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A Parable for Today?: Anthropocentric Reasoning and Pandemic in Sukanya Datta's Short-Story "Modern Neelkanths"

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Abstract

First published in her collection of science-fiction stories titled, *Once Upon A Blue Moon* in 2006, Sukanya Datta's "Modern Neelkanths" is a peculiar case of environmental dystopia. Conveyed in the style of hard science-fiction with precise scientific details, the story chronicles a strike carried out by incensed trees on a global scale against humans. The narrative enlists an apocalyptic imagination—which is a core part of the environmental imagination at large—with the model of a revengeful Gaia, as it simultaneously works like an oblique vituperative against anthropocentric and aggressive forms of rationalism. This paper is an attempt to study these inter-related aspects in the light of key ecocritical concepts. Ecocriticism has emerged as a literary theory in its own right and is interdisciplinary in nature and political in orientation. This paper shows how Datta's story readily lends itself to an ecocritical reading. It is a critique of rationalism—along the lines of the arguments presented by the environmental philosopher Val Plumwood. The story also aptly gives a literary and imaginative demonstration of James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis—another central ecological-ecocritical concept.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Rationalism, Gaia hypothesis

I

Sukanya Datta's short-story "Modern Neelkanths" is an environmental dystopia and a very persuasive demonstration of the inevitable consequence of what the eco-theorist Harold Fromm calls as man's 'Myth of Voluntary Omnipotence'. This peculiar myth is a modern

version of the Faust legend which manifest in the form of a dismissive attitude seen in big corporations and states that trivialise environmental problems. Datta's story which begins *media-res*, obliquely highlights that with modernisation, humans are increasingly disregarding their organic connection with the planet. The repercussion of this apathy is an unforeseen and unprecedented apocalypse that never figured in man's doomsday calculations. The ecological emphasis of the story makes it readable along the lines of fundamental environmental theories, especially Val Plumwood's critique and decentering of rationalism and James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis—affording itself as a rich site for ecocritical interpretation.

Emerging in the 1980s after the influential environmental movement of the 1960s, ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that takes a distinct "earth-centred approach" and studies the human-nature or culture-environment interactions. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined by William Rueckert who had titled one of his essays as "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", in 1978. Rueckert defined ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature". In the 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as follows:

> What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xviii)

Glotfelty further delineates ecocriticism by opining that as a theoretical discourse, it "negotiates between the human and the non-human" and as a critical stance, it has "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty xix). While literary theory in general engages with "writers, text and the world", ecocriticism—as Glotfelty observes—expands idea of the world, the "social sphere" to include "the entire ecosphere". Barry Commoner's first law of ecology states the truism that "Everything is connected to everything else".Glotfelty therefore says that literary criticism like ecocriticism is a necessary critical, philosophical and theoretical intervention since literature does not happen in vacuum. She writes, "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (Glotfelty xix). Richard Kerridge offers a similar definition of ecocriticism in his *Writing the Environment* (1998). Emphasising on the importance of literature and literary criticism addressing and engaging with environmental issues and crises, he writes:

> The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis (Kerridge 5).

Greg Garrard therefore says that ecocriticism, since it deals with global and local environmental distresses, is "an avowedly political mode of analysis" (Garrard 3).

The Gaia hypothesis is a fundamental ecocritical concept which engages with ecological crises on a planetary scale. The strategic use of the term 'Gaia' was

first suggested by the novelist William Golding as it meant "Earth-Goddess". It facilitated James Lovelock's "earth-centred approach" in his representation of the planet as a living organism. Garrard writes that the Gaia hypothesis is "now used by deep ecologists and ecofeminists to counter the inflection of the Earth as a technologically and economically enframed globe" (Garrard 171). Lovelock says in his seminal work *The Revenge of Gaia* (2007), that we need to re-imagine the planet as a large self-regulating system—similar to a living organism—a super-organism of sorts. Garrard explains, "Rather than merely being a rock in space with life clinging to it, the non-living parts of the planet are as much a part of the whole as the non-living heartwood of a living tree" (Garrard 173). The nature or biosphere is therefore not a passive and inert background for humans but an active and dynamic force to be reckoned with. The introduction of the Gaia hypothesis was a timely philosophical and theoretical intervention because, as Garrard writes,

> Gaia has been attractive to deep ecologists and eco-spiritualists as well as climatologists, hydrologists and philosophers of science. Ascribing organismic unity to the planet and giving it the name of an Earth-goddess allows Gaia to be appropriated as the object of global environmental consciousness, and perhaps veneration too (Garrard 174).

Martin Ogle is of the opinion that the Gaia hypothesis is one of the most important myths and imaginative tropes for the twenty-first century because of the strength of the metaphor in bringing about ecocentric awareness. Vaclav Havel similarly says that the Gaian worldview instils a sense of being connected and anchored to the earth and promotes due reverence for nature. Gabriel Egan, in his "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism" shows how

the Bard deploys the Elizabethan worldview of a proto-Gaian philosophy to show how order and balance is restored with a newfound respect for mother Earth who is a giant and sentient super-organism in her own right. The reverse is true for Datta's short-story "Modern Neelkanths". With growing apathy for the planet—with all its flora and fauna being reduced to mere "resources"—humans finds themselves disrupting the order and balance of nature and thereupon led to the brink of extinction. This is significant and falls in line with the revenge trope that Lovelock includes in his notion of Gaia. Lawrence Buell has observed in his *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) that the apocalyptic imagination is the single-most important component ofenvironmental thought. It links ecocide with the idea of a vengeful nature. The trope of apocalypse or an apocalyptic imagination is also seen in the founding text of modern environmentalism—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It employs the literary genre of apocalypse to effectively convey the message of environmental perils. The rhetorical strategies of the apocalyptic imagery help reinforce the fact that eco-catastrophes are a consequence of anthropocentric excess and hubris.

A large part of environmental thought is also dedicated to a questioning and criticism of anthropocentric reason and rationalism. The ecofeminist Val Plumwood mentions in her seminal book *Environmental Culture*, that, "Human/nature dualism...is a system of ideas that takes a radically separated reason to be the essential characteristic of humans and situates human life outside and above an inferiorised and manipulable nature" (Plumwood 4). The repercussions of damaging human activities, especially in the case of sensitive forest ecosystems—as shown in "Modern Neelkanths"—has been very telling and tangible

in recent years. We fail to see that plants are also sentient beings in their own right—a microcosm of the macrocosmic Gaia. We are so bent on a human-nature separation that it has become difficult for us to understand that such a separation is essentially a misperception. The Aristotelian predilection for reason combined with the conventional idea of the superiority of humans over other life-forms have sanctioned much of the domination, control and destruction of nature carried out in the name of progress and civilization. Reason which treats nature as an inert and passive realm has thus come under flak and forms a core part of ecocritical thought. It must be noted that the impetus of ecocritics and environmental philosophers in this regard is not on a wholesale rejection or condemnation of reason, but a nuanced interrogation of the same.

II

Sukanya Datta's short-story "Modern Neelkanths" makes a strong case for the environment. It puts up an impressive critique of the anthropocentric reason-centred culture which is responsible for stoking the anger of the otherwise long-suffering Mother Nature. This narrative of wrath opens with an image of exasperated trees whichare fed up of the culpable humans. Nine-year old Banani, a precocious girl, can almost sense the waves of anger pulsing through the trunk of all the trees in her vicinity. She is bemused by this new development; she feels as though these trees which she considers as her playmates, had suddenly decided to cut all ties with her:

> The trees were angry. Livid would be a better term...She had felt the anger like a sharp electric shock, as if her life-long friends had slammed the door in her face. (Datta 70)

Her biology teacher at school, Mr Junaid also begins to notice a strange development in the slides of the plant cells of various specimens that he prepares for botany class of primary-level students. It baffles him that the vacuoles—the storage units of plant cells—were all filled with a sap of blue pigmentation. Little does he know that this seemingly miniscule occurrence spells annihilation for the human race.Through Junaid's character, it is shown that plants are complex systems in their own right; plant-roots are fittingly called "the hidden half" as so little is understood about their mechanisms and operations. While teaching Class V students about plant anatomy, Junaid says:

> Imagine it...a global subterranean network of roots that can communicate not only with other roots but change the ecology of the surrounding soil and all that live in it. The trees are the First Citizens of the world; they came here before we did. We talk about a wired or networked world...well; they beat us at it too. They have the entire underground wired. Think about it (Datta 72)

This is the analogy with which Datta takes to task the rationalistic pride of humans. The capacity of abstract reasoning has been denied to the supposedly 'lower order beings' of animals and plants for a long time. However, in the fairly recent turn of events, it has been contested (with thorough scientific evidence) that 'reason' is not the sole prerogative of men. Scientists have discovered that plants are intelligent beings in their own right. They can make decisions, delegate actions, communicate over short and long distances, send and process information, act corporately, etc. As the story shows, plants do all these intelligent tasks through the language of chemical exchanges of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and various other

compounds and minerals. These traits and functions vouch for the claim that plants share fundamental similarities with animals and men who are blessed with brains. Despite the evidence though, the hyper-separation between nature and men that Descartes had instituted is still insisted upon for the sake of expediency. This is because 'cognitive superiority' of men permits and facilitates the continued abuse of nature.

Plants are the protagonists in Datta's short-story—no longer a mere presence in the background but an active force influencing world events—as suggested by the Gaia hypothesis. As the example of roots above shows, the narrative invests heavily in descriptions of plant anatomy and physiology with an end to showing the sentience or 'intelligence' of the same. The story insists that natural disasters, more often than not, are actually man-made disasters orchestrated by theirown 'intelligence'. The disaster that thus overtakes men unawares in the story has much to do with this cold and manipulative intellect. It is this repository of "superior"intellect—the human brain—that the trees target for counter-attack. In the hard science-fiction style typical of her, Datta brings up the matter of glial cells and its relationship to the brain through Junaid who teaches aboutthe same to his students. From his lectures we find out that, "The brain is a demanding and greedy organ. It needs large and constant supplies of oxygen and glucose" (Datta 73-74). It consumes glucose in the form of glial cells which are like 'nurse cells' to our neurons. This information on glial cells is crucial to the plot in the way the story unfolds. The trees release a chemical that depletes the reserve of glial cells which fuel the human brain. In a way, they are putting up a strong statement and fight against anthropocentric reason which has severely compromised the quality of the environment.

This critique of hyper-rationalism mounted in Datta's story is in accord with the critique of anthropocentric reason forwarded by the environmentalist Val Plumwood. As hinted in the story, Datta avers that human culture which privileges reason has a very narrow and myopic vision instead of a holistic one. This becomes very clear when one looks at the ways in which the short-sighted rationalist culture has dealt with environmental problems so far. Man has not been able to respond exactly rationally to the mounting ecological crises all around. That is why it seems that Datta, risking the charge of anthropomorphising, has shown that the huge network of trees all over the world are angry at the defaulting humans as they are not applying their much-cherished and overrated reason to the good cause of solving environmental problems. Plumwood says that instead of trying to address and mitigate the environmental problems he has spawned, man has behaved like a 'rational fool' who overlooks the fact that he is hastening his own doom as time goes by; he is undeterred even with the "ultimate risk of the death of nature" because of his blind insistence on the march of progress.

In "Modern Neelkanths", nature is not a passive victim of anthropocentric rationalism. Through the global subterranean network of trees—nature attacks the organ associated with our reasoning faculty—our brain. This counterattack of trees manifests in the form of extreme and overwhelming fatigue in humans which is diagnosed as brain malfunction. Clinics all over the world begin to be flooded with growing number of people complaining of inordinate exhaustion, leaving top-notch doctors like Peter Scotts M.D. in New York, 'mildly intrigued'. This unfathomable phenomena sweeping the globe is at first seen by doctors like him as the result of excessive stress which has become a part of modern life—a clear case of

misdiagnosis. With this strange, unprecedented and unidentifiable disorder springing from the brain—which the WHO terms 'Extreme Exhaustion Syndrome' or EES—the plant kingdom vents out its frustration against humans and on their prized but perverted forms of reasoning. No doubt remains of the fact that our modes of reasoning which legitimises environmental disruption is and has been one of the primary causes and originators of our current environmental disintegration which has snowballed since the onset of industrialisation in 19thcentury. Plumwood sees a direct correlation between the rise of a hegemonic rationalist culture and the gradual, steady decline of our planet's health. She says about this directly proportional equation that, "Rationalism has given us a deeply anti-ecological narrative of reason that has guided much of the development of western culture, with the ecological crisis as its climax" (Plumwood 180). It has set into motion and normalised 'biospheric degradation' by making it an inevitable part of progress. Consequently, as Plumwood says, we cannot hope to survive for much longer with our characteristic complacency as a species. In "Modern Neelkanths", the upshot of this complacency is the unavoidable extinction of the human race. The malignant, arrogant and insensitive forms of reason or framework of rationalism which put a premium on 'success', 'growth', 'progress', 'development' etc., has resulted in ruthlessness when it comes to the environment. We especially see the 'developmentalist rationality' in the story which, with its project of incongruent urbanisation, mandates forests to be cleared and decimated to make room for cities—concrete and sterile urban jungles replacing natural ones for good. This comes with trade-offs and repercussions but environmental concerns take a backseat in the matter. As the story suggests, ecological

matters do not occupy people who are smug in their conveniences and luxuries afforded by technology and homogenous modernisation. This, as Plumwood says, is due to the 'low-priority' that people accord to ecological threats. Because of the slow pace of the 'potentially disruptive' processes, the fast-paced hyper-rationalist culture has begun to turn a blind eye to them. Nature has been reduced to a mere resource reserve—a commodity out there waiting to be exploited, extracted, harvested, etc. This, as Plumwood sees it, has been one of the greatest 'ethical failures' of the rationalist culture. If we fail to bring changes in this culture, we should get ready to 'face extinction'—much like the EES-infected people in Datta's story. Our reasoning has not been up to the mark as it has failed to recognize what Plumwood calls as our 'ecological embeddedness'. The rationalist civilization that we see in the story can thus be characterised as irrational-rationalism which is ultimately self-detrimental. This skewed rationalism which is thoroughly anthropocentric and strictly hierarchical; deem non-human others as always-already rationally inferiorto man. This 'rationality of monologue'—as Plumwood calls it—has contributed to the superficially imposed separation between humans and non-humans and justified the domineering and dismissive attitude towards the latter. The trees in the story have had enough of the sadistic treatment of nature espoused by anthropocentric reason and they therefore hit back with the EES pandemic.

This motif of a vengeful nature finds a succinct exposition in James Lovelock's much-acclaimed, *The Revenge of Gaia* (2007). Lovelock also writes about the sadistic aspects of anthropocentric reason and argues that we need to see our planet as a living being with intellect and emotions who will not take our rationalist extremities

without a struggle. He goes back to the ancient concept of the Earth as Gaia which he believes will help mitigate the insensitivity spawned by our mechanistic-rational culture. The Gaian view holds that the Earth is a living organism, not an inert entity—a view that is immediately apparent in Datta's story. This view is of course, a metaphorical one, though studies in the line suggest that it is a metaphor which is not very far from the truth. Besides, its application helps one in seeing and situating the Earth and its ecosphere ethically. So it is a timely and a much-needed metaphor of the hour. In the story, the vengeful trees are a synecdoche of the larger Gaia who grows weary with the defaulting and insufferable humans. As Lovelock argues, the concept of Gaia will help "counter the persistent belief that the Earth is a property, an estate, there to be exploited for the benefit of humankind" (Lovelock 173). Our planet has the capacity to retaliate in unforeseen ways that may threaten the very foundation of human civilization; our rationalistic hubris and excesses will have turned our caring friend into our "greatest enemy". Though weakened, Gaia, who has sustained life over aeons, has the strength to take necessary actions to eliminate the culpable. As Lovelock says, "The planet we live on has merely to shrug to take some fraction of a million people to their death" (Lovelock 1). In the story we see how humans who have been indifferent towards environmental fallout are forced to face the music of their 'rational' mindset and actions when, mother-nature takes her revenge with an incurable pandemic which was ironically pronounced as "Ease". EES is a super killer. With subtle and innocuous symptoms of fatigue in the daily grind of life, EES goes on to achieve a complete system shutdown of the human body starting with the brain as the epicentre. Initial feelings of tiredness quickly progress to become extreme lethargy and weakness

due to which even little tasks become a chore. As per medical tests, EES was simply an absolute and irreversible condition which could not be assuaged by any drastic last-minute medical measures. We see that:

> The symptom was simply tiredness that escalated to total exhaustion. At this point no amount of glucose infusions could bring the patients back. The cells were totally refractory to resuscitation efforts. Finally cellular respiration ceased and the patient died. (Datta 77)

It causes WHO to declare this elusive new epidemic which was "spreading like wildfire" as "Totally Refractory". The modus operandi of the disorder was revealed in the forensic analyses of the affected patients. We find that the humans who had died of EES had a "total degeneration of the glial cells of the brain...no detectable glycogen reserves in the body. The body had used up all its energy reserves" (Datta 77-78). The information on the relationship between glial cells and the brain in the beginning of the story is therefore crucial to the plot. The revenge of nature against humans is executed with trees hijacking the element important to the normal functioning of the brain. Attacking the human brain becomes equivalent to attacking narcissistic Reason. Lovelock, like Datta and Plumwood, squarely locates the source of current environmental crises in our reason-centred culture. As he puts it, "We are in our present mess through our intelligence and inventiveness...We had ceased to be just another animal and begun the demolition of the Earth" (Lovelock 8).

In "Modern Neelkanths", Gaia, through the enraged trees, declares a long-overdue battle against the ruthless humans. Their networking history regarding the release of

the polymeric compound shows that this revenge plan of theirs has been under wraps for quite some time. It also shows that they have a thorough knowledge of the workings of human physiology as they have attacked the organ whose damage in any manner would spell a complete system breakdown. This model of systematic revenge by Gaia is forecasted by Lovelock when he says that, "Battle will soon be joined, and what we nowface is far more deadly than any blitzkrieg. By changing the environment we have unknowingly declared war on Gaia" (Lovelock 13). In the story, Datta employs the motif of battle for revenge very strongly with the EES pandemic. We find:

> The entire global machinery swung into action the way it had done during the Avian Flu scare. All laboratories investing epidemic-causing entities such as Ebola, HIV, West Nile Virus and those involved in investigating Bio-terrorism attacks were at the forefront of the research (Datta 77).

We also get to know that EES makes its mark on the frozen continentof Antarctica. Due to global warming, grass had sprouted there after thousands of years and the disease somehow finds its way to the scientists over there studying the grass. Zoo authorities all over the world were also reporting that their captives like chimpanzees and dolphins—animals with complex brains like humans—were showing symptoms of EES, though a "milder version" of the same. Unlike humans however, no animal had died of the disease yet. This goes to show that Gaia through her plant kingdom had specifically targeted humans—the animals with the most complex brain on the planet. The root cause of the disorder had been finally deciphered to be a "polymeric compound that has a

selective affinity for glial cells" (Datta 81). And again, in her hardcore hard science-fiction style, Datta explains:

> It seems plant cells are releasing into the ground and so of course are also taking it up into their tissues as well as expressing it in the fruits and seeds. It appears to be an allelopathic substance that in varying degrees is now present in all newly harvested fruits and vegetables...all food items may be considered to be contaminated (Datta 82).

The allusionof trees as 'Modern Neelkanths' is therefore revelatory as they are essentially putting out a substance poisonous to the human race in the lithosphere. In the original myth, as Banani's tired grandmother relays to her, "Shiva the Destroyer" who had gulped down all the poison threatening mankind and other gods in the episode of 'Sagar-Manthan'or sea-churning is the Neelkanth as his skin turned into a blue hue after the consumption. The modern Neelkanths however are not so tolerant; by storing the strange blue sap of the polymeric compound in their vacuoles, they are in fact presenting poison to be consumed by the masses. People realise the following:

> Poison. *Halahal,* not from the sea that was churned but imbibed from the soil this time...It all seemed to boil down to unacceptable options. One could eat, and die of poisoning. Or starve to death" (Datta 82).

The trees have therefore left no way out for humans to escape from the predicament. Questions as to why the plants themselves are not affected are answered by the findings of the school-teacher Junaid. The poison that the plants have been releasing into the soil from which they draw their sustenance is, as has been mentioned, stored in their vacuoles. The vacuoles are plants, "containment areas where they can sequester the poison...and hold it till they

neutralise it" (Datta 83). The second reason as to why plants are immune to the poison is interesting. As revealed, "the compound acts on brain cells...glial cells. Plants do not have a nervous system, let alone a brain—so they are doubly safe" (Datta 83). This is a further insult to man who deems himself as the sole possessor of reason. Rational man has been discrediting plants so far for the mere absence of a brain. But by having a brain—the most complex one at that—he is dying of a plague that threatens to exterminate the entire species of *Homo Sapiens*.

"Modern Neelkanths" alludes to concerns of green criminology for we find references to what are recognised as environmental crimes, from the perspective of a cosmonaut up in space. Our crimes against nature amount to what Lovelock calls a "double whammy" with which we are whacking the Earth. We are decimating natural ecosystems like forests—which holds a particular significance in the short-story—with more and more agricultural lands for commercial harvest which unleashes and ultimately accomplishes ecological imbalance on many levels and launches us all on the highway of manifold perils. Because of our dispensable luxuries and excesses, we have wrested far "beyond the Earth's capacity to provide" (Lovelock 171). But there must be an embargo of some sort on the continued abuse of the planet. Since we cannot exist without Gaia, its well-being must come before our own. It is high time that we cultivate the common-sense free of rationalist trappings to grow vigilant enough so as to "constrain the growth of luxuries that threaten Gaia" (Lovelock 172).

As it transpires in the story, putting the apparently altruistic welfare of humans first before the health of Gaia turns out to be a self-destructive enterprise. The sense of urgency in Lovelock's Gaian model regarding us humans

nearing our own extinction finds a perfect representation in the story wherein we see that the angry plants, trees and forests spread across the world have successfully accomplished their agenda of exterminating the reprehensible humans for the sake of restoring ecological balance and neutralising all the harms introduced by this intelligent race. The revenge trope in the Gaian model of the Earth explains how and why nature fights back and puts up some sort of resistance against the continued onslaught of unregulated plunder of resources and a variety of pollutions. Because the Earth or Gaia is a self-regulating system, it will do everything in its power or capacity to restore balance—for instance, with respect to global warming, a sudden spike of cold-waves has been observed which is intended to cool the atmosphere and regulate the rising temperature. In the story, Gaia, through her network of trees and forests—ancient and young, has done what she has judged as the solution or panacea for all ecological crises by eliminating and eradicating humans who are behind her precarious predicament. Lovelock therefore compares our planet to Janus-faced goddesses like Khali and Nemesis for "she acts as a mother who is nurturingbut ruthlessly cruel towards transgressors, even when theyare her progeny" (Lovelock 188).

As it is, with our current rate of environmental degradation, it might be already too late to turn things around. According to his calculation, Lovelock says that even if we decide to abruptly stall all our environmentally harmful activities, it will still take thousands of years for the planet to recover fully from the damage it has undergone in the hands of the supposedly cognitively superior species of humans that Gaia hosts. In a somewhat pessimistic tone, he says that no drastic step taken now to stem the tide of depredation will be good enough to restore

ecological balance—however much partially. This pessimism can be felt in "Modern Neelkanths" as well. The injury we have caused to our planet over the years is irreversible to a certain extent. Lovelock therefore, in a jeremiad reminiscent of apocalyptic diatribe, warns his readers time and again that if we fail to cultivate a reverent attitude towards nature, towards our planet now, and refuse to see it as a holy place of God's creation, then we are to get ready to be expelled from this Earthly home. As he says yet again, "if we fail to take care of the Earth, it surely will take care of itself by making us no longer welcome" (Lovelock 3). As a price or penalty for our pillage and desecration of Gaia, we will be rooted out in ways we cannot fathom or predict.The question that Prof Goldsmith puts to his peers in the story is pertinent here as it sums up the discussion above and is worth quoting at length:

> More importantly, Bose we must ask why the plants are behaving like this and how they have managed to synchronise this release globally. It is my theory...that the vast network of roots served to telegraph messages...Perhaps we destroyed a large part of the network when we destroyed rainforests and chopped down trees to build our cities. Perhaps the void caused some alarm to ring. Or perhaps the trees sensed high levels of atmospheric pollution—in any case it hints at intelligence—apparently just the absence of neural tissue does not mean absence of sentience. The choice of the compound released hints strongly that the trees have gauged our strength and hit exactly where it would hurt the most. We humans lord it over animals and rule the world thanks to our intelligence (Datta 83).

The Professor's question as to why the trees are behaving aberrantly is partially answered by the fact that

trees have memories. His desperate question already betrays the fact that trees are intelligent, rational creatures, even without a brain. In the interview titled as, "Are Trees Sentient Beings?", the interviewee Peter Wohlleben, a German forester, says that he believes trees are sentient beings; it is just that their sentience is of a different order and beyond the pale of our epistemological grasp. He sees them as a badly misunderstood lot and has found after years of study that they remember their experiences, especially their times of constraint or hardship during which they learn how to cope and make decisions accordingly in the future. They either become cautious, or their reactions range from defensive to offensive—as per the challenge or the situation demands. Wohlleben is affirmative that all these features exhibited by plants go to prove that they do possess some sort of consciousness after all—an opinion which does not hold water in the mindset of a rational culture. By not attributing consciousness to them, we are practicing the "arbitrary caste system for living beings". Wohlleben wants to do away with such practices that denigrate other life-forms with which we share the planet. He says:

> We say plants are the pariahs, the lowest castes, because they don't have brains, they don't move...I want to remove trees from this caste system. This hierarchical ranking of living beings is totally unscientific. Plants process information just as animals do...we create these artificial barriers between humans and animals, between animals and plants, so that we can use them indiscriminately and without care, without considering the suffering that we are subjecting them to (Wohlleben).

Here we see that Wohlleben imputes feelings to trees by referring to the suffering they undergo in our hands. If

trees are acknowledged of their capacity to feel pain or suffer, a whole new ethical ground of consideration would open up for them. And to refrain, Datta also implies that trees can feel emotions—they can be solicitous and friendly, or hurt, angry and vengeful. She thus touches on certain core concerns of speciesism as well in the story. The Gaia metaphor of the Earth that Lovelock deploys to talk about a sick and angry planet can also be read in the line of speciesist discrimination. Deeming Gaia to be passive, the rational man dismisses her suffering in his hands without any qualms. Lovelock is therefore insistent in his analogy of the Earth as Gaia which makes us see the planet as conscious, aware, capable of emotive experience, and deserving ethical consideration. Or else, just as we find in the story, Gaia will unleash her wrath on us with full force; and she will not be forgiving this time. The story ends with the horrifying line— "Totally Refractive Extreme Exhaustion Syndrome (TREES) progressed as planned" (Datta 84)—hinting at the final statement that there is no stopping the apocalypse set in motion.

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