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Tahader Katha, Environmental justice for the unwanted, in selected short stories of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract:
This paper seeks to study environmental justice of socially neglected and unidentified identities for ecological justice, presented in Rabindranath Tagore selected short stories. It will examine how ecological movements are being limited in some selected caste, category and gender movements, while some social identities remain undiscovered. The research will investigate four short stories of Rabindranath Tagore as, *Balai, Subha, Ghater Katha* and *Chuti* and explore how, a motherless boy , dumb girl , a river as collective history and a village boy, socially oppressed get their existence and emotional connection in Nature . By applying the theory of recognition by David Scholasberg, it will demand an identification of this narrative voices and their ecological justice .
Keywords: Rabindranath, Environmental Justice, Socially Oppressed ,Recognition, Narrative Voice .

Introduction

The ecological crisis of the present era has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges confronting humanity. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and pollution are not abstract phenomena; they manifest in the daily struggles of ordinary people—through declining agricultural yields, contaminated water, rising health risks, and forced migration. For millions, the crisis is not a distant scientific debate but a lived reality that shapes survival, identity, and cultural continuity.

However, recent studies and policy discourses often frame ecological suffering within rigid categories of class, caste, or community. While such frameworks are useful for highlighting structural inequalities, they risk obscuring the profound emotional and existential connections that individuals and groups maintain with nature

While mainstream eco-literature has often emphasized universalized visions of nature—whether sublime, restorative, or catastrophic—there exists a body of "silent ecological narratives" that articulate ecological realities from marginalized perspectives. These narratives, expressed through Indigenous oral traditions, Dalit writings, feminist eco-literature, and postcolonial texts, remain underrepresented in dominant literary canons. This paper-style discussion examines how such narratives express ecological consciousness, why they are marginalized, and what their recognition contributes to ecological justice.

The ecological crisis is not only environmental but also epistemic. Literature has long been a medium through which humanity negotiates its relationship with nature, yet dominant traditions often silence or marginalize voices that articulate ecological realities from positions of social vulnerability. These silent narratives are not absent; they are overlooked, excluded, or categorized as peripheral. Recognizing them is essential for broadening the scope of ecological discourse and for understanding how environmental degradation intersects with identity, culture, and survival.

Literature has always expressed humanity's relationship with nature, but its dominant traditions often silence marginalized ecological identities. Recognizing these silent narratives is crucial for ecological justice, as they expand our understanding of the crisis beyond universalized categories to include diverse, embodied experiences. In doing so, literature becomes not only a reflection of ecological realities but also a site of resistance against epistemic erasure.

Research Background:

Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate and cultural icon of the Bengal Renaissance, consistently wove ecological consciousness into his literary works. His poems, stories, and essays reveal a profound sensitivity to the rhythms of nature, portraying rivers, forests, and landscapes not merely as settings but as living presences intertwined with

human existence. This ecological vision anticipates modern ecocriticism, which studies the relationship between literature and the environment.

Tagore's poetry often celebrates the beauty of the natural world while emphasizing its spiritual and existential significance. In *Gitanjali*, for instance, rivers and skies are not passive scenery but symbols of continuity and transcendence. His short stories, such as *Ghater Katha* and *Chuti*, foreground the emotional and existential ties between people and their ecological surroundings. The river in *Ghater Katha* becomes a witness to human life and death, while the village ecology in *Chuti* shapes the identity of children, only to be disrupted by modern education. These works highlight Tagore's belief that human identity is inseparable from nature.

Critics have noted this ecological dimension in his writings. Aparna Ray and Hitkaran Singh Ranawat argue that Tagore's literary legacy unfolds "ecocritical dimensions" by depicting landscapes, rivers, and flora with remarkable detail, thereby cultivating ecological awareness through literature. Professor Sharif Atiquzzaman observes that Tagore's eco-consciousness was evident long before ecocriticism became a recognized discourse, suggesting that he believed literature could reduce environmental disasters by fostering ecological sensitivity. Similarly, Abhinav Dahiya emphasizes Tagore's stress on interdependence and interconnectedness of ecosystems, noting that his works consistently portray the necessity of sustaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Tagore's ecological vision was not limited to literature; it extended into his educational philosophy. At Santiniketan, he designed an open-air school where children learned in direct contact with nature, embodying his conviction that education must nurture ecological belonging. This stands in contrast to the Western model of modernist education, which often alienates children from their environment. His critique of industrial modernity and mechanization further underscores his ecological stance, warning against a society that ignores emotional and existential connections with nature.

Critically, Tagore's ecological writing can be seen as both celebratory and cautionary. While he exalts the beauty and spiritual depth of nature, he also laments society's failure to recognize its intrinsic value. Modernity, in his view, risks severing humanity from its ecological roots, leading to alienation and imbalance. Scholars have thus positioned Tagore as a precursor to ecological justice theories, where recognition of nonhuman identities and cycles is essential for sustainable living.

In conclusion, Rabindranath Tagore's literature embodies a profound ecological consciousness, blending poetic celebration with philosophical critique. His works remind us that rivers, forests, and landscapes are not mere resources but living entities with which humans share emotional and existential ties. Critics affirm that Tagore anticipated ecocritical thought, making his writings not only timeless literary achievements but also urgent ecological reflections for contemporary society.

Literature Review:

Scholarly research on Rabindranath Tagore increasingly foregrounds his ecological vision, situating him as a precursor to modern eco-critical thought. Aparna Ray and Hitkaran Singh Ranawat argue that Tagore's poetry consistently depicts landscapes, rivers, forests, and flora with ecological sensitivity, embedding environmental ethics within aesthetic expression. They note that while not all his works are explicitly eco-critical, his literary legacy reveals a sustained engagement with nature as both beauty and moral force.

Kumar Kishor Borah's ecocritical study emphasizes how Tagore's poems articulate "nature's voice," presenting the environment not as passive scenery but as an active participant in human life. Borah highlights that Tagore's poetry often negotiates cultural and environmental issues simultaneously, thereby linking ecological consciousness with broader social attitudes.

Md Siddique Hossain's research extends this perspective by analyzing Tagore's prose and drama, including *Balai* (1907), *Dui Pakhi* (1912), *Raktakarabi* (1925), and *Brikkha-Ropon* (1927). Hossain demonstrates that these texts portray nature as animate, ethical, and spiritual, while also critiquing industrial exploitation and its severing of human-nature bonds. He situates Tagore's ecological vision within sustainability discourses, noting its relevance to contemporary environmental ethics.

Across these studies, a consensus emerges: Tagore's ecological thought is holistic, integrating aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality. His works anticipate modern eco-critical frameworks by emphasizing reciprocity, sustainability, and resistance to industrial exploitation. Yet, scholars also point out that Tagore's ecological contributions remain underrepresented in mainstream eco-literary discourse, which often privileges Western Romantic or scientific

paradigms. This silence underscores the need for further research into Tagore's ecological philosophy as a vital component of global environmental humanities.

Theoretical Framework: Tagore's Ecology through Schlosberg's Theory of Recognition

David Schlosberg's influential work *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (2007) provides a multidimensional understanding of justice, moving beyond the traditional focus on distribution of environmental goods and burdens. He identifies four key dimensions: distribution, participation, recognition, and capabilities. Among these, **recognition** is foundational. Schlosberg insists that *"without recognition, there is no possibility of justice, as misrecognition denies the very existence of the subject as a participant in the community of justice"* (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 14). Recognition, therefore, is not simply symbolic; it is the condition for meaningful participation and equitable distribution.

Tagore's literary works resonate deeply with this dimension of recognition. His stories foreground characters whose ecological identities are socially neglected yet profoundly connected to nature. In *Balai* (1907), the motherless boy's love for trees exemplifies an ecological belonging that is invisible to social structures but demands recognition as a legitimate voice of justice. His bond with trees is not reducible to caste or class categories; it is existential, emotional, and ecological. Similarly, in *Subha* (1893), the mute girl's silent communion with rivers and landscapes illustrates how ecological identity can be expressed beyond language. Her marginalization—both as a woman and as someone denied speech—embodies Schlosberg's insight that justice must include recognition of identities excluded from dominant discourse.

Tagore's depictions of village boys and their ties to village ecology, as well as his reflections on ponds as lifelines for human communities, further demonstrate how everyday ecological practices of neglected groups articulate justice claims. These narratives insist that ecological justice must move beyond rigid categories of caste, community, and gender to acknowledge the lived, affective, and existential connections individuals form with their environments. As Schlosberg notes, *"Recognition is not simply about identity politics; it is about acknowledging the diversity of ways in which people experience and value the environment"* (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 18). Tagore's works embody precisely this demand: they call for recognition of silent ecological voices that mainstream justice frameworks often overlook.

By applying Schlosberg's recognition theory, Tagore's ecological vision can be understood as a literary articulation of justice for socially neglected identities. His characters demonstrate that ecological belonging is not only material but also emotional and existential, and that justice requires acknowledging these diverse forms of connection. The research gap lies in the limited application of recognition theory to literary analysis, particularly in non-Western contexts. Tagore's writings show that recognition is not only a political demand but also a cultural and literary one, where ecological justice requires acknowledging the silent narratives of marginalized individuals.

***Subha* : the language of Nature**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Subha* (1893) is a story where silence becomes both the mark of social exclusion and the medium of ecological belonging. Subha, a mute girl, is marginalized by her family and community because she cannot speak, and thus cannot fulfill the social expectations of communication, marriage, and domestic participation. Yet, her existence is sustained through her bond with nature. Rivers, trees, and landscapes become her companions, and nature alone "knows her language."

David Schlosberg's recognition framework in *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (2007) helps us see how Subha's ecological identity is denied legitimacy. Schlosberg argues: *"Without recognition, there is no possibility of justice, as misrecognition denies the very existence of the subject as a participant in the community of justice"* (p. 14). Subha's ecological voice—expressed through silence and communion with the environment—is invisible to her society. Her family sees only disability, not ecological belonging.

Tagore intensifies this misrecognition by withholding Subha's future from the reader. We are given no closure, no information about what happens to her after her marriage prospects collapse. This narrative silence mirrors the social silence around her ecological identity: she is forgotten by society, and even the reader is denied recognition of her continued existence. In Schlosberg's terms, Subha is doubly misrecognized—by her community and by the literary structure itself.

Seen through the lens of environmental justice, *Subha* dramatizes how socially neglected individuals articulate ecological belonging in ways that mainstream society refuses to acknowledge. Her survival depends on nature,

but because only nature understands her language, she remains unrecognized by human society. This aligns with Schlosberg's insight that *"Recognition is not simply about identity politics; it is about acknowledging the diversity of ways in which people experience and value the environment"* (2007, p. 18). Subha's silent communion with rivers and landscapes exemplifies precisely this diversity, demanding justice for ecological identities expressed outside dominant social norms.

***Balai* as an Ancient soul**

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Balai* (1907) is often remembered as a tender portrayal of a boy's love for trees. Yet, when read through David Schlosberg's recognition framework in *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (2007), the story becomes a profound ecological critique of society's selective valuation of nature and its silencing of ecological identities that do not conform to profit-driven norms.

Schlosberg argues that justice is multidimensional, encompassing distribution, participation, capabilities, and recognition. Among these, recognition is foundational: *"Without recognition, there is no possibility of justice, as misrecognition denies the very existence of the subject as a participant in the community of justice"* (2007, p. 14). Recognition requires acknowledging diverse ways in which individuals experience and value the environment, even when those experiences do not align with dominant social or economic structures.

In *Balai*, the boy's existence is shaped by his motherlessness, which intensifies his emotional dependence on the natural world. His bond with the **shimul tree** is existential rather than ornamental. He nurtures saplings, grieves when they are cut, and treats trees as companions. For Balai, the shimul tree is not simply vegetation but a surrogate for human relationships, a living presence that fills the void left by his absent mother. Yet, society does not recognize either Balai or the shimul tree. Adults dismiss his grief as childish sentimentality, and the tree itself is cut down because it does not yield profit or fit into utilitarian norms.

This reveals a double misrecognition. First, Balai's ecological identity is denied legitimacy because it cannot be structured into social expectations of childhood. Second, the shimul tree's ecological value is erased because it does not produce fruit or economic benefit. Society respects certain forms of nature—fruit-bearing trees, crops, or resources—while disregarding others. In doing so, it erases both the ecological identities of individuals like Balai and the intrinsic value of non-profitable nature. Schlosberg's framework helps us interpret this as injustice: the denial of recognition to ecological voices and values that do not conform to dominant norms.

Tagore's narrative critiques adult rationality and utilitarianism. By cutting down the shimul tree, the adults embody a worldview that sees nature only through the lens of profit and utility. Balai's grief, however, is a demand for justice—an insistence that ecological belonging must be recognized even when it cannot be commodified. His story anticipates contemporary debates in environmental justice, showing how silenced ecological voices—whether of children, marginalized individuals, or neglected communities—must be acknowledged to achieve justice.

Ghater Katha :

Rabindranath Tagore's another story, Ghater Katha also opens a new perspective of environmental justice. It is about a water body's connection to common village peoples lives . It narrates the daily lives and their bathing process and feels connected to them . Here the river recounts the past which change across the time and cycle of . The river sees how plants and birds lives coexisted in the bank of it and changes through time . The story talks about , a widowed girl Kusum , living close to nature finally died in the river, fulfill the cycle.

The theory recognition, demands identification of this characters and their emotional connection with nature . characters like Kusum,

Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghater Katha* (*The Story of the Riverbank*) is a remarkable meditation on the relationship between human beings and nature. Narrated by the *ghat*—the stone steps leading down to the river—the story transforms the riverbank into a living witness of human joys, sorrows, and rituals. This narrative strategy anticipates David Schlosberg's theory of recognition, which argues that justice must extend beyond material distribution to include acknowledgment of identities—human and nonhuman alike. Through this lens, Tagore's river is not merely a physical setting but a subject with its own existence, memory, and voice.

Schlosberg insists that recognition involves seeing the environment as an active participant in human life. Tagore embodies this idea when the ghat reflects: *"How many have sat upon me, how many have wept, how many have laughed, and how many have gone, never to return."* The riverbank here is not passive stone; it is a repository of human presence, a keeper of memory. The river sees life unfold on its banks—marriages, farewells, rituals of

bathing—and becomes inseparable from the identities of those who inhabit it. This recognition of the river's identity highlights the emotional and existential connection between people and place.

The death of Kusum in the river deepens this connection. Her drowning is narrated not as an isolated tragedy but as part of the eternal rhythm of life and death. The ghat recalls: *"She came to me with laughter, she left me in silence, and the river carried her away."* Kusum's death suggests the cycle of existence, where human life is reclaimed by nature. Schlosberg's ecological justice framework helps us see this as recognition of another type of existence—the river as a living entity that embodies continuity, memory, and renewal. Kusum's passing is absorbed into the river's identity, reminding us that human lives are inseparable from ecological processes.

Tagore's river thus represents more than a backdrop; it is a subject with its own form of existence. Schlosberg's theory allows us to interpret this as a call to recognize nonhuman identities. The river exists as a witness, a participant, and a cycle of renewal. It holds human stories yet transcends them, offering another type of existence—one that is collective, cyclical, and enduring. By listening to the river's voice, Tagore invites us to acknowledge the deep emotional and existential ties between humanity and nature, ties that modern societies too often ignore. In doing so, *Ghater Katha* becomes not only a literary reflection but also an ecological philosophy: recognition of the river's identity is recognition of life itself.

Modern society, however, frequently overlooks this emotional and existential bond with the natural world. In the pursuit of industrial progress and urban expansion, rivers are reduced to mere resources—channels for water supply, transport, or waste disposal—rather than recognized as living entities with histories and identities. This neglect reflects what Schlosberg critiques as a failure of recognition: the inability to acknowledge the intrinsic value and voice of nonhuman nature. Tagore's *Ghater Katha* reminds us that the river is not simply matter but memory, not only flow but witness. By ignoring such connections, societies risk severing themselves from the cycles of existence that sustain meaning and continuity. Kusum's death in the river illustrates how human life is absorbed into ecological rhythms, yet modern perspectives often erase this truth, treating death as isolated rather than part of a larger cycle. To recognize the river's identity is to restore a sense of belonging and humility, acknowledging that our existence is intertwined with the enduring presence of nature.

Chuti:

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Chuti* (*The Holiday*) is a poignant exploration of childhood, freedom, and the deep bond between village children and their natural surroundings. The protagonist, Phatik, is a restless boy whose life in the village is filled with play, mischief, and an intimate connection with rivers, fields, and the rhythms of rural ecology. His eventual displacement to the city for education, however, becomes a narrative of alienation. David Schlosberg's theory of recognition provides a powerful lens to understand this tension: the failure of society to recognize the emotional and existential ties between children and nature, and the imposition of modernist education that severs those ties.

Schlosberg argues that justice is not only about distribution of resources but also about recognition of identities—human and nonhuman. In *Chuti*, the village environment is central to Phatik's identity. His games by the river, his quarrels and reconciliations with friends, and his carefree wanderings are inseparable from the ecology of the village. The natural world is not a backdrop but a participant in his childhood. Yet, when Phatik is sent to the city for schooling, this recognition is denied. The modernist concept of education treats children as subjects to be disciplined and molded, ignoring their emotional and existential connection with the environment that nurtured them.

Tagore's narrative highlights the consequences of this denial. In the city, Phatik feels suffocated, unable to adapt to the rigid structures of school and the indifference of urban life. He longs for the riverbanks and open fields of his village, expressing a yearning that society refuses to acknowledge. Schlosberg's framework helps us see this as a failure of recognition: the child's identity, deeply rooted in ecological belonging, is ignored in favor of abstract ideals of progress and modernity. The emotional cost is profound—Phatik's health deteriorates, and his spirit breaks under the weight of separation.

The story thus critiques a society that is not ready to accept the existential truth that children are bound to nature. By privileging Western models of education, which emphasize discipline and detachment from ecological life, society enforces a separation that is both emotional and existential. Tagore's portrayal of Phatik's decline is a reminder that ignoring these connections leads to injustice—not only to individuals but to the cultural and ecological fabric of communities. Schlosberg's theory underscores that recognition must extend to these ties:

justice requires acknowledging that children's identities are formed in relation to nature, and that severing this bond is a form of harm.

In conclusion, *Chuti* becomes a narrative of ecological injustice. Phatik's displacement illustrates how modern education, shaped by Western ideals of progress, disregards the emotional and existential existence of children within nature. Through Schlosberg's lens, the story calls for recognition of these connections, urging society to value the ecological identities of its children. Tagore's vision is clear: without recognizing the bond between childhood and nature, education risks becoming an instrument of alienation rather than growth.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the undermine narrative voices in ecology demanding emotional and existential justice . It shows how literature can play a vital role in portraying the social inequality . It gives new research way to find the undermined voices and their realizations of nature. Our present day society need to realize their presence and view can offer new definition of ecology and human identity. Furthermore, literature demands identities like, a dumb girl, local village boy, some ecological place and nature loving boy to understand a reality of existence and survival.

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