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## Beyond Anthropocentrism: Tagore's Environmental Imagination in Children's Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's children's literature has often been celebrated for its lyrical beauty, moral depth, and imaginative freedom. However, its environmental dimensions—especially its non-anthropocentric vision—remain largely unexplored in academic discourse. This paper seeks to examine Tagore's environmental imagination in his stories and poems for children through the critical lens of ecocriticism and post-humanist thought. It argues that Tagore's literary universe for children subtly decenters the human subject and reimagines the natural world as sentient, interconnected, and ethically significant in its own right. Tagore does not merely use nature as a backdrop or metaphor; rather, he imbues natural elements—trees, rivers, birds, animals, and seasons—with agency, emotion, and voice. In texts such as *Tota Kahini*, *Khokababur Pratyabartan*, and nature-centric poems like *Briksha Ropon*, Tagore cultivates a sense of ecological empathy that challenges the binary of human versus non-human. Through gentle storytelling and symbolic narrative, he invites children to see themselves as part of a larger web of life, encouraging a relational and respectful attitude toward the environment. By moving beyond utilitarian and dominion-based views of nature, Tagore's children's literature offers an early vision of environmental ethics rooted in joy,



wonder, and coexistence. This paper situates his work within contemporary eco-critical theories, particularly those that emphasize biocentrism and interspecies relationships, to uncover how Tagore imagined education, storytelling, and the natural world as intertwined processes of nurturing holistic consciousness. In doing so, the paper reclaims Tagore not only as a poet of humanity but also as a pioneer of ecological sensitivity in children's literature—a legacy that resonates urgently in today's climate-challenged world.

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**Introduction:** The early twentieth century was a period marked by the rapid rise of industrialization, imperialism, and anthropocentric ideals of “progress” and “civilization.” Against this backdrop, Rabindranath Tagore emerged as a critical voice advocating for harmony between humans and nature. Although his environmental philosophy has been acknowledged in his adult poetry, essays, and educational experiments, a significant but overlooked dimension lies in his literature for children. Tagore’s children’s stories and poems, rich in imagery, symbolism, and moral reflection, subtly challenge the dominant anthropocentric worldview and envision an interdependent ecological order.

Children’s literature has long served as a medium for transmitting cultural values, ethical teachings, and imaginative worldviews. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore stands as a pioneer who redefined childhood not just in psychological or pedagogical terms but also as a time of ecological wonder. Far from representing nature as passive background, Tagore’s works treat the natural world as an active participant in moral and emotional development. This paper argues that Tagore’s children’s literature is an early and profound site of **post-anthropocentric imagination**, where the line between human and non-human consciousness is blurred.

Tagore's ecological imagination challenges the binaries of nature/culture, human/animal, and animate/inanimate, inviting children into a more relational and respectful mode of being with the Earth. This paper explores how these ideas are embedded in his children’s stories and poems, proposing that Tagore’s environmental ethics were not abstract philosophical positions but lived and literary realities, especially tailored for the moral education of the young. This paper also explores how Tagore’s literary imagination for children reflects an early environmental consciousness that resonates with post humanist and Eco critical frameworks. It argues that by portraying animals, plants, rivers, and other non-human entities as sentient beings with intrinsic value, Tagore instills in his young readers a relational worldview



that transcends human-centered narratives. In doing so, he lays the foundation for a mode of ecological thinking that remains deeply relevant in our time of environmental crisis.

**Anthropocentrism and the Eco critical Framework:** Anthropocentrism, derived from the Greek *Anthropos* (human), refers to the belief that human beings are the central and most significant entities in the universe. This worldview, deeply ingrained in Western Enlightenment thinking, has led to the instrumental treatment of nature, justifying environmental degradation in the name of development and progress. In contrast, ecocriticism—a field of literary theory that emerged in the late twentieth century—interrogates such assumptions and explores the representation of the natural world in literature, seeking to dismantle the binary of human and non-human.

Post humanist theory further expands this critique by decentering the human subject altogether, emphasizing the agency, voice, and interconnectedness of all forms of life. In this context, Tagore's children's literature, though written decades before the rise of ecocriticism and post humanism, can be seen as pioneering in its environmental vision. His works resist anthropocentric dominance and propose an alternative model of coexistence, where children are invited to engage with nature not as masters but as kin.

**Tagore's Ecological Worldview: Philosophical Foundations:** Tagore's environmental ethics are rooted in the Upanishadic idea of the unity of existence. Influenced by Brahma philosophy, his own rural upbringing, and the indigenous traditions of Bengal, Tagore saw the divine presence not only in human beings but in every blade of grass and grain of soil. For him, nature was not merely an object of study or utility but a living, breathing presence imbued with spiritual and aesthetic value.

His founding of Santiniketan and later Sriniketan as open-air schools, where learning occurred under trees and in harmony with nature, exemplifies this vision. In *Shikshar Herfer* (The Parrot's Tale), *Sahaj Path* (Easy Reader), and other children's texts, Tagore integrates nature into the process of learning and moral formation. He believed that children were naturally attuned to the rhythms of the environment and that literature could nurture this sensitivity into ecological wisdom.

**Nature as a Moral and Sentient Entity:** Tagore's stories and poems for children often depict nature as sentient, expressive, and ethically significant. In "Tota Kahini" (The Parrot's Tale), a free-living parrot is captured by a king's ministers and subjected to an oppressive education system designed to "civilize" it. The parrot, once vibrant and curious, eventually dies, a tragic consequence of human control over natural beings. Although satirical, the story powerfully critiques both mechanical education and the colonization



of the natural world. Here, the parrot becomes a symbol of all that is stifled by anthropocentric systems—be it freedom, spontaneity, or ecological vitality.

In poems like *Brikkharopon* (Tree Planting), the act of planting trees is not portrayed as mere horticulture but as a spiritual and communal ritual that binds humans with nature's cycles. Trees are not passive objects but active participants in human life, capable of evoking joy, memory, and reverence. Tagore's emphasis on the moral status of trees and animals positions his literature as deeply aligned with bio-centric ethics.

**The Animal Other and Interspecies Relations:** One of the most striking features of Tagore's children's literature is his portrayal of animals' not as mere background characters but as protagonists with voice, emotion, and agency. In *Khokababur Pratyabartan* (The Return of the Little Boy), a young child finds companionship not among adults but in the natural world and among animals, whose unspoken understanding and loyalty reveal a moral depth often lacking in the human characters.

Tagore's depiction of animals avoids simplistic anthropomorphism. Instead, he presents their alterity—their difference—as worthy of respect. This aligns with contemporary posthumanist ethics, which advocate for recognizing the rights and subjectivity of non-human life without reducing them to human terms. By fostering interspecies empathy, Tagore's literature teaches children to relate to animals not as property or pets but as co-inhabitants of the world.

**Ecological Empathy and the Child Reader:** Tagore's approach to engaging children with nature is rooted in experiential learning. His stories do not moralize in a heavy-handed way; rather, they encourage wonder, observation, and emotional engagement. For instance, in *Shishu* (The Child), nature is not separate from the self—it is an extension of the child's being. The sun, moon, river, and stars are all interlocutors in the child's imaginative world.

This model of learning through play and interaction resonates with current environmental education principles that emphasize experiential learning, sensory engagement, and emotional intelligence. Tagore's child protagonists are often curious, empathetic, and deeply connected to their surroundings—qualities essential for nurturing a future generation of environmentally conscious citizens.

**Language, Symbolism, and Aesthetics of Nature:** The aesthetic power of Tagore's writing plays a crucial role in shaping ecological imagination. His descriptions of natural landscapes are lyrical, detailed, and evocative. Whether it is the quiet rustling of leaves, the glimmering surface of a river, or the scent of rain-soaked earth, Tagore's language brings nature alive in the reader's mind.



Symbols such as the river (representing flow and time), the bird (freedom and song), and the tree (growth and endurance) recur across his children's works. These symbols are never static; they evolve within the narrative, reflecting ecological cycles and human emotions. Through this symbolic economy, Tagore embeds environmental values in the very structure of his stories.

**Postcolonial Context and Ecological Resistance:** Tagore's environmental thought must also be situated within the broader postcolonial critique of industrial modernity. As a thinker who was critical of Western models of development, Tagore saw colonialism not only as a political imposition but as an epistemological one—it imposed a utilitarian, extractive view of nature on colonized peoples. His valorization of rural life, indigenous knowledge, and agrarian rhythms in his children's literature resists this narrative.

In texts like *Sahaj Path*, the world of the village—its fields, birds, trees, and rivers—becomes the site of knowledge and beauty, in stark contrast to the sterile, urban, colonial classroom. Tagore's environmental imagination thus functions as an act of cultural reclamation, asserting the value of non-Western ways of being in and with nature.

**Relevance to Contemporary Environmental Discourse:** In the current age of climate change, ecological collapse, and biodiversity loss, Tagore's vision appears remarkably prescient. He anticipates the concerns of contemporary eco critics, environmental educators, and climate activists who advocate for a shift from anthropocentric to eco centric values. His children's literature, in particular, offers a model for cultivating this shift from an early age.

By fostering curiosity, empathy, and reverence for the non-human world, Tagore's works can serve as pedagogical tools for environmental education. Integrating his texts into modern curricula could help children form ethical relationships with nature that go beyond recycling slogans and into a deeper understanding of interdependence and care.

**Case Studies of Children's Literature with Environmental Imagination:** Tagore's children's literature offers rich examples where environmental imagination takes center stage. His narratives often portray nature not as a static background but as a living, breathing presence that interacts with human characters in meaningful ways. Here are a few illustrative examples:

1. **Tota Kahini (The Parrot's Tale):** This satirical story critiques rote learning and mechanical education by narrating the fate of a parrot that is caged and stuffed with facts until it dies. The natural instincts of the bird are stifled under the pretext of education, offering a powerful



metaphor for the destruction of the natural self by anthropocentric institutions. The parrot here is a symbol of both ecological and intellectual freedom, and its tragic end is a warning against domination—both of minds and of nature.

2. **Khokababur Pratyabartan:** This story reflects Tagore's sensitivity to rural Bengal's human-nature relationships. While it focuses on the emotional bond between a British child and his Indian caretaker, the background of the story is embedded in natural imagery and village life. Nature functions here as a silent yet expressive presence that nurtures relationships, evokes emotions, and symbolizes change.
3. **Briksha Roapon (Tree Planting):** This poem and the associated festival reflect Tagore's commitment to ecological restoration and collective environmental responsibility. Aimed at both children and adults, it celebrates the act of planting trees as a spiritual and communal ritual. The trees are not just resources but beings with whom humans share a sacred duty. The annual celebration of *Briksha Roapon Utsav* at Santiniketan instills environmental consciousness through joy, music, and participation.
4. **Sishu (The Child) and Kishor (The Adolescent):** These poetry collections include numerous references to rivers, skies, animals, and plants. The tone is one of awe and interconnectedness. For instance, in poems like *Akash*, *Nadi*, and *Pakhi*, the natural elements are personified, made to speak and feel. The child protagonist in these poems often converses with nature as a friend or a fellow being, demonstrating a post humanist worldview.
5. **Chhuti (The Holiday):** This short story captures a boy's yearning to return from a city boarding school to his village during holidays. Nature is portrayed not only as a refuge from institutional control but also as a source of vitality and self-discovery. The countryside, with its rivers, trees, and open skies, becomes a character in its own right—alive, healing, and liberating.

These examples collectively reflect Tagore's ecological vision: one that decentralizes the human ego and encourages children to form ethical, emotional, and imaginative relationships with the natural world. Rather than preaching conservation, Tagore's stories invite readers—especially young ones—to see the environment as a community to which they belong.

**Nature and Interspecies Ethics:** Tagore's children's literature is remarkable for its quiet but firm resistance to species hierarchy. He does not approach animals or plants as “lesser beings” but rather as fellow inhabitants of a shared world, capable of joy, sorrow, loyalty, and expression. In doing so, he



anticipates key insights of post humanist philosophy, which seeks to dismantle anthropocentric frameworks and reimagine ethical relationships between humans and non-humans.

In stories like *The Parrot's Tale*, Tagore suggests that the suffering of a bird under an oppressive educational system is not just a metaphor for human suppression but also a literal ethical concern for the bird's autonomy and well-being. He uses storytelling to cultivate a sense of care for non-human life, suggesting that ethical sensibility must extend beyond the human community.

The tree in *Briksha Ropon* is more than a resource—it is a living presence whose flourishing is tied to human rituals of celebration and gratitude. The act of planting becomes a symbolic ethical gesture, a promise of care and continuity. Tagore subtly implies that humans are not the stewards of nature in a dominion-based sense but are participants in a mutual ecological covenant.

Tagore's depiction of interspecies relationships frequently evokes empathy rather than pity. Animals in his stories often possess their own wisdom and emotional complexity. For instance, the birds and trees in his poems are portrayed as beings that mourn, rejoice, and teach. This narrative strategy challenges the Cartesian divide between human and animal, mind and body, culture and nature.

The ethical paradigm in Tagore's works resonates with contemporary theories of biocentrism and deep ecology. He does not moralize nature but allows children to experience its intrinsic worth through wonder and storytelling. In a world increasingly shaped by ecological crises, such literary visions are crucial for shaping future generations who can think and feel beyond human-centered ethics.

In short, Tagore's children's literature builds an ethos of coexistence. His tales offer a foundation for interspecies ethics that sees all life forms as deserving of care, dignity, and freedom. By presenting nature as kin rather than property, Tagore opens the possibility for a new ecological sensibility in both literature and lived experience.

**Conclusion:** Rabindranath Tagore's children's literature is a profound expression of environmental imagination that challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of his time—and ours. Through his poetic language, symbolic richness, and narrative empathy, Tagore constructs a world where children engage with nature as kin, not as conquerors. His works promote a worldview grounded in rationality, respect, and wonder, making them vital resources in the ongoing search for sustainable and ethical ways of living.

As we confront ecological crises that threaten the very fabric of life, Tagore's vision reminds us that the seeds of change can—and must—be planted in the young. His children's literature offers not only stories



but a way of seeing the world—one that acknowledges the intrinsic value of all life and seeks harmony over domination. In re-centering nature in the moral and imaginative lives of children, Tagore emerges not only as a poet of humanity but as a quiet prophet of ecological wisdom.

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