

Whispers of the Earth: Ecological Sensibility in Tagore's 'The Homecoming' and 'Shubha'

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Abstract:

This paper explores the ecological themes present in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories, 'The Homecoming' and 'Shubha', analysing them through the perspective of ecological critique of modernity and the supportive framework of ecological humanism. These narratives address the disconnection from nature that often results from modern societal frameworks. At the same time, they advocate for a vision of deep interconnection between human life and the surrounding natural world. By carefully examining the characters' experiences of displacement, intense alienation, and significant moments of connection with nature, this paper argues that Tagore's tales provide invaluable and lasting insights into the complex and often troubled relationship between humanity and the environment, thus foreshadowing many current ecological issues. Additionally, the paper will highlight Tagore's unwavering focus on the essential values of empathy, deep compassion, and the intrinsic worth of all living beings, which aligns perfectly with the fundamental principles and ethical responsibilities of ecological humanism.

Keywords: Interconnectedness, Ecological Humanism, Modernization, Alienation, Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most influential figures in Bengali literature and the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (1913). He is renowned worldwide for his profound humanism as well as his deep spiritual philosophy that infused his artistic works, and his intensely personal and evocative bond with the natural environment. Although his vast collection of works may not traditionally fall under the category of “ecological literature”, a careful examination uncovers a persistent and immense concern for the complex and fragile relationship that exists between humans and the environment that supports it. This paper sets out to investigate the hidden, yet significant ecological aspects found in two of Tagore’s emotionally impactful short stories, ‘The Homecoming’ and ‘Shubha’, using the complementary frameworks of ecological critique of modernity and ecological humanism.

Literature has been the catalyst to promote ecological balance in the world. It has helped to raise awareness and solidarity towards such a global crisis. In the article, “Ecocriticism in Modern English Literature”, critics note that “[E]cocriticism offers a revisionist and reformist viewpoint that has gained prominence in modern English literature across the globe (Al Fawareh, Dakamsih, and Alkouri 2023, 785).

The ideology of ‘organic or ecological humanism¹’ and Rabindranath Tagore’s holistic perspective on the relationship between humans and nature, as well as his criticism of contemporary industrialism, are particularly compatible. This viewpoint presents a fair assessment of the environment. It disapproves of excessively spiritual as well as strictly scientific (mechanistic) perspectives on nature. It criticizes the industrial society for elevating humans above nature and distancing them from it. It does not, however, support primitivism or suggest that religious ideas are the answer. Rather, it looks for a peaceful method for people to coexist with the environment.

“What is lost in all this is that there is another ecological tradition that repudiates both mechanism and spiritualism, that while critiquing industrial capitalism and the megamachine, along with its anthropocentric and dualistic paradigm, does not go to the other extreme and embrace primitivism and some form of religious metaphysic. This is the tradition of organic or ecological humanism.” (Morris 2017, 1-2)

¹ It is an ecological philosophy which argues that humans and the nature are not two separate entities but one. The proponents of this theory are Lewis Mumford, René Dubos, and Murray Bookchin.

The ecological critique of modernity serves as a vital analytical framework that helps to understand how contemporary societies, with their historical and ongoing focus on relentless industrial growth, the rapid expansion of urban areas, and the pervasive impact of rationalization across all areas of life, have unintentionally or intentionally cultivated a sense of disconnection and alienation from the natural world. This disconnection has been associated with environmental damage and the loss of traditional ecological knowledge that has been passed down through generations, and a fundamental change in humanity's understanding of its role within the broader biotic community. On the other hand, ecological humanism presents a philosophical and ethical viewpoint that actively highlights the intrinsic interconnectedness of humans and the vast, intricate natural world. It promotes the development of a more holistic and fundamentally harmonious relationship with the environment which is characterized by mutual respect and understanding. This viewpoint thoughtfully integrates the scientific principles of ecology with the core tenets of humanism, acknowledging the inherent and irreplaceable worth of all living beings, both human and non-human, and emphasizing the essential need for empathy, deep compassion, and a strong ethical obligation towards the natural world that sustains all life.

“Ecological humanism is, in essence, a communitarian view. Human beings, it argues, pursue the developmental ideal of becoming fully integrated persons within community contexts...once we recognise the continuities between ourselves and other creatures, we can hardly value the human while devaluing all other life.” (Brennan 2004, 2)

Rabindranath Tagore's perspectives on nature align closely with the notion of ‘ecological humanism’. He not only promoted environmental harmony but also represented a worldview nurtured in the subcontinent for thousands of years. A major influence on his thought was the Upanishadic philosophy ²of non-dualism (*Advaita Vedanta*). This ancient wisdom asserts that the ultimate reality, *Brahman*, ³permeates all existence, including both humans and nature. Tagore believed that separating humanity from the natural world results in a loss of truth. This is directly derived from this concept of inherent oneness. He advocated for an education that

² Upanishadic philosophy is the philosophical core of Hinduism that explores the nature of ultimate reality (Brahman) and the individual soul (Atman), emphasizing their fundamental unity. It shifts focus from Vedic rituals to introspective knowledge, advocating that realizing the identity of Atman and Brahman leads to spiritual liberation (moksha). The texts explain that ignorance is the cause of suffering, and true knowledge brings freedom from the cycle of rebirth (samsara).

³ According to the Upanishads, Brahman is the ultimate reality and the supreme, universal, and absolute truth. It is the eternal, infinite, and all-pervading divine essence of the entire cosmos, transcending all form and attributes. The Upanishads also teach the identity of Brahman with the individual self (*Atman*).

encouraged harmony with all existence, reflecting the Upanishadic ideal of dissolving the perceived divide between self and cosmos. Additionally, Tagore was inspired by the ancient Indian tradition of forest hermitages, or *tapovans*. In contrast to Western monastic traditions that focused on withdrawal from the world, *tapovans* served as spaces where sages resided amidst nature, pursuing spiritual and intellectual enlightenment through their connection with the environment. The establishment of Santiniketan ⁴by Tagore in a rural setting was a conscious effort to recreate this ideal, with the goal of fostering holistic human development and learning in intrinsic harmony with the environment, rather than in isolated, urban institutions. The vibrant and diverse *baul* mystic tradition ⁵of Bengal also significantly influenced Tagore's perspectives. *Bauls* celebrate the divine present within the human body and the natural world, rejecting rigid dogmas and institutionalized religion. Their focus on direct experience, the *Maner Manush* (the man of the heart), and a joyful, spontaneous connection to life and nature resonated profoundly with Tagore's humanistic and ecologically aware spirituality. This perfectly aligns with "organic humanism's"ⁱ dismissal of both sterile mechanism and dogmatic spiritualism. Tagore compares detachment of man from nature to "dividing the bud and the blossom into separate categories and putting their grace to the credit of two different and antithetical principles." (Tagore 1972, 7)

This paper contends that Tagore's seemingly straightforward yet multi-layered short stories, written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resonate remarkably with the contemporary ecological issues that have become increasingly urgent in our current age. Through his empathetic depiction of characters who confront experiences of deep alienation, forced removal from their natural environments, and an ongoing desire for a meaningful connection with the natural world, Tagore critiques the dehumanizing elements that can accompany unchecked modernization. At the same time, he eloquently honours the enduring and essential connection that exists between humankind and the natural environment. It is a connection that goes beyond mere utility and speaks to a deeper and more spiritual bond. "To Tagore the world of nature is not an illusion but is rather a medium for accomplishing indivisibility with the infinite" (Nagar, 77). By carefully analysing specific textual examples from both 'The Homecoming' and 'Shubha' and situating Tagore's literary insights within the larger context of

⁴ Established in rural West Bengal in 1901 by the renowned poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, Santiniketan was a residential school and centre for art based on ancient Indian traditions and a vision of the unity of humanity transcending religious and cultural boundaries.

⁵ The Baul mystic tradition is a unique spiritual and cultural movement that originated in Bengal (present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal). It combines elements of Hindu bhakti, Sufi mysticism, and Tantric philosophy, creating a deeply humanistic and inclusive spiritual path.

ecological thought, this paper aims to illustrate the prophetic nature of his short stories in relation to contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, the necessity of sustainability, and the fundamental need to reassess humanity's role within the intricate web of life. It is an important reading because-

“Literature continues to play the dominant part in postcolonial ecocriticism, and it will continue to do so... This raises an issue that continues to influence the reception of postcolonial ecocriticism, namely its (for some) narrow focus on representation and the ‘close reading’ of literary and other cultural texts.” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, ix)

‘The Homecoming’ is a short story first published in 1891. It narrates the heart-breaking journey of Phatik Chakravorti, a lively, restless, and undeniably mischievous fourteen-year-old boy who is suddenly taken away from the comforting and nurturing natural environment of his rural village and sent to reside with his materially well-off but emotionally detached uncle in the bustling city of Calcuttaⁱⁱ for the purpose of his education. Phatik, who has always resided in the expansive spaces and natural rhythms of his village, finds it incredibly challenging to adapt to the strange and often stifling urban setting, along with the strict, impersonal discipline that defines city life and formal schooling within it. He finds it difficult to adjust to this new environment, for he has been accustomed to a much simpler environment since birth. The narrative is rich in emotional depth and illustrates Phatik’s overwhelming feeling of isolation, his constant and heartrending yearning for the familiar comforts and liberties of his rural upbringing, and his eventual, untimely tragic end in the alienating landscape of the city.

‘The Homecoming’ can be interpreted as a critique of the modernizing forces that were beginning to significantly reshape the Indian society during Tagore’s era. Calcutta⁶, as a swiftly growing and dynamic urban hub, symbolically embodies the encroaching wave of modernity, with its increasing focus on rationality, the relentless chase for advancement, and the often cold and impersonal nature of social mobility. Urbanization, industrialization, and radicalization were at their peak in the cities during this time. People were swayed by the grandeur it held and were ready to distance from their roots to be a part of it. Phatik’s fatal struggle to acclimatize to this drastically different atmosphere sharply emphasizes the potential for severe dislocation, alienation, and a loss of identity that can accompany the unquestioned progression

⁶ The name Calcutta was officially changed to Kolkata in 2001 by the Government of West Bengal. The change aimed to reflect the original Bengali pronunciation and heritage of the city’s name, derived from the village Kalikata, one of the three villages that formed the city under British rule. This renaming was also part of a broader postcolonial effort in India to restore indigenous names and cultural identity.

of modernization, especially when it overlooks the inherent human need for connection with nature and community.

Tagore depicts Phatik in this story as an archetypal ‘child of nature’, firmly anchored in the organic rhythms and sensory richness of the village life. The story opens with Phatik as the undisputed leader among his village peers, orchestrating a playful and harmless scheme to collectively relocate a heavy log, which was a task that highlights his innate energy, spontaneous spirit, and his direct and unfiltered interaction with the physical world surrounding him. As Tagore writes, “Phatik was the ringleader of the boys of the village” (Tagore 2024, 4). This natural leadership is vividly illustrated within a natural context, in close connection to the earth and its tangible elements. His life in the village is characterized by expansive open spaces that beckon exploration and play, a sense of unrestricted freedom, the warmth and companionship of close friendships, and a direct, tactile, and sensory connection with the natural environment that envelops him.

When Phatik is thrust into the strange and overwhelming atmosphere of Calcutta, he is forced to encounter a realm that is starkly and harshly different from the one he cherishes. He finds himself confined within the restrictive walls of his uncle's residence, subjected to the rigid constraints of formal education that stifle his innate curiosity and vitality. He is surrounded by individuals who fail to grasp his free-spirited essence and his deep yearning for home. His aunt, specifically, is depicted as being unsympathetic to his significant struggles, viewing him merely as an unwelcomed addition to her household and persistently reprimanding him for his perceived lack of discipline and failure to adapt to the stringent expectations of urban life. Tagore illustrates her response, noting that she “was displeased with this unwelcome addition to her family. She deemed it an intrusion to introduce a raw village boy into their sophisticated city home” (Tagore 2024, 144). This sharply contrasting urban landscape, with its focus on artificiality and its separation from the natural environment, serves as a powerful symbolic representation of the modern world’s growing detachment from the essential rhythms and restorative qualities of nature. In this scenario, Phatik’s escalating anguish and eventual tragic end can be viewed as a direct outcome of the irreconcilable conflict between his inherent natural tendencies and the often-dehumanizing expectations of a swiftly modernizing society that values intellectual achievement and social conformity over emotional health and connection to the natural world.

Phatik's relentless and increasingly desperate desire for his rural home is not merely a sentimental bond to a familiar place filled with cherished memories but also a deeply felt yearning for a lifestyle that is inherently more intertwined with the natural world. It is characterized by freedom, spontaneity, and a sense of belonging within a community and landscape that he understands and loves. His gradual descent into illness and eventual tragic death in Calcutta can be interpreted as a direct consequence of his forced separation from the nurturing natural environment that nourished his spirit. As Tagore writes, "Mother, the holidays have come" (Tagore 2024, 365), Phatik's final, whispered words bear a deeply moving dual significance. While he literally refers to the much-anticipated school holidays, they also symbolically signify his ultimate desire for liberation from his suffering and a return to a state of peace, belonging, and spiritual 'homecoming' that, in his tragic situation, can only be achieved through the finality of death.

Through Phatik's sorrowful journey, Tagore effectively critiques the modern inclination to prioritize abstract concepts of progress and development, measured solely in economic or social terms, at the cost of essential human well-being and the human connection with the natural world. This story by Tagore is a reminder of the importance of preservation and promotion of humans' intrinsic bond with nature and pinpointing the potentially devastating consequences of ignoring or harming that elemental bond in the name of scientific and technological development or societal advancement.

'Shubha' was published in 1891 and tells the story of a young woman who is born without the ability to speak, unable to verbally communicate her thoughts and feelings. Isolated and frequently misinterpreted by her local community due to her perceived 'lack', Shubha discovers deep comfort, true friendship, and a strong sense of belonging within the vibrant and expressive natural environment that is around her. The narrative is a heartfelt and compassionate examination of her solitude from human society, her extraordinary inner strength amidst this exclusion, and her instinctive connection with the surrounding world. Ecological humanism advocates for a non-dualistic, interdependent relationship between humanity and nature, rejecting anthropocentric supremacy and acknowledging an intrinsic value that extends beyond utilitarian or merely spiritual considerations. Shubha, who is deaf and mute, discovers her authentic language and comfort not within the human society that marginalizes her, but in the nurturing presence of nature. Her connection with the river, the grazing cows, and the trees surpasses traditional forms of communication. The river serves as

her companion, and the animals perceive her unexpressed feelings, responding to her presence without judgment or the expectation of verbal expression.

In the context of the narrative, Shubha's silence transcends a simple physical limitation, and it evolves into a powerful metaphor for the wider marginalization of individuals who do not align with the restrictive norms and expectations of a predominantly language-centric society. In a world that frequently places excessive importance on verbal communication as the main means of interaction and comprehension, Shubha's silence is often viewed as a major shortcoming, a crucial deficiency that tragically distances her from her peers and even her own family. Her parents, weighed down by societal pressures and their own fears, "felt that she was a burden on them" (Tagore 2008, 10). Nonetheless, Tagore depicts Shubha's silence not as an empty space or a simple lack of verbal ability, but rather as an alternative and equally legitimate mode of communication which is a rich and complex language of gestures and movements, deeply experienced emotions, and an emotional or spiritual connection to the non-human natural world.

Shubha's closest and most empathetic companions are the animals inhabiting her surroundings and the other everyday elements of the natural world near her village. She forges a particularly deep and significant bond with the family cows, finding in their quiet presence and gentle acceptance a sense of understanding, a non-judgmental companionship, and unconditional love that is often absent from the human society around her. Tagore eloquently writes, "Perhaps she had a wider and deeper sympathy with them than with human beings" (Tagore 2008, 25). This evocative assertion implies that Shubha, perhaps because she is unencumbered by the limitations and potential misunderstandings of spoken language, possesses a unique and profound ability for empathy, a heightened sensitivity that surpasses the arbitrary confines of human language and connects her directly to the inner lives and unspoken communications of the non-human realm.

The river that flows peacefully past Shubha's village becomes a powerful and recurring symbol of her own silent yet deeply expressive existence. Tagore beautifully illustrates how "Shubha would sit silently by the riverbank, as if she were in communion with its silent flow" (Tagore 2008, 40). The river, which is much like Shubha herself, serves as a constant and enduring entity, quietly observing the world around it without the need for articulate speech. It serves as a source of comfort and a mirror reflecting her own quiet strength, her inner fortitude, and her deep connection to the fundamental patterns of existence.

Shubha's relationship with the natural world goes far beyond being just a passive admiration of its visual allure or merely seeking comfort in its peacefulness. It also represents a means of experiencing a sense of belonging, deep interconnectedness, and an inherent purpose in a universe that often appears indifferent or even hostile to her existence. In a culture that frequently sidelines her and renders her invisible, nature grants her a secure sense of place, a deep feeling of being understood without the necessity for spoken language, and a basic sense of purpose within the broader tapestry of life. As Tagore beautifully articulates, "She felt as if she were a part of the mute, universal life of nature" (Tagore 2008, 50). This deep bond with a "mute, universal life" strikingly emphasizes a viewpoint that intentionally transcends the often-restrictive human-centred perspective of modernity. It implies that there are numerous other legitimate ways of knowing, experiencing, and existing in the world, methods that do not solely depend on the frequently flawed and sometimes exclusionary nature of language, and that these alternative modes of existence can connect us to a much larger and more inclusive web of life that encompasses all living beings.

Through Shubha's moving narrative, Tagore honours the often-neglected silent language of nature and implicitly critiques the inherent limitations of a society that frequently prioritizes verbal communication and articulate expression at the cost of other equally valid and meaningful forms of communication. It also highlights how the glory of a woman's life is measured with reference to her marriage, and how disabled women are doubly marginalised. Shubha is depicted as "weighing as a silent weight on her parents" because she was not married and her other two siblings were. Rabindranath Tagore's 'Shubha' is also a critique of societal norms and the alienation faced by those considered "different". Tagore's message is a compelling call for empathy and acceptance, encouraging readers to look past superficial distinctions and acknowledge the inherent value and unique modes of existence that lie beyond societal norms. It stands as a testament to the notion that genuine understanding surpasses verbal expression. Through Shubha, Tagore implies that society's disconnection from the 'other', whether it be a person with disabilities or nature itself, originates from a similar incapacity to move beyond its self-imposed limitations and adopt a more organic and relational existence.

Both 'The Homecoming' and 'Shubha', although their narratives differ, resonate the essential principles and ethical commitments of ecological humanism. Tagore's overarching vision, as conveyed through the experiences of his characters and their relationships with their environments, significantly anticipates the central ideas of this increasingly important

philosophical framework. He consistently highlights the need and impact of interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world, the inherent and irreplaceable value of all forms of life, both human and non-human, as well as the critical necessity of nurturing deep empathy, compassion, and a strong sense of ethical responsibility toward the environment that sustains life.

Tagore's notion of interconnectedness is vividly explored in his detailed depiction of the characters' deeply personal and often troubled relationships with their immediate surroundings. Phatik's intense suffering and eventual demise directly arise from his forced and traumatic separation from the nurturing natural world that he knows and cherishes, while Shubha discovers her only genuine solace, companionship, and sense of belonging in her deep and instinctive communion with the natural environment that welcomes her without judgment. Through these contrasting experiences, Tagore seems to suggest that the well-being of humans is strongly linked to the health and vitality of the surrounding environment. Any significant disruption of this delicate and essential balance can have manifold and devastating consequences for the humans. Shubha's compassionate bond with animals, especially cows, along with her acute awareness of the details in her natural surroundings, directly confronts the anthropocentric perspective that elevates humans above everything else. Through his sensitive depiction of Shubha's distinctive viewpoint, Tagore acknowledges that the natural environment possesses its own intrinsic value and dignity, completely independent of any perceived usefulness to humanity.

Tagore's unwavering focus on the ideals of empathy and deep compassion serves another foundational element of his humane and ecological vision. Both narratives evoke a strong sense of pathos for the protagonists' personal struggles, encouraging readers to connect with their painful journeys and to gain a deeper comprehension of their complex relationships with their environments. This empathetic involvement, nurtured through Tagore's detailed storytelling, fosters a heightened sense of ethical obligation towards both human and non-human beings, advocating for a more inclusive, compassionate, and ultimately sustainable worldview that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all living things.

Tagore's idea of ecological humanism is not just a simple sentimental or romanticized admiration for the beauty of nature, but it embodies an ethical and spiritual understanding of humanity's role within the universe. He firmly believed that genuine and enduring human satisfaction could only be attained through fostering a fundamentally harmonious and mutually

respectful connection with the natural environment, along with a deep acknowledgment of the intrinsic interconnectedness of all life forms. His extensive literary works frequently draw from the rich well of Indian philosophical traditions, highlighting the essential unity of all creation and the vital importance of living in harmony with the natural rhythms and wisdom of the earth. Through ‘The Homecoming’ and ‘Shubha’, Rabindranath Tagore provides an impactful ecological critique of the materialistic and alienating elements of modernity, presenting a compelling and lasting vision of ecological humanism that remains strikingly relevant even in the present-day context. These seemingly straightforward but richly layered narratives, written in the late 19th century, resonate with growing urgency regarding contemporary issues related to environmental degradation, widespread social alienation, and the critical necessity to nurture a more sustainable, compassionate, and ethically responsible relationship with the natural world that sustains all life. Tagore’s deep understanding, firmly grounded in his extensive spiritual and philosophical beliefs and expressed with extraordinary literary finesse, presents a timeless and ever more pressing message of optimism along with a strong plea for the establishment of a more balanced, sustainable, and ultimately more compassionate future for all forms of life. By carefully reflecting on these timeless narratives through a modern ecological perspective, we can achieve a richer and deeper comprehension of Tagore’s intellect and his vital role in the ongoing and increasingly urgent global conversation regarding humanity’s evolving relationship with the natural environment.

Hence, while Tagore’s humanistic ideals are widely acknowledged, this analysis uncovers his deep understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature, presenting a new aspect of his literary works and intellectual scope. By linking these 19th and early 20th century stories to present-day ecological issues such as displacement and alienation, the paper offers a significant historical perspective, indicating that these dilemmas are not exclusively contemporary. Utilizing the frameworks of ecological critique of modernity and ecological humanism, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, demonstrating how literary critique can enhance ecological discussions. It emphasizes Tagore’s advocacy for empathy and the inherent worth of all living beings, highlighting the ethical principles vital for fostering a sustainable future. By scrutinizing his critique of modernity and his emphasis on interconnection, it contributes to the ongoing conversation about achieving a sustainable and ethically sound future. By shedding light on Tagore’s ecological awareness, this paper offers important insights to both literary analysis and environmental humanities, underscoring the significance of his wisdom in addressing our current ecological concerns.

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