



Research article

Ecologies of Freedom: Nature and Self in Tagore's *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days*

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Abstract:

To perceive the human world in coexistence with nature and to nurture freedom and constructive processes, we need to rethink the transformative literature of Rabindranath Tagore, who inspires a deep ecological sense of identification with the immediate environment. Tagore, as an eco-literary artist, had voiced the endowments of his formative years to nature's opulence, espousing a symbiotic coexistence between man and his environment. This paper explores Tagore's *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days* to highlight the profound interconnection between nature and the realm of Baruch Spinoza's notion of *natura naturata* ("nature natured"). Tagore's picturesque portrayal of the green world in both these autobiographies imply an active, reaching-out aspect of the environment to preserve its well-being, attributed to all physical entities—animate and inanimate, individual and collective. The ecologies of Tagorean freedom, interpreted from the Spinozan concept of *conatus*, augment the expansion of his environmental sensibilities to challenge the conventional nature–culture dichotomy. This dichotomy becomes the central narrative technique to symbolize nature as freedom, fluidity, and authenticity, and culture as control, confinement, and artificiality. Drawing towards the end, the paper aptly justifies the repositioning of Tagore's ecological vision, interweaving the cultural, spiritual, and agrarian rhythms of ancient Indian environmental philosophy.

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1. Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore's literary imagination, emerging from his profound sensitivity to the natural world, explores his deep love for nature. He celebrates the eagerness to enter into a deep communion with nature's grand festival, enthraling him with a spirit of fun and unlimited freedom to stimulate his human emotions, thoughts and spiritual awareness:

Over the green and yellow rice fields sweep the shadows of the autumn clouds followed by the swift-chasing sun. The bees forget to sip their honey; drunken with light they foolishly hover and hum. The ducks in the islands of the river clamour in joy for nothing. (Tagore, 1912, p.134)

Rooted in the philosophy of harmony between the self and the environment, his works consistently foreground an intimate communion with nature, essential to human freedom and creativity. His deep ecological consciousness interpenetrating the vast body of his writings brings life to the shifting moods and rhythms of the natural world, reflected in the radiance of bright sunshine, in the quiet glow of mellow evenings, or in the stillness of nature. Through these images, he not only celebrates beauty but also reveals nature as a space of reflection, connection, and transcendence. In a letter written to his niece Indira Devi, Tagore states that "his soul seems to have settled comfortably in the arms of nature without missing a particle of its light, its air, its scenery and its song" (Tagore, 1999, p. 568). His play *The Cycle of Spring* (1917), which participates in the joyful celebration of nature's plenitude and beauty, reiterates his harmony with the music of nature, with melodies arising from the murmur of rushing water, from birdsong, and from rustling leaves. His eagerness to enter into a deep communion with nature's grand festival, to see and hear nature in a consummately significant way, focuses on the intersection of the literary and the physical environment to construct eco-literary narratives:

I have had many invitations to the world's festival.
My eyes have seen and my ears have heard.
It was my part at this feast to play upon my instruments. (Tagore, 1912, p. 67)

These rare and intimate moments of his communion with nature permeate his soul with the grandeur of its sounds and colours, enthraling him with a spirit of fun and unlimited freedom:

Over the green and yellow rice fields sweep the shadows of the autumn cloud, followed by the swift-chasing sun. The bees forget to sip their honey; drunken with light, they foolishly hover and hum. The ducks in the islands of the river clamour in joy for nothing. (Tagore, 1912, p. 134)

Thus, we find Tagore constantly caressing nature, extolling its beauty and splendour to discover a common ground for the mutual coexistence between the human and the non-human alike:

The kulkul noise of the ripples, the gentle tremor of the boat, the light-bathed sky, the vast expanse of soft blue water, the fresh foliage of the trees—an ensemble of colour, music, dance, and beauty—lends radiance to the superb melody of nature. (Tagore, 1962, p. 23)

Nature's melody, echoing through the chirping of "the bird's note and the stream's babbling" (Tagore, 1918, p. 45) constructs a conceptual foundation for the study of interconnections between literature and the environment. Furthermore, elucidating the fact that literature is

perceived as an aesthetic and constructed part of the environment directly addresses the questions of human constructions pertaining to language and imagination. The world of nature, transmitting ecological values, creates a more environmentally conscious position in literary studies, promising to offer a living life with “imagination stimulated in harmony of its variegated forms, colours, sounds and movements.” (Tagore, 1931, p. 23–48).

Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of nature has a wide range and variety. At different stages of life, his attitude towards nature clearly underlines an evolution that presupposes attitudinal changes. His first awareness of the realm of natural expression occurred when he was learning to read and write in his childhood. Words, which appeared like disconnected fragments, suddenly conjoined in an orchestral beat of the rhyming phrase “jal parey / pata narey” (the water falls / the leaf trembles). The rhythm of the words connected him for the first time with a harmonious, creative dimension. Narrating his own experience, Tagore writes that:

The rhythmic picture of the tremulous leaves beaten by the rain opened before my mind a world which does not merely carry information, but a harmony with my being. The unmeaning fragments lost their individual isolation, and my mind revelled in the unity of a vision (Tagore, 1966, p. 90–108).

This sudden birth of poetry in the childish soul is reminiscent of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s (1924) line: “lisp of leaves and ripples of rain” (Swinburne, 1934, p. 249–50). The mute waterfall and the imagined gentle tremor of the leaves—their ideas, their sounds and their rhymes filled young Tagore with an ecstatic delight. To quote Tagore, he states that “the poetry of the primordial poet had touched my heart”, (Tagore, 1962, p. 24), striking a deep resonance within him to connect with the harmonious natural dimension: “The whole day, my heart was leaping with joy as water was spraying and the leaves were rustling in my inner consciousness” (Tagore, 1962, p. 25).

The poet, in company with himself, along with the birds, plants, flowers, and raindrops belonging to the multiplicity of transient natural entities, allude to the eternal generative activity of the universe, *natura naturans* (Garber, 2024, p.384-385) or “nature naturing.” Transcending the duality of art and life, spiritual and natural, the principle of “nature naturing” establishes an ethical and aesthetic ground for the renewed understanding of literature and ecology. The ecocritical conceptualization of literary texts, though “not limited... to writings on the page” (McHale, 1987, p.60) thus helps in establishing a “dialogic interplay of voices and values” through the power of self-identification with nature as “the greatest gift possessed by an individual” (Thompson, 1921, p. 234).

2. Literature Review:

Reading the wide range of Rabindranath Tagore’s literary creations, one realizes the endowments of his formative years to “the beauty of the earth, the incessant pouring of the rains, and the sky whose blue radiance, filled with ecstasy, stretched over its trees and cow pastures” (Tagore, 2008, p. 9–22). Tagore recurrently traces the associations which knitted up his feelings about life, its pleasantness, and human continuity with the music of nature. His loss of his mother in early

childhood haunted him with a peculiar regret for her love. It threw him back upon the consolations to be derived from boyish communion with nature:

Mother Nature, after a long time, you have discovered your lost child. That is why you have taken me in your affectionate embrace and have begun to sing your imposing music to me, rich in harmony and melody. (Tagore, 2008, p. 19–22)

The separation between man and nature intensified the bliss of union between the lovers. Loneliness was a key feature of Tagore's childhood. In his *Jibansmriti* (*My Reminiscences*, 1923), he portrays nature filling him with a sense of joy and entertaining his mind with "her numerous troupe, her variegated make-up, and her medley of music" (Tagore, 2008, p. 20–22). The fanciful imagination of the young boy, playing with the quivering shadows of the aerial roots of a banyan tree in a solitary afternoon, would glare longingly through the Venetian blinds at the "Outside" to get glimpses of nature: "beyond my reach stretched the limitless thing called Outside" (Tagore, 2008, p. 16). His most recurrent childhood thought would concern a great surrounding mystery, something "undreamt of lurking about Nature" (Tagore, 2008, p. 13). The veiled view of things whetted his growing appetite for his ultimate union with nature and, through nature, with nature's God. But, to his utter dejection, the horizon stretched far beyond, and the "Outside" remained ever receding. Tagore recollects that "flashes and sounds and scents" (Tagore, 2008, p. 13). which momentarily used to come and touch through interstices, seemed to beckon him through the "shutters with a variety of gestures" (Tagore, 2008, p. 13). The marvellous manifestations of nature had something always cupped in her hands, asking him with a smile, "what do you think I have?" (Tagore, 2008, p. 15). Tagore exalted in delight as he looked around to see nature "presenting a panorama of inexpressible beauty, calling him to come near to play and sing, smile and dance in ecstatic pleasure" (Tagore, 2008, p. 16). The delightful leisure in nature's magnanimous creation was revealed everywhere to him:

in the earth's green covering of the grass, in the blue serenity of the sky, in the reckless exuberance of spring, and in the severe abstinence of gray winter. (Tagore, 1922, p. 256)

It enthralled him with a spirit of joy and a sense of childish "companionship very intense and very intimate" (Tagore, 2008, p. 15). Thus, when nature captured his imagination, Tagore, in his childhood fancy, merged with it to enjoy an eternal companionship, profoundly akin to his own imaginative mind. The sorrows of his lonesome existence, mitigated in the world of his imagination, inspired him to trace glimpses of his eternal playmate hiding behind the veil of real things. It helped him to overcome the burden of his pensive mood by visualizing the fairy universe, where the stars talk and the sky stoops down to come to amuse him through his "windows with trays of bright toys" (Tagore, 2008, p. 14). The imaginative playmate, coined in the mental framework of the young child, re-framed his consideration that "the artificial world gets its life energy from the natural world, without which existence becomes fatal" (Bate, 2000, p. 221). The joyful expressions of his truant activities amid nature's vast beauty depicted an eternal companionship. His "heart, lapping [with its] waves of songs, longs to caress this green world" (Tagore, 1916, p. 427), and his "songs share their seats in the heart of the world with the music of the clouds and forests" (Tagore, 1916, p. 120). Drawing reference to Baruch Spinoza's concept of *conatus* (Aksoy, 2021, p.107–130), the verbal constructs between man and nature reflect the "faith" of the speaker to reach out to the natural elements of the environment to compose and

recompose themselves through their dynamic relationship with others. The natural world no longer remains the unchanging divine artefact but rather a process of natural being integrated into the holistic plan of symbiotic well-being.

Tagore had been an eco-literary artist long before the coinage of the term. His earnest concern in necessitating nature as a verbal subject requires a non-dualistic perception and interpretation from the anthropocentric human position. His vision of nature as a self-articulating subject embarks upon the project of reconceptualising nature not as an object of mere observation or interpretation, but as an active agency in its own right. Furthermore, relying on the ontological argument of ecology—that everything is connected to everything else— “human ecology” examines the symbolic inscriptions of the Earth as an interactive process in the literary texts. An analysis of Tagore’s *My Boyhood Days* (1940) and *My Reminiscences* (1923), focuses on the literary strategies used in these texts to construct an ecologically informed discourse between man and nature. The textualization of nature in these literary texts creates an eco-literary discourse to produce an intertextual as well as an interactive approach between the language of nature and the language of literature. Nature appears as an active and self-articulating subject, speaking through human discourses. She beckons the young child to “come and play, sing and dance” (Tagore, 2008, p. 25–27) and be a part of her jocund company. Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking* (1989), states that such a reconception of nature, attributing to it a metaphorical status of speaking as a living subject, questions “the constructionist assumption that whether nature and culture go together?” (Fuss, 1989, p. 6). Val Plumwood states that though a dialogue with nature is not possible in linguistic terms, constructing new modes of understanding and perception, where “we as humans can speak as non-human nature, somehow completely eliminates the nature/culture division” (Plumwood, 1997, p.349). Furthermore, an ecocritical attempt aims to deconstruct the privileged human subjectivity in its dialogue with the language of nature. It reconstructs a sustainable ecological vision, valuing nature and culture equally in their diversity. Although the distinction between nature and culture is a category “humans have created to help us understand and order the world” (Plumwood, 1997, p. 356–374), ecocritics have launched a “new ethic and aesthetic dimension embracing the human and the natural”. (Goltfelty, 1996, p. 107). The essence of creating a “consciousness of the essential unity of all life” (Eisler, 1990, p. 23–24) experienced in the intimate kinship with nature and freedom incorporates a valuable recognition of harmonious “continuity of relation between light and darkness, motion and rest, man and nature.” (Tagore, 1996, p. 316).

3. Critical and Comparative Literary Analysis:

Ecocriticism, seeking to redirect humanistic ideology by using ideas to sustain viable readings, retraces its footsteps back to the hermeneutics of natural existence. Both nature and writing (the former being an external presence, the latter a process of verbal articulation) demand and contribute to the author’s awareness of self and the non-self. According to Tagore, our union with the ‘limitless beauty’ of nature remains not a matter of mere intellectual knowledge; rather, it involves our imaginative ability to feel one with nature and open out to everything around us with “a radiant joy and an ever-spreading note of love” (Tagore, 1962, p.34). In his *My Reminiscences* (1923), Tagore, referring to his early childhood days, recalls:

The beauty, sweetness, and scent of nature, the movements of the people, the noises in the street, the cry of the kites, and the morning perfume of the blossoms made me feel the omnipresence of nature, awakening a keen sense of interest and a deep delight in my mind. (Tagore, 2008, p.14)

The beauty of nature, with its magnitude of vibrant colours, joyful lives, and spirited movements, makes a “call for love which is only a call and never a demand” (Tagore, 1996, p.325). Tagore intensely proclaims that through our sense of love, all the contradictions of our existence merge to infuse it with human preeminence, ‘irradiating’ our mind with the bond that holds man and nature together. This observation remains an important prelude to Tagore’s claim of identifying the laws at work in nature in unison to claim an aesthetic and joyful relation with it. Nature, for Tagore, may be understood as comprising two complementary aspects: one associated with truth and governed by law, and the other expressed through beauty and joy. The former, referring to the outward or physical dimension of nature, is perceived through a utilitarian lens—as a causal mechanism to be examined by science and harnessed by technology for human purposes. Tagore’s *Aranya Devata* (Forest Deity, 1986), a critique of modern man’s indulgence in luxurious and profligate living, does not merely confine this analysis to the outward manifestations of ecological imbalance alone. His article *Bilaser Fans* (The Noose of Luxurious Living, 1986) investigates further to detect the inner causes of this malady, springing from the basic *ripus* (vices) such as greed, jealousy, pride, and lust sheltered in the darkest grooves of the human mind. These *ripus* reflect ugly manifestations in forms of commercialism, conspicuous consumerism, and unbridled competition for insatiable pomp and power. Tagore’s dramas, *The Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) and *The Waterfall* (*Muktadhara*) in particular, usher his awareness about the technological inventions, making us realize the venomous effects of industrialization and mechanization on earth, water, and sky:

kill[ing] the music of the earth and laugh[ing] its sinister laughter, displaying its rows of steel teeth in the sky (Tagore, 1996, p.176-77).

He sadly laments the ‘external’ relation with nature in terms of estrangement and harps on the pronounced human supremacism ornamented with technotopian edge to equate worldly loss and gain. His article *Tapavan* (*The Message of the Forest*), emerging from the vital concern of ecological modernization, expresses his alarming concern in justifying the ruthless exploitation of nature for unabashed self-advancement. To counter the logocentric approach of humans “created to help us understand and order the world” (Gruen, 1997, p.364), ecocriticism offers an “analysis of the cultural constructions of nature, including an analysis of language, desire, knowledge, and power” (Legler, 1997, p.227).

4. Literary Interpretations:

Tagore’s primary concern for nature, based on non-utilitarian grounds, seeks the protection of Mother Earth on the grounds of ‘mutual co-existence’, where man and nature are ‘adapted’ inseparably for flourishing symbiotically:

When we know that the world is alien to us, then its mechanical aspect takes prominence in our mind, and we set up machines and our methods to deal with it and make as much profit as our knowledge of its mechanism allows us to do. (Tagore, 1962, p.312).

Rising consciousness in current environmental issues counterbalanced with the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the global ecological crisis have forced mankind to re-think that “the earth, water and light, fruits and flowers.... were not only merely physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside” (Tagore, 1999, p.283), Tagore’s passion for nature, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s self-identification speaks of the benign influence of nature “being spread over all that moves and all that seemth still” (Wordsworth, 1946, p.67). However, Tagore’s claim that the union of man with nature and the appreciation of his personal growth are dependent on harmony with nature characterizes the age-old tradition of the ancient Indian spirit. Indian civilization, with its origin in the diverse areas of wilderness, prospered “to enlarge their consciousness by growing with and growing into their surroundings” (Tagore, 1999, p.385-400). They respected “the dignity of the simple life of the forest hermitage and drew [their] best from the inspiration from the wisdom stored there” (Tagore, 1999, p.281, p.5). Tagore, poignantly referring to the intimate kinship between man and nature, speaks of the literary works of the ancient Sanskrit poets like Kalidas and Banabhatta, portraying nature as an active nurturing presence shaping human life and emotions. Tagore claims that the union of man with nature and the appreciation of his personal growth, dependent on the harmony with nature, characterize the age-old tradition of the Indian spirit. Indian civilization, with its origin in the diverse areas of wilderness, prospered in a constant living communion with nature. Their primary aim was not to extend the boundary of their material possessions, but “to enlarge their consciousness by growing with and growing into their surroundings.” (Tagore, 1999, p.385-400). They respected “the dignity of the simple life of the forest hermitage and drew [their] best from the inspiration from the wisdom stored there.” (Tagore, 1999, p.385-400). Thus, Tagore’s literary illustration of the hermitage as “the place where the chasm between man and the rest of creation has been bridged” (Tagore, 1999, p.385-400). emphasize on an eco-ethical co-existence between man and nature.

In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the forest hermitage of Shakuntala occupies a central place symbolically overshadowing the king’s palace to foreground the intimate kinship between human beings and their natural surroundings. The opening scene of King Dushyanta entering the forest while hunting an antelope immediately establishes a conflict between the king’s royal pastime and the prevailing spirit of compassion and protection that governs life in the hermitage. Alarmed by the intrusion, the forest-dwellers appeal to the king to spare the deer, reiterating the spirit of ecological harmony dwelling in the sacred woodlands and challenging the status of humans as the privileged speaking subjects. Nature itself extorts “the people of the hermit” (Tagore, 1999, p.329) to hasten the rescue of all the living spirits of the sacred forest from Dusyanta, “the lord of earth, whose pleasure is in hunting, has come.” (Tagore, 1999, p.440). Likewise, in Kalidasa’s *Meghaduta*, the exiled Yaksha, tormented by separation from his beloved, turns to natural elements like the clouds, forests, and rivers—as companions and messengers of his longing. The physical environment in the *Meghaduta* develops an earth-centered approach, reverberating the sympathetic articulation of the connections between human language and the eco-literary use of language in the narratives. Similarly, Banbhatta in his poetic composition of *Kadambari*, evokes our sense of close communion with nature through scenes like the “flowering plants bowing to

the wind, the trees scattering to the blossoms, and the deer caressing the hermit boys with their tongues." (Tagore, 1999, p.465). Thus, the wide range of Indian literary creations merging to create stories "made by life." (Jim, 1997, p.105) contextualizes the ecological concepts of wholeness and interrelatedness of all organisms, human and non-human:

Deep ecology requires a sense of maturity and growth, an identification that goes beyond humanity to even include the non-human world. (Devall, 1985, p.65)

In the process, by interspersing the boundaries between the human and the non-human spheres, the ecocritical reading of the texts focuses on the strategies used to nurture how an ecological vision is addressed or subverted in literary texts. The use of literary and ecological discourses creates interconnections between the natural world and literary studies. The literary illustration of the hermitage as "the place where the chasm between man and the rest of creation has been bridged" (Tagore, 1995, p.285-300) rightly proclaims that Tagore's ecocritical vision calls forth a "new ethic and aesthetic embracing of the human and the natural" (Glenn, 1990, p.238), by infusing new eco-literary discourses to address nature's voice, coagulating with human pre-eminence (Oppermann, 1999, p.5). Together, these works illustrate the richness of the Indian literary imagination, consistently blending human life with the rhythms of nature, emphasizing ecological ideas of wholeness, interconnectedness, and the mutual coexistence of human and non-human life, where:

Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if only we learn to translate the messages with fidelity. (Howarth, 1996, p.77)

5. Conclusion:

Fritjof Capra, calling the natural world "a multidimensional world" (Capra, 1997, p.35), states that literary texts create a multidimensional world of their own to close the gap between ecological investigations and literary considerations. The ecological concept, linked to the literary concept of ecology, not only remains connected to the question of interrelatedness between literature, theory, and ecology but also to the entire system of their implications (Oppermann, 1995, p.9). Literary studies, interconnected as an integral part of nature, contextualize the ecological concepts of wholeness, interconnections, and interrelatedness of all organisms, human and non-human alike (Oppermann, 1995, p.9). However, the contextualization of ecological themes in literature, including environmental pollution, extinction of species, deforestation, toxic waste contamination, and the destruction of tropical rainforests, leads to further analysis of the ecologically informed criticisms. Tagore, utterly dismayed at the sight of the ruthless destruction of nature to satiate the lustful demands of man, vehemently protests human-centered 'imperialism' or speciesist 'chauvinism', aiming to engage nature with a sense of practical utility. On the contrary, he enumerated the magnanimity of nature's creation manifested in the smell of grass, in the graceful movement of the boughs of trees and in the melody of birds' songs to create for us a 'phenomenological' world to relieve us from the pressures and involvements of our ordinary and practical pursuits. Nature "stimulates an element of [the] superfluous in our heart's relation to the world" and fosters a harmonious co-existence in living, promoting the common grounds of

“mutual co-operation to flourish equally in this biosphere” (Tagore, 1995, p.93). Reiterating the importance of “literary ecology” (Rueckert, 1996, p.105) to merge the environmental dimensions where “the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere, it can be aptly concluded that nature “gives evidence to something which is not external, but which intensely exists to stimulate the sense of our existence” (Tagore, 1999, p.690).

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