagore employs supernatural elements to create a “sexual and neurotic” sensation that “becomes enticing for nerves” (62). Here, the palace emerges as a theatre for creation of an aestheticized sensation that oscillates between the differences of life and death.

Subsequent scholars would examine the narrator’s inner experience more closely. Apurba Saha suggests that the story is primarily an “impression” on the human mind (1). It focuses on the internal struggle between the narrator’s imagination and his daily reality. Here, the narrator’s experience is seen as an encounter between a “present self” and a “past self” (Saha 1). The palace is then mostly relegated to the side-lines as a space where human memory and imagination reside.

A similar psychological approach is discussed by Dipankar Roy. Roy’s reading of “The Hungry Stone” is careful, layered and deeply insightful. What stands out most is the way he connects the story to a larger historical and cultural context instead of treating it as just a ghost tale. By bringing in Freud’s idea of the “uncanny”, he explains how the strange experiences in the palace are not random, but meaningful. This helps us see that the haunting in the story is tied to something that has been pushed away but not fully forgotten. One of the strongest parts of his argument is how he links uncanny feeling to the repression of India’s Muslim past. He clearly shows that the story is not only about fear or mystery; it is also but about history and identity. According to him, the tale becomes “a literary manifestation of ... the repression of the country’s Muslim past” (Roy 204). This gives the story a deeper meaning and connects it to the politics of nationalism. His reading also becomes very powerful when he explains the inner conflict of the narrator as “a quasi-disintegration of his psyche”

(Roy 204). The split between the rational self and the repressed, emotional self is shown very clearly. Even so, one may feel that this reading still places much of the story's meaning within the narrator's inner world. The haunting and the "hunger" seem to depend largely on his mind, his desires and his instability. As a result, the "hunger" of the stones remains symbolic rather than something that exists independently in the material environment.

Mantu Ghosh's reading of "The Hungry Stones" is rich in its focus on atmosphere and setting. He highlights the "spectral mysteries" of Barich and its historical aura (Ghosh 239). He shows that the story moves between dream and reality. He also notes that it is rooted in a "psychological dilemma or torment" (Ghosh 239). His description of the palace is very striking. At one point, it seems almost alive, as the narrator feels "as if the whole house is like a living organism which is slowly digesting him" (Ghosh 240). This gives the palace a strong presence and helps us understand its strange effect on the narrator. At the same time, one can say that his reading mainly focuses on the narrator's inner experience. The emphasis is more likely on imagination, dream and mental disturbance. So, the haunting is understood mostly in psychological terms, not as something physically active. Because of this, even though the palace seems alive, it does not fully appear as an independent force. The idea of the stones' "hunger" therefore remains suggestive and metaphorical.

In addition to psychological readings, some scholars have also explored postcolonial interpretations. Debi Prasad Misra interprets the story as an expression of "colonial anxiety" (211). He demonstrates the collector's fear as a "journey into the buried, repressed history" (Misra 214). He sees the hunger of the palace as a kind of clarified view of the historical trauma that haunts the present of colonial India. Wareesha Rukhsar investigates the story through Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. She delves into the details of the palace as a "polyphonic space" where multiple voices from the past emerge together and disrupt any singular colonial narrative of history (Rukhsar 39).

These readings all bring to the fore important perspectives and complexities within the story. Simultaneously, they share an assumption. Whether the discussion of the palace turns on Romantic landscape, psychological setting or postcolonial architecture, the building is understood as a vessel of human experience. The stones' hunger is understood as a metaphor for subconscious repression, latent trauma or the memory of history. The material architecture of the building is rarely seen as active within the text.

Building on the theories of Simon Estok, David Del Principe and Timothy Morton, I propose that the palace acts as an active agent. It does not just represent the past; it consumes the present colonial subject through a physical process. The study enables us to fill the void in the existing criticisms and re-examine "The Hungry Stones" in the context of South Asian Ecogothic.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the palace as an active nonhuman presence, this study draws on several ideas from Ecogothic criticism. This approach questions the assumption that fear and agency belong only to human characters.

The first idea comes from Simon C. Estok, who gives the concept of ecophobia. Estok thinks that ecophobia is more than just fear. He says that it “can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness” towards the natural world (Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 1). He points out that these negative attitudes often support political and economic power. This idea is very helpful when looking at a story which is set in a colonial government office. Estok also explains that the struggle between humans and nature is often most intense in Gothic stories. He writes that “the prospect of a loss of control” is a major part of fear (Estok, “Theorising the EcoGothic” 46). In Tagore’s story, this helps us to see how the narrator gradually succeeds towards this loss of control as the palace begins to disturb his rational outlook.

The second viewpoint is that of David Del Principe, whose work elaborates on Ecogothic thought by emphasizing the role of the nonhuman in Gothic narratives. Del Principe writes, Ecogothic criticism takes a “nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1). In this view, the environment becomes something more than merely a background. Del Principe also explains that the Gothic body does not have to be human; it can be “unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid,” and it can function as “a site of articulation for environmental and species identity” (1). In a similar vein, Andrew Smith and William Hughes explain that nature in Gothic writing often offers “a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological” (3). In this light, the marble palace that features in Tagore’s tale also functions as a kind of Gothic body that interacts with its inhabitants.

The third concept that informs the current study is Timothy Morton’s notion of dark ecology. Morton points out that ecology is not always something that feels warm and fuzzy. In fact, an awareness of ecology often produces feelings of discomfort as the barrier between the human and the environment is diminished. Morton describes an ecological awareness with the phrases: “dark-depressing,” “dark-uncanny,” and ultimately “dark-sweet” (5). He explains that “ecological awareness is a loop because human interference has a loop form” (Morton 6). The palace at Barich reflects this as it draws the narrator into a 250-year-old loop where a familiar place becomes welcoming and predatory at the same time. Together, these theoretical strands open up new avenues of exploring Tagore’s story “The Hungry Stones”.

The Metabolism of the Monument: Architecture as Predator

At the beginning of the story, the marble palace at Barich appears quiet and abandoned. It stands silently beside the river like an empty structure. But our initial perception changes as the story progresses. A different perspective regarding this place emerges soon. What seems like a simple building slowly turns into something much more disturbing. We can see that the palace is not just a background setting for the narrator's experience. Instead, it behaves almost like a living presence. The building seems to possess its own strange vitality and influence over the human body and mind.

The narrator arrives there as a government officer. He describes himself as a cotton tax collector. He is someone whose job is purely administrative and rational. At first, he believes that he is simply occupying the palace for work purposes. However, the relationship between the narrator and the environment begins to change. The palace starts collecting. It seems to acquire a life of its own. The narrator may think he is controlling the palace. But in reality, the palace starts controlling him. This shift becomes clear through the narrator's own description of his experience inside the palace. At one point he expresses a deeply unsettling sensation: "I felt as if the whole house was like a living organism slowly and imperceptibly digesting me by the action of some stupefying gastric juice" (Tagore 6). This line is extremely important for understanding the Ecogothic dimension of the story. The palace is no longer described as a lifeless building. Instead, it is imagined as a biological organism as the narrator feels that he is being digested, almost like food inside a body. The comparison to "gastric juice" gives the palace a metabolic function. In other words, the building appears capable of absorbing and breaking down the human presence within it. The narrator says it happens gradually. It brings about more disturbances. There is no sudden attack or visible violence. The narrator does not even fully understand what is happening to him. He is already deeply affected. His rational mind gradually weakens. His connection with the present moment becomes unstable.

We may say that the palace possesses what can be called a kind of "lithic memory." The stones themselves seem to carry traces of the past. This idea is reinforced through the words of Karim Khan. Karim Khan is the old clerk who knows the history of the place. He explains that over the centuries the walls have absorbed many intense human emotions. He says, "countless unrequited passions and unsatisfied longings" have accumulated there (Tagore 23). Thus, with this emotional residue the palace has developed a strange hunger. The building is described as being thirsty and hungry. The palace is compared to a monstrous creature. It is said to be "eager to swallow up like a famished ogress any living man who might chance to approach" (Tagore 24). Through this description, the marble palace becomes something like a Gothic body. The stones appear to require nourishment from living human beings. They feed upon human memory, desire and presence. The narrator is therefore not simply observing the palace. Instead, he is slowly being drawn into its internal world. We can see how his own identity begins to dissolve. The building exerts a hypnotic influence over him. He feels as though the

palace has “possessed” him like a “witch” (Tagore 9). The narrator’s agency weakens. He gradually becomes part of a history that is not his own. The palace does not merely contain the past. It actively consumes the present and turns it into another layer of memory.

Ecophobia and the Collapse of Colonial Authority

At the outset of the story, the narrator presents as a colonial officer. He introduces himself as “a strong young man” (Tagore 5). This position bestows upon him a sense of authority and control. Like many colonial administrators he assumes that the environment which surrounds him is but a set of resources to be managed. This is what Simon Estok terms ecophobia. In such a frame of mind people put themselves at a distance from nature. They see themselves as above the environment and that they may dominate it through the use of reason and administrative power. The narrator at first shares in this belief. He surrounds himself with modern things and bureaucratic routine in order to preserve his identity. These elements are protective symbols of the colonial world. He wears a “*sola* hat like the *sahebs*” (Tagore 10). He also continues to write out report. As the night descends, he sits near a kerosene lamp so that the darkness of the palace cannot overwhelm him. These items are the formal structure of colonial administration. They are what tie him to the modern world outside the palace. What we see is that he is tied to these rituals for psychological comfort. The narrator terms them the “shackles of work” (Tagore 15). These things ground him in the real world. But the palace also chips away at these symbols of power. Tagore puts forth that the narrator’s sense of power is an illusion. One of the most powerful scenes comes when the narrator sheds his colonial clothing. Just as he prepares to remove his “English hat and coat,” something unexpected occurs (Tagore 18). A “sudden whirlwind, crested with the sands of the *Susta* and the dead leaves of the *Avalli* hills” seizes them up and maelstroms them “round and round” (Tagore 18). He hears a loud laughter rising higher and higher in the air. This moment has strong symbolic significance. The environment itself seems to be mocking the narrator’s colonial identity. The “whirlwind” sweeps the marks of his authority into the air. The sand, the wind and the leaves combine to challenge the human control.

The narrator ultimately abandons these objects altogether. He resolves to shed his “queer English coat and hat for good” (Tagore 18). This decision is a turning point in the story. Lacking those symbols, he seems less enmeshed with the colonial administrative system. And thus, his official functions start to lose all meaning. His work suddenly feels empty. He calls his administrative duties “trivial, meaningless, and contemptible” (Tagore 21). It all does not seem to mean anything anymore for the matters of the government. Even the “Nizamat of the Nizam”, with a monthly Rs. 450 salaries, barely matters to the narrator (Tagore 21). The weird vibe of the palace distracts him. He hears the strange music and the sound of anklets. The narrator’s rational world starts to collapse entirely. The logic of the colonial state cannot endure in a reality governed by its own inscrutable laws. The stones

have a strange power that gradually erases his bureaucratic identity. As the narrator himself notes, “whatever belonged to the present ... seemed trivial” (Tagore 21).

Dark Ecology: The *Susta* and the Weird Loop

The other significant thing in this story is the relationship between the palace and its natural environment. Ingeniously they combine into what Timothy Morton calls a dark ecology. This idea describes a kind of disturbing ecological consciousness which reminds us that humans are enmeshed in the environment in ways we cannot easily dominate.

The river *Susta* was crucial in creating surrounding atmosphere on the plot of the story. Initially the narrator speaks of the river with elegance and almost poetic beauty. The water in the river moves gently like “a skilful dancing girl” (Tagore 5). The image implies elegance and rhythm. The river looks peaceful and innocuous. But soon enough, the narrator has something far stranger. Though the surface of the river is still, he starts to sense that something is disturbing the water. It is apparently “stirred suddenly by the splash of many an arm jingling with bracelets” (Tagore 8). This moment blurs the boundary between the present and the past. The narrator feels as though invisible figures of centuries ago continue to visit the river. Their motions appear to undulate through the water. The narrator’s body becomes responsive to non-physical, imperceptible forces. His physical frame becomes thrilled as he perceives the silhouette of an “invisible mirage,” belonging to a world that existed 250 years earlier (Tagore 9). Time itself starts to act strangely in this setting. The narrator calls it a “dark curtain of 250 years,” but the curtain is not fully drawn (Tagore 8). On the contrary, it seems to be porous. The past seeps through to the present. The palace, the river and the surrounding vegetation all seem to take part in this strange system. The spicy shrubs, the running water, the marble floor— all of them are linked in ways that preserve memory. Everything contributes to keeping that earlier world alive. That is why the ecological atmosphere is dark. The narrator slowly realises that he is trapped within a network of forces that he cannot escape. He gets caught in what the narrative describes as a “weird spell cast by that marble demon” (Tagore 23). Reason and logic are no longer bedrock. The atmosphere comes with its own inscrutable tempo and the narrator becomes entangled within it.

Meher Ali: The Witness to Environmental Agency

Meher Ali is one of the story’s key characters. At first, he seems like a wandering madman. He is regarded with amusement or pity by the other characters. And his presence is of profound significance for the Ecogothic reading of the story. Meher Ali walks around the palace every day. As he walks, he shouts a message to all who would come near the building. His scream is always the same: “Stand back! Stand back!! All is false! All is false!!” (Tagore 20, 23). While others dismiss him as mad, his language reveals a greater awareness of the power of the palace. Meher Ali has already felt the full force of the building’s influence. He has, in a way, been wholly digested by its strange atmosphere. He

managed to escape with his life, but the experience changed him permanently. He had lost his reason and his position in normal human society. But this loss of reason might also make it possible for him to see what others cannot.

From an Ecogothic viewpoint, rational thought can be a means of drawing a line between humanity and the nonhuman world. Since Meher Ali is considered mad, that barrier no longer applies to him. The palace has strangely changed him. The narrative depicts him as someone “fascinated by the weird spell” (Tagore 23). He warns others, yet cannot fully rid himself of the location. In this way Meher Ali is like “a bird flying fascinated about the jaws of a snake” (Tagore 23). He both recognises the danger and is attracted to it. His warnings repeat like a protective incantation. He is trying to prevent others from entering the devouring jaws of the stones. His cry thus remains a haunting hint of the palace’s destructive potency. Thus, the building can destroy the human mind and leave behind only a desperate cry echoing through the air.

The Aesthetic of Agony: Nonhuman Sorrow

The milling atmosphere of the palace is just unbearable at a point in the story. The building does not merely affect the narrator’s thoughts. It starts to articulate a profound and painful grief through the very land itself. The palace during a violent storm is animated with intense emotion. The narrator describes how the “desolate halls of the palace” start to move and make noise — as if they have emotions (Tagore 22). The doors “banged” and “moaned” in the dark (Tagore 22). The sounds resemble human suffering, yet no visible person is present. The narrator hears a woman “laughing a hard, harsh, mirthless laugh” (Tagore 22). Soon thereafter the same voice appears to succumb to “violent wringing sobs” (Tagore 22). These emotional gestures seem to arise directly from the fabric of the palace. They imply that the building holds a vast store of unprocessed grief. This weeping is associated with the number of sad events that have happened in the palace over the century. The narrator calls the grief as the “curse of all the heart-aches and blasted hopes” (Tagore 24). All these residual feelings have made the palace monstrous. The building craves because it cannot fulfil those former desires. It is still “thirsty,” because it bears the memory of countless passions.

At one point, the narrator asks himself: “Whom could I console when no one was by?” (Tagore 22). This moment shows the limits of human compassion. He feels a profound grief surrounding him, but he cannot find where it comes from or how to cure its hurt. The anguish of the palace is part of the world that is not wholly human. Its want and its woe are primordial and are rooted in the physical world.

Eventually, the narrator believes that he has to flee before the palace finishes its job on him. He makes a last resort back to his routine office hoping to find his stability of the moment. But already the experience has changed him. His escape is more of an escape than a victory. The palace has just managed to assimilate him in its long and haunted history.

Conclusion

The study examines “The Hungry Stones” by focusing on the agency of the material environment. Drawing on the concepts of ecophobia, the nonhuman Gothic body and dark ecology, I argue that the palace functions not simply as a setting but as a predatory presence that gradually absorbs and breaks down the colonial subject. The narrator’s failure to maintain his formal headgear and administrative paperwork shows the collapse of colonial rationality. At the end, the palace appears as a starving predator that remains active and yearning for presence. It holds traces of a past that can physically consume the present. Through this reading, I suggest that the story can be understood as an early South Asian Ecogothic text in which the material world emerges as the primary antagonist.

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