



## 'Nature's Voice' in poetry: An Ecocritical study of Rabindranath Tagore's poems.

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### ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism investigates the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects.

This paper undertakes an ecocritical examination of selected poems by Rabindranath Tagore to explore how they articulate "nature's voice." Moving beyond anthropocentric perspectives, the study analyzes his poetic techniques in portraying nature's agency, interconnectedness with human existence, and its spiritual or symbolic significance. By focusing on distinct yet complementary aspects of their engagement with the natural world – Tagore's cosmic and mystical communion, this paper aims to highlight the diverse manifestations of ecological consciousness in early 20th-century Indian English poetry and its enduring relevance in contemporary environmental discourse.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Indian Poetry, Rabindranath Tagore, Nature, Ecological Consciousness, Spirituality, Interconnectedness.

### Introduction:

Ecocriticism investigates the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. This form of criticism has gained a lot of attention during recent years due to higher social emphasis on environmental destruction and increased technology. It is hence a fresh way of analyzing and interpreting literary texts, which brings new dimensions to the field of literary and theoretical studies. Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including "green (cultural) studies", "ecopoetics", and "environmental literary criticism."

### Background:

Ecocriticism, as a distinct field of literary and cultural theory, emerged and developed in Western academia largely as a response to the growing environmental concerns of the late 20th century. The term "ecocriticism" itself was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." He defined it as the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." While Rueckert's essay laid the groundwork, the term didn't immediately gain widespread traction. The rise of the modern environmental movement, particularly in the United States, played a crucial role. Publications like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) brought widespread public attention to ecological degradation, inspiring a new wave of environmental consciousness and activism. Individual scholars, particularly within the *Western Literature Association (WLA)*, began to explore the relationship between literature and the environment, often focusing on nature writing and the literature of the American West. Key figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau were revisited through an ecological lens. The term "ecocriticism" gained renewed prominence around the 1989 WLA conference, largely due to the efforts of Cheryl Glotfelty. She, along with others, began to actively advocate for the establishment of ecocriticism as a coherent field of study.

Nature has held a profound and multifaceted significance in Indian thought and philosophy, deeply intertwined with its spiritual, cultural, and ethical frameworks from ancient times to the present. Unlike a purely utilitarian or exploitative view, traditional Indian perspectives often foster a sense of reverence, interconnectedness, and even divinity in the natural world. This paper explores the portrayal of nature in the works of selected Indian poets through an ecocritical lens. It examines how these poets transcend anthropocentric perspectives to give voice to the natural world, reflecting on themes of environmental degradation, the interconnectedness of all life, and the spiritual significance of nature. By analyzing their poetic techniques and thematic concerns, this study aims to highlight the ecological consciousness embedded in Indian poetry and its relevance in contemporary environmental discourse.

### Research Gap:

While there's a growing body of ecocritical work on Indian literature, several areas often present opportunities for a focused study:

(a) *Nuanced Interpretation beyond "Nature Worship"*: Many studies acknowledge the traditional Indian reverence for nature. However, a gap exists in thoroughly exploring how this philosophical background translates into specific poetic techniques that give "voice" to nature. It's not just that nature is revered, but how poets embody nature's agency, suffering, or resilience through language, imagery, and narrative perspective, transcending a purely descriptive or symbolic role.

(b) *Bridging Classical and Contemporary Ecocritical Concerns*: While classical Indian texts clearly show environmental ethics, the direct connection of these traditions to modern Indian poetry's engagement with contemporary ecological crises (pollution, urbanization, climate change, biodiversity loss) often needs more explicit and detailed analysis. How do modern Indian poets, perhaps even unconsciously, draw upon ancient reverence while simultaneously grappling with the stark realities of environmental degradation?

(c) *Beyond Anthropocentrism in Indian Poetic Forms*: While ecocriticism generally pushes against anthropocentrism, many literary analyses, even in ecocritical studies, still focus on human perception of nature. The gap lies in rigorously examining how Indian poets specifically de-center the human and allow nature to "speak" or act as an independent entity, a subject rather than an object.

### Significance of the study:

By focusing on Indian poets, the study offers unique perspectives to the broader field of ecocriticism. Indian philosophical traditions (like *Prakriti*, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *Ahimsa*) offer indigenous frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships that can complement or challenge Western-centric ecocritical theories. This study can demonstrate how a non-Western cultural lens enriches the understanding of ecological consciousness in literature.

It establishes that Indian poetry is not merely descriptive of nature but actively engages with ecological concerns and holds an inherent ecological consciousness, often predating the formal emergence of ecocriticism in the West. This counters any notion that environmental awareness is solely a Western import.

By analyzing how poets give "voice" to nature, the study can reveal powerful artistic expressions of ecological concerns. This can contribute to raising environmental awareness, fostering empathy for the natural world, and inspiring a more ethical relationship with the environment among readers and society at large. Poetry, with its evocative power, can connect with audiences on an emotional level that scientific reports often cannot.

The study offers a new lens through which to re-read and appreciate the works of Indian poets, revealing layers of ecological meaning that might have been overlooked in traditional literary analyses. It demonstrates the enduring relevance of classical and modern Indian poetry in contemporary environmental discourse.

This research encourages dialogue between literary studies, environmental philosophy, cultural studies, and indigenous studies, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of ecological challenges and their cultural representations.

### Aims and Objectives:

The aim of this research paper is to analyze how selected Indian poets utilize nature in their work from an ecocritical perspective, exploring their portrayal of nature and its relationship with humans. The objectives include identifying the poets' views on nature, examining the ecological themes in their poems, and assessing the impact of their work on promoting environmental awareness.

### Literature Review:

Drawing from diverse fields such as literary theory, environmental philosophy, and ecology, ecocritical scholarship analyzes how texts represent, respond to, and influence human perceptions of nature (*Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996*). Early pioneers like Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell established foundational concepts,

emphasizing the need to move beyond anthropocentric interpretations to explore literature's ecological dimensions, including themes of wilderness, pastoralism, environmental degradation, and the ethical implications of human-nature interactions (Buell, 1995). Vedic texts, the Upanishads, and classical Sanskrit literature – notably the works of Kalidasa – frequently personify natural elements, treating them as integral to the cosmos and often as manifestations of the divine (Chapple & Tucker, 2000). This rich heritage cultivated a reverence for nature, viewing it as a living entity, a source of spiritual insight, and a reflection of universal principles (Sen, 2006). Tagore's profound connection with the natural world is frequently attributed to his upbringing and particularly his lifelong association with Santiniketan, a rural abode he established as an educational and cultural hub (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). This environment fostered a deep observational and experiential relationship with nature, which permeated his artistic vision. Numerous studies acknowledge nature as a pervasive and central theme in Tagore's oeuvre. Scholars like Krishna Kripalani (1962) and Sisir Kumar Ghose (1986) have extensively discussed how Tagore's poetry celebrates the beauty and dynamism of the natural world. A recurring observation is Tagore's emphasis on the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, often portraying nature not as a separate entity but as an intrinsic part of human existence, mirroring emotions, offering solace, and inspiring spiritual awakening (Chakraborty, 2005). The changing seasons, the flow of rivers, the resilience of trees, and the melodies of birds are imbued with deep symbolic meaning, often serving as metaphors for life's cycles, human emotions, and spiritual transcendence (Das, 2010). His poems often embody principles of interconnectedness, respect for all life forms, and a rejection of anthropocentric domination. Scholars frequently utilize terms such as "eco-centric vision," "biocentric perspective," or "deep ecological sensibility" to describe his approach, suggesting that his work resonates with contemporary environmental ethics (Bhattacharya, 2012; Ray, 2018). His laments for lost natural beauty, his poignant depictions of pastoral tranquility, or his celebration of pristine landscapes can be interpreted as an implicit call for environmental preservation and a cautionary note against the encroaching forces of modernity (Mandal, 2017). Tagore's spiritual understanding of nature, where the divine is imminent in the natural world, strongly resonates with concepts of spiritual ecology. Ecocritical studies frequently connect his pantheistic tendencies with a broader ethical framework that advocates for profound reverence towards all creation (Ghosh, 2019).

While this review primarily focuses on poetry, a comprehensive ecocritical study could extend to Tagore's essays, letters, and even his educational philosophy to fully map his integrated environmental ethics. Finally, applying newer ecocritical theories such as posthumanism, new materialism, or even queer ecology to Tagore's work could open up novel and theoretically sophisticated interpretations of his engagement with the non-human world, potentially revealing previously unarticulated dimensions of "nature's voice" in his oeuvre.

### Methodology:

The study will focus on selected poems of Rabindranath Tagore. The methodology involves qualitative analysis of selected poems, focusing on recurring themes of nature, human-nature relationships, and the impact of colonialism and modernity on both. This could be supplemented by biographical details of the poets and their socio-cultural contexts to understand the influences on their work. The study could also incorporate a comparative analysis of how Tagore portrays nature, potentially exploring differences in their styles and perspectives.

### Discussion:

#### Rabindranath Tagore : The Cosmic voice of nature:

Rabindranath Tagore's poetic engagement with nature transcends mere picturesque description; it delves into a profound philosophical and spiritual realm, presenting nature as a cosmic voice that resonates with the divine and the human soul. For Tagore, nature is not an inert backdrop but a living, breathing entity, an active participant in the grand symphony of existence, often serving as a direct conduit to the infinite.

He vehemently rejected the Western dualism that separated humanity from nature, instead advocating for a holistic vision where humans and the natural world are inextricably linked. For Tagore, alienation from nature was akin to a spiritual impoverishment, leading to a fragmented understanding of oneself and the universe. He believed that true freedom and spiritual progress lay in aligning oneself with the harmonious rhythms of nature.

In Tagore's poetry, nature often speaks with a cosmic voice, revealing fundamental truths about life, death, joy, and sorrow. This "voice" is not always auditory; it is often felt as a pervasive presence, a subtle communication through beauty, rhythm, and cyclical change.

**a) The Immanence of the Divine:** Many of Tagore's poems portray nature as a direct medium for experiencing the divine. In *Gitanjali*, especially, the beauty of a sunrise, the rustle of leaves, or the flow of a

river are not just natural phenomena but glimpses of the Beloved, the Infinite. For instance, in *Gitanjali* 5, the poet feels the presence of the divine in the "sighs and murmurs" of summer and the "minstrelsy" of bees, realizing that "Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee." Here, nature's gentle sounds become a sacred call to communion.

**b) Nature as a Teacher and Guide:** Tagore frequently depicts nature as a profound teacher, imparting lessons that transcend human intellect. The simple elements of nature embody wisdom and a sense of effortless being that humans strive for. The tireless striving of roots, the blossoming of a flower, the ceaseless flow of a river – these are not just observations but profound instructions on resilience, growth, and humility. The poem *Gitanjali* 13, where the poet states, "*The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day. I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument. The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set; only there is the agony of wishing in my heart,*" can be contrasted with the effortless "song" of nature, highlighting its inherent perfection.

**c) Cosmic Interconnectedness:** Tagore's vision embraces a profound sense of interconnectedness, blurring the lines between the human and the non-human, the individual and the cosmic. The wind, the sky, the earth, and the human heart are all part of the same vast, interconnected web of existence. This is evident in poems where human emotions mirror natural cycles, and vice-versa. His concept of "Man's universe" being distinct from the "Universe of Man" underscores that true human fulfillment comes from recognizing this kinship, not from asserting dominance.

Tagore's works frequently illustrate Edward O. Wilson's concept of *biophilia*, the innate human tendency to connect with other living systems. For Tagore, this connection is not merely aesthetic but deeply spiritual and psychological.

**d) Blended Identity:** In many of his poems, the poet's self seems to merge with nature. The human heart becomes a "*bird of the wilderness*" (*The Gardener* 13), seeking liberation and solace in the vastness of nature. This fusion speaks to a deep, primal bond where nature is not an external object but an extension of one's own being.

**e) Solace and Inspiration:** Nature consistently serves as a source of profound solace and inspiration for Tagore. When faced with the complexities and sorrows of human existence, he often turns to the simplicity and grandeur of nature for comfort and renewal. The child playing on the seashore in *The Crescent Moon* ("*On the Seashore*") embodies an unmediated, joyful connection with nature, oblivious to the sea's profound mysteries, yet fully immersed in its essence. This innocence represents a desired state of being in harmony with the natural world.

**f) Subtle Environmental Consciousness:** While Tagore's poetry is not overt environmental protest, it implicitly contains a deep ecological consciousness. His lamentations are often not about direct pollution but about the human alienation from nature, the loss of a harmonious relationship that he saw as fundamental to spiritual well-being.

His critique of the "*dreary desert sand of dead habit*" in *Gitanjali* 35, where the "clear stream of reason" loses its way, can be read as a metaphorical warning against a rigid, unthinking societal path that ignores the organic flow and wisdom of life, much like environmental degradation. He recognized that unchecked human pride, greed, and the pursuit of power could disrupt the delicate balance of nature, leading to a loss not just of natural resources but of human spirit itself. His educational experiments at Santiniketan, with their emphasis on learning in and from nature, were practical extensions of this philosophy.

Rabindranath Tagore's "cosmic voice of nature" in his poetry offers a timeless and profound ecocentric perspective. He masterfully blends spiritual realization with an intimate connection to the natural world, allowing nature to speak through its inherent beauty, rhythms, and subtle wisdom. His work reminds us that true understanding and liberation come from recognizing our unity with the entire cosmos, challenging anthropocentric views and advocating for a life lived in harmony with the natural world – a message that resonates with even greater urgency in our ecologically challenged present.

### Conclusion:

Rabindranath Tagore's voluminous poetic output demonstrates a multifaceted engagement with nature, leading to various convergences and subtle divergences in how he articulates "nature's voice." While a consistent thread of reverence and spiritual connection runs through his work, the way nature speaks and the context of its utterance evolve, reflecting different phases of his thought, poetic aims, and even personal experiences.

Despite the breadth of his work, several key aspects of nature's voice consistently converge in Tagore's poetry:

**1) Convergence:** This is perhaps the most prominent and consistent aspect. Across collections like *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, and *Fruit-Gathering*, nature's voice is primarily the voice of the infinite, the Beloved, or the universal spirit. The rustle of leaves, the morning light, the flow of a river, the blooming of a flower – all are seen as direct communications from the divine, inviting spiritual contemplation and union. This voice is often silent, yet profoundly eloquent, perceived through intuition and a receptive heart.

Examples: *Gitanjali* 5 ("*I know not how thou singest*"), *Gitanjali* 10 ("*Here is thy footstool*"), and numerous poems where natural beauty evokes a sense of awe and transcendence.



Tagore consistently turns to nature for comfort amidst life's struggles, for renewal of spirit, and for creative impetus. Nature's voice, in this sense, is therapeutic and nurturing. It speaks of peace, resilience, and the eternal cycles of renewal.

Examples: His personal essays and letters often detail his retreat to the solitude of nature (e.g., at Santiniketan) for creative pursuits. In poems, the embrace of the open sky or the calm of a garden offers respite from urban clamor or personal sorrow.

Nature's voice frequently imparts wisdom without words. It teaches simplicity, humility, patience, and the profound interconnectedness of all life. The lessons are drawn from natural processes: the perseverance of a seed, the effortless beauty of a flower, the unwavering path of a river. This voice is one of quiet authority and profound insight.

Examples: The simplicity of a wild flower against human complexity; the unending cycles of birth, growth, and decay reflecting life's transient yet eternal nature.

The unbridled essence of nature—the wild wind, the open sky, the untamed bird—consistently symbolizes freedom from societal constraints and the yearning of the human spirit for liberation. Nature's voice here is one of boundless possibility and an escape from the mundane.

Examples: The recurring motif of birds and their flight, the wide expanse of the sky, the open road leading to discovery.

**2) Divergences:** While the cosmic voice is pervasive, some poems shift towards a more concrete, sensual appreciation of nature. In his later works or specific collections like *The Gardener*, nature's voice might be heard not just in the divine presence, but in the immediate, tangible beauty of a flower's scent, a bird's specific call, or the physical sensation of the wind. This is a voice experienced through the senses, rooted in the particular rather than the universal abstract.

Examples: Poems that focus intensely on the visual details of a specific landscape or the sound of rain, where the beauty is celebrated for its own sake before (or without) immediately elevating to a spiritual plane.

In works like *The Gardener*, nature's voice often becomes intertwined with human romantic love and desire. Here, the garden, the moon, the night, or flowers act as settings, metaphors, or even silent witnesses to human emotion. Nature's voice might be empathetic to human passion, reflecting its joys and sorrows, or providing a backdrop for courtship and longing. It shifts from purely divine resonance to a more humanly engaged, emotional echo.

Examples: Poems where lovers meet amidst blossoms, or where the moon observes their silent communication.

In *The Crescent Moon*, nature's voice is often perceived through the unadulterated, innocent perspective of a child. This voice is simple, playful, and immediate, free from adult intellectualization or spiritual yearning. It's the voice of the sea playing with a child's sand-castles, or the tree whispering secrets to a young mind. This voice highlights a primal, unmediated connection with nature, which might be lost in adulthood.

Examples: "*On the Seashore*," where the sea plays with children or poems about the simple joys found in a garden by a child.

While not explicitly ecocritical in a modern sense, Tagore's lament over humanity's alienation from nature carries an implicit environmental critique. Nature's voice here is one of subtle warning or sorrow, hinting at the consequences of excessive materialism and the disconnection from organic life. It's a voice of loss or a call to return to simpler, more harmonious ways.

Examples: *Gitanjali* 35's metaphorical "*dreary desert sand of dead habit*" where the "clear stream of reason" loses its way, can be interpreted as a subtle critique of societal paths that lead to spiritual and perhaps ecological barrenness. His preference for learning in nature at Santiniketan was a practical divergence from purely scholastic, urban education.

In conclusion, Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of nature's voice is consistently rooted in reverence and a profound sense of interconnectedness. The primary convergence lies in nature acting as a cosmic, divine voice that teaches, heals, and inspires. However, subtle divergences emerge when this voice is contextualized: sometimes resonating with human passion, at other times echoing the innocence of childhood, or even implicitly critiquing the excesses of a world losing its connection to its vital source. These varied facets underscore the richness and depth of Tagore's ecological consciousness, making his poetry a timeless testament to humanity's intricate and indispensable relationship with the natural world.

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