

Connecting the Toddler and the Timber- An Ecological Insight into Tagore's Short-Story "Balai"

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Abstract

An ecological insight guided by the spirit of universal oneness as sermonized in the Upanishads has been reflected in various poetry collections, plays and short stories of Tagore. Swayed with the very idea of forest colonies of great teachers in ancient India Tagore set up a school named Patha Bhavana in 1901 at Santiniketan. Tagore envisioned these forest colonies of great teachers as the abode of holistic coexistence of man and other natural creatures. This idea of integrity and holism has been replicated in the short story "Balai" which Tagore read out after the tree planting ceremony (briksharopan) on 14th July, 1928 at Santiniketan. "Balai" narrates the story of a child's kindred association with the natural world and the ethereal passage of his soul in the world of natural creatures generating the idea of oneness in the universe. In this paper I will venture into exploring how Balai and his natural world are interconnected having an inseparable entity. I will try to investigate whether Tagore's ecological concerns mirror the ecological paradigms of the ecologists of contemporary times or not. I will again study whether the age-old pantheistic mainstay of Indian philosophy drifted through the passage of time and sermonized among Indian intellectual world has stimulated Tagore's ecological concerns or not. It will attempt to set parallels between Tagore's ecological solicitude getting reflected in this short story with that of various thinkers of his time around the world.

Keywords: Integrity, togetherness, holism, ecological, nature, man, tree.

Introduction:

While commenting on Richard St. Barbe Baker, Jane Goodall in the introduction to *Man of the Trees- Richard St. Barbe Baker, The First Global Conservationist* observes that during his childhood days Baker went off into the forest and developed an intimate affinity with one particular tree. He standing close to her imagined that he had roots digging into 'deep down into Mother Earth' having her branches up above which had reached the sky. (Goodall, 2018). Long before the emergence of Richard St. Barbe Baker as 'Man of the Trees' and the formation of International Tree Foundation in 1922, a Bengali poet from Calcutta, Rabindranath Tagore had been developing connection with trees and Nature since his childhood. In his autobiography *My Reminiscences* Tagore recollects that when solitude has engulfed the water and entire atmosphere, his whole attention would be drawn to 'the shadows under the banyan tree'. It was as if an ancient dream-land escaping the

‘divine vigilance’ has touched the light of modern day. (Tagore, 1917). This idea of oneness and unification with Nature fostered within the poetic self would be echoed in his later writings. In the essay “The Creative Ideal” swayed with the essence of the *Upanishads* Tagore opines in favour of the inseparable existential unity among the cosmic elements-

“...this world is a creation; that in its centre there is a living idea which reveals itself in an eternal symphony, played on innumerable instruments...” (Tagore, 1922, The Creative Ideal Section, P.35)

An ecological insight guided by the spirit of universal oneness as sermonized in the *Upanishads* has been reflected in various poetry collections, plays and short stories of Tagore, like- *Banabani* (*The Message of the Forest*), *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*), “Balai” etc. Being an ardent critic of the prevalent education system for its ineptitude to deliver the lesson of harmonious coexistence with the universe Tagore turned his eyes to ancient *gurukul* system as a source of intellectual and spiritual incentive. Swayed with the very idea of forest colonies of great teachers in ancient India Tagore set up a school named *Patha Bhavana* in 1901 and a university named *Visva Bharati* in 1921 at Bengal hinterland Santiniketan. The motto of setting up a school modelled upon the ancient *gurukul* system was to engraft the idea of spiritual integrity with the fellow dwellers of the earth in the minds of modern students. Tagore envisioned these forest colonies of great teachers as the abode of holistic coexistence where students grew up along with pasture, trees, cattle and sunshine and inculcated the idea of integrity with other cosmic objects and could peer themselves not as any separate entity but as creatures living in God. This very idea of integrity and holism steered the poet’s creative faculty towards the celebration of *briksharopan* (tree planting ceremony) on 14th July, 1928 at Santiniketan. After the tree planting ceremony Tagore read out his new short story “Balai” to the audience, which was later published in the November-December 1928 issue of *Prabasi*. Tapobrata Ghosh in his introduction to *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* points out that in a letter written to Tejeshchandra Sen in 1926 Tagore says that his mute friends around his house ‘are raising their hands to the sky’. The image of a ‘mystic tree-like being’ is replicated in the character Balai. (Ghosh, 2000)

Ecology (the term was coined by German zoologist and naturalist Ernst Haeckel in 1866) is a branch of biological science which studies the relationship between the living elements and their environment. Ecological study can be applied in the field of human ecology which studies the relationship between human beings and their environment. Years after literary scholars pondered over developing a connection between ecological perspectives and literary criticism. They tried to dissect literary texts from ecological view points and also attempted to study how literature treated environment as its subject.

In this paper I will venture into exploring how Balai and his natural world are interconnected having an inseparable entity. I will try to investigate whether Tagore’s ecological concerns mirror the ecological paradigms of the ecologists of contemporary times or not. I will again study whether the age-old pantheistic mainstay of Indian philosophy drifted through the passage of time and sermonized among Indian intellectual world has stimulated Tagore’s ecological concerns or not. It will attempt to set parallels between Tagore’s ecological solicitude getting reflected in this short story with that of various thinkers of his time around the world.

Interconnectivity between Balai and His Natural World:

A profound, kindred intercourse of the poetic self with Nature has been time and again reflected in Tagore’s lines. In a letter written from Shazadpur in June, 1891 Tagore contemplates that a kind of scent coming out the grass and the heat from the ground have touched his body. He can feel the warm breathing of the ‘living Earth’ upon him. (Tagore, 1921)

In “Balai” read out on the very onset of *briksharopan* (tree planting ceremony) at Tagore’s *gurukul* at Santiniketan Tagore has depicted this perpetual coherence between man and Nature, the

credence long nurtured in the poetic self. In this story the character of Balai is not depicted as any separate entity associated with human society, not even as a companion to trees; rather Balai is presented as an integral part of natural world absolutely amalgamated with the trees. Tagore says,

“When layers of dark clouds gathered solemnly in the eastern sky, his entire soul seemed to fill with moist winds carrying the aroma of a forest during the rains... When the mango trees blossomed... an intense joy awoke in his bloodstream...” (Tagore, 2000, p. 255)

Balai is a child who wanders through the garden trying to reach deodar trees, rolls down the grassy slope treating them like human beings and the grass tickles his neck. Though the trees could not speak, Balai could have sensed their pulse; as if he is interacting with his forefathers. When he loiters in the garden in search of new sapling, he responds to them in such a way as if he is enquiring of their wellness. The saplings also in return enquire of Balai about himself. Balai is never trying to trespass into the natural world as a fringe. His journey into the natural world is the ethereal passage of one soul to another soul in the cosmic world developing the homogenous perception of the world despite their corporeal heterogeneousness. Tagore in his “Introduction” to *Creative Unity* points out to the untold mystery of unity in him having the ‘simplicity of the infinite’. The ‘One’ in him knows the ‘universe of the many’. This One’s knowledge of a tree is the ‘knowledge of a unity’ appearing in the persona of a tree. (Tagore, 1922, Introduction Section)

Balai’s kinship and solidarity with trees is not any compassionate cohabitation with trees or symphonia’s sojourn with natural beings; rather Balai’s cohesive coexistence with trees is the manifestation of the pantheistic monad in various particles. Tagore at beginning of the story observes-

“...we know that among the people around us, we find tacit hints of various forms of animal life. In fact, what we call ‘human’ is the trait in us which levels and combines all the animals in our selves- which puts the cow and the tiger in us in the same pen... Like a raga, it takes all the notes within its being and weaves them into a musical form...” (Tagore, 2000, p. 255)

Thus, Balai becoming the mouthpiece of Tagore does not treat nature objectively; rather Balai becomes the subject of his natural world. Balai and tress are not disintegrated existence; they are the quintessential substance of the composite order of the universe despite living in the terranean world of binary and dichotomy. Shampa Mondal in her article “Beyond Anthropocentrism: Reading the Inanimate in Tagore’s *Balai* and *Ghater Kotha*” rightly observes that Tagore’s treatment of nature is not static; he assumes and portrays it as a ‘sentient, participatory presence’ coexisting with human life. Nature is not ‘other’ but intimately ‘entangled with human emotion, memory, and consciousness’. (Mondal, 2025)

Balai’s inner soul is bruised at the sight of any tree being hurt. When his friends throw stones at the amla tress, snaps off a bakul branch or someone plucks flower from a tree, Balai cannot react instantly. He knows very well that none will be compassionate enough to his feelings; rather they will consider him crazy. Balai’s reluctance to react resembles the muted subsistence of the trees and thus Balai’s emotional suffering reflects the universal law of indistinctness and compassion. The short story “Balai” is the podium where Balai stands for the universal law of togetherness and his friends stand for the temporal law of binary and otherness. Here Tagore makes a sharp demarcation between the temporal and the terranean on one hand and the eternal and ethereal on the other. Balai’s consciousness of togetherness is but the perpetual effort of a man to reflect himself in the outside world. Tagore in his essay “The Artist” contemplates-

“The consciousness of the real within me seeks for its own corroboration the touch of the real outside me...According to the stages of our consciousness we have more or less

been able to identify ourselves with this world..." (Tagore, 1961, The Artist Section, p. 258)

Incongruence between the Postulates of Western Ecologists and Tagore's:

Rachel Carson while commenting on the evil effect on the environment examines the history of the life on earth as the history of 'interaction between living things and their surroundings'. Only in the present century the one species called man has acquired and exercised significant power to remodel the shape and nature of the world around him. (Carson, 1962)

In the western literary discourse human subject is associated with natural objects and there has been professed to bridge communication between these two. In this discourse human subject is accountable for both to control and nurture Nature. Natural objects are exploited and manifested through human lens. Christopher Manes in his essay "Nature and Silence" argues that as per the animistic viewpoint the natural world is 'inspired' and not only human beings but also animals, plants or even the inanimate objects like stones and rivers are intelligible subjects and can communicate with human beings. He again advocates to develop a series of environmental ethics to confront the silence in the natural world because this 'eerie silence' that surrounds the 'garrulous human subjectivity' steers the human subject to exploit Nature and to generate the ecological crisis which now requires the 'search for an environmental counterethics'. (Manes, 1996)

Toeing the same line with Christopher Manes, Lawrence Buell also examines the incongruous relationship between man and Nature as assumed in western literary circle. Buell in his book *The Environmental Imagination* reflects that in western society writing and reading were performed indoors as it was perceived that learning could not be done "without long shifts of attention away from the natural environment". He even points out that many amateur Thoreauvians (follower of David Thoreau) would find it strange that in Thoreau's *Journal* it has been stated that 'when the mind sees nature what it sees is its difference from nature'. (Buell, 1995)

But unlike Carson, Christopher Manes or Buell the environmentalists who objectifying Nature have delivered their apocalyptic conjecture, Balai is not the yield of civilizational crisis generated out of the conflict between man and Nature; rather Balai's cries and concerns are the upshot of the homogenising pattern of creation which seeks order through unification and reflects the relation between the progeny and the progenitor. Balai belongs to the age when the earth has been like a forest having no animals, no birds, no bustle of modern times. Balai belongs to the age when in the words of Tagore,

"The plant, speechless foster-mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny..." (Tagore, 2000, p. 257)

For Balai, mother earth and trees are neither the reservoir of natural resource being the genesis of sustainability nor their relationship is based on the didactic principles of environmental ethics of developing compassionate coexistence between man and Nature focusing on the postulate of sustainable development; rather for Balai they are the maternal cradle of vitality and their relationship is the umbilical conjunction driven with the perpetual principle of progenesis. Balai's attachment with the silk-cotton tree is not motivated with the ethical compulsion of fellow feelings generated out of environmental ethics. It is the spontaneous response of a mother to her child. To water the plant is not the urge to sustain the globe or to preserve it; it is the yearning of a mother to sustain his family. The care and concern which Balai bestows upon the sapling of silk-cotton tree, is generated out of the warmth of filiality which stimulates Balai to develop the alter ego within himself and to assume the role of a mother. Tagore narrates-

"...he had watered it every morning and evening, and eagerly kept track of its growth. Silk-cotton trees grow fast, but not fast enough to keep pace with Balai's enthusiasm.

When it had grown about two cubits high, Balai looked at its foliage and judged it to be an exceptional tree, just as any mother considers her child exceptional when it shows the first signs of intelligence." (Tagore, 2000, p. 257)

Where "Balai" reflects India's Pantheistic and Holistic Vision:

Tagore being an ardent apostle of Indian school of thought laden with the profound ideals of *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* time and again in his writings disseminates the idea of cosmic unity deeply rooted in Indian philosophical convention. In his essay "The Religion of the Forest" he explores the idea of cosmic unity. He says that the Indian sages have inscribed in the *Upanishads* the emancipation of soul lies in realising the 'ultimate truth of unity'. Though we, the people of India believe in the multiplicity of things, we realise the 'joy of our soul' lies in our union with the 'Infinite Soul'. That is why they have attained their fulfilment who have entered into all things ("sarvam eva vishanti"). Therefore the 'perfect relation' of natural beings with the world is the 'relation of union'. Even Indian classical literature also reflects the ideal of perfection preached by the forest dwellers of ancient India. (Tagore, 1922, The Religion of the Forest Section)

Again, in his essay "An Eastern University" he argues in defence of the organic unity of natural beings. He points out that there is the fundamental cognitive unity of human mind. When we, human beings understand this truth, it teaches us to 'respect all the differences in man' yet to 'remain conscious of our oneness' and to become aware of the fact that 'perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony'. (Tagore, 1922, An Eastern University Section)

The ultimate joy of the soul through developing harmonious unity with other fellow dwellers and the pneumatic and cognitive attachment with the saplings mirroring Tagore's precept of 'perfect relation' based on the 'relation of union' can best be manifest in the human propensity of Balai. Tagore describes-

"His dreamy eyes did not only look upwards. I have seen him walking in my garden, looking at the ground as if trying to find something. New saplings were coming out into the light with their curly heads, and he could not wait to see them... He could not decide how to express his camaraderie with the new green leaves." (Tagore, 2000, p. 256)

Echoing Tagore's idea of 'perfect relation' Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his book *Bhagavadgita* argues that the integral and undivided unity of the 'Supreme' or the Superpower is revealed through 'multiplicity of souls'. The unity is the ultimate 'truth' and the 'multiplicity' is merely the manifestation of it. (Radhakrishnan, 1948)

Vandana Shiva in her critically acclaimed book *Staying Alive* cites the concept of 'Aranyani' or the 'Goddess of the Forest' which has been considered as the primary source of 'life and fertility' and the model of 'civilizational evolution'. The human evolution has been measured in terms of his effort to mingle intellectually and spiritually with Nature and forest. Shiva also argues that earth's fertility has been articulated through the image of 'Vana Durga' or the 'Tree Goddess' in Bengal associated with the *sheora*, *sal* and *asvaththa*, in Assam it is named 'Rupeswari'. She again points out that all religions and cultures of the South Asian Region are deeply rooted in the forests, 'not through fear and ignorance but through ecological insight'. (Shiva, 1988)

The saplings even asked Balai about his mother. As Balai lost his mother at a very early age, he responds with a negation. Tagore narrates-

"'Where's your mother?' And Balai silently responded, 'I haven't got a mother.'" (Tagore, 2000, p. 256)

Balai's desperate attempt of humanizing the natural world should be an attempt of reclaiming the motherly care which is fervently associated with the image of 'Aranyani' the 'Goddess of the Forest' being the source of 'life and fertility' as pointed out by Shiva. Tagore who has lost his mother at an early age very much like Balai, also envisions Nature as the source of maternal care. For Tagore returning to Nature is but returning of a child to his mother. In another letter to Indira Devi from London in 1913 Tagore observes that during the month of Chaitra (March-April) the air becomes thick with 'the fragrance of mango-blossoms'. At this very moment he contemplates that when a child is full spirit, charm and zeal he does not think of his mother. When he becomes exhausted, he wants to 'nestle in her lap'. Tagore at the dusk of his life wants to nestle himself in the lap of Mother Earth. (Tagore, 1961, Letter to Indira Devi Section)

Balai has been emotionally drained and shattered when the grass-cutter has come and cut various weeds like- small creepers having violet and yellow flowers, a night-shade having blue flowers, numerous medicinal plants, a kalmegh, an anantamul, neem seeds sprouting into plants have been cleared by the weeding tool. Tagore says,

"None of them were prized trees of the garden; there was no one to listen to their protests." (Tagore, 2000, p. 256)

Balai's heartfelt imploration has been reined by his aunt with the excuse of weeding, when hugging his aunt and sitting on her lap he pleads-

" 'Please ask the grass-cutter not to cut down those plants of mine.' " (Tagore, 2000, p. 256)

While his aunt's argument of weeding is based on the fragmented and disintegrated idea of conflicting binaries, Balai's 'mine' does not imply the lexical connotation of materialistic possession; rather it is the resonance of the anguished attempt of the universe to regain the composite and holistic order out of the chaos.

Tagore's observation is reverberated in the views of Sri Aurobindo who while exploring the essence of Indian philosophy argues that all the religious sects and conflicting religious philosophies have universally admitted that the 'Spirit', 'universal Nature' which has often been described as 'Maya', 'Prakriti', or 'Shakti' and 'the soul in living beings, Jiva' are the three truths. There is always the perception from the Vedic times in Indian minds that the 'Supreme' is the 'Infinite' and the Infinite 'must always present itself in an endless variety of aspects.' (Aurobindo, 1997)

From this primordial mainstay it can be easily assumed that Balai and the trees are not unique and disintegrated entities; rather the manifestation of the Infinite 'in an endless variety of aspects', and their alliance is not the reflection of universal fraternity between heterogeneous beings based on the dichotomous perception of the world and worldly creatures. Instead, it is the reflection of the holistic, integrated and composite oneness of the universe.

Conclusion:

In his essay "The Relation of the Individual to the Universe" Tagore views.

"...in India it was in the forests that our civilisation had its birth... It was surrounded by the vast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her... Having been in constant contact with the living growth of nature, his mind was free from the desire to extend his dominion by erecting boundary walls around his acquisitions. His aim was not to acquire but to realise, to enlarge his consciousness by growing with and growing into his surroundings." (Tagore, 1915, p.4)

Laden with this very essence of ancient Indian forest civilization Tagore's short story "Balai" becomes the microcosm of India's civilizational manifestation, where Balai bears the archetypal image of man's metaphysical journey towards not only the celestial consonance but also the cosmogenic analogousness. When Balai leaves for Shimla, his uncle cuts the tree off. But it is the very image of the tree that haunts and prompts Balai all through the time. He urges his aunt to send a photograph of the grown-up tree which has already been cut off. It is not known to the reader whether Balai could become aware of the predicament of the tree or not. But that draws a pernicious stimulus in the life of his aunt. Tagore says,

"...when Balai's uncle removed forever the tree that Balai had loved so much, her whole world felt the blow, and her heart took a wound.

To her, that tree had been the image of Balai- his life's friend." (Tagore, 2000, p. 259)

Balai is not only the child of Nature grown along with the natural beings and developing affinity with them like the motherless child Willie Maddison of pre-First World War England in Henry Williamson's novel *The Beautiful Years* (Williamson, 1921) or the motherless child Sakuntala of ancient Indian hermitage in Kalidasa's play *Sakuntala* (Kalidasa), but also the reagent accountable for the metamorphosis of his aunt from her individual anthropoid identity to the quintessential emblem of Mother Earth fostering her child with perennial care and compassion. "Balai" is the testament of the quest of the galactic unity among the sub-astral substances where Balai, his aunt, the silk-cotton tree, the kalmegh, the grassy slope are merely the hieroglyphs of cosmic particles having the inherent and incessant cadence of connectivity among themselves resonating Romain Rolland-

"From the source to the sea, from the sea to the source, everything consists of the same Energy, of the Being without beginning and without end... Unity, living and not abstract, is the essence of it all." (Rolland, 1929, p. xvii)

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