

## Sameness Connecting ‘Ecosophy’ With The Natural Self Of Bolai In The Short Story “Bolai” By Rabindranath Tagore

**Mantu Ghosh**

Ph.D. Research Scholar  
 Department of English  
 Lalit Narayan Mithila University  
 Darbhanga, Bihar, India

### Abstract

We have been living through our mechanical life without any pulse of nature. Environment is the prime root of the universe. Our ancient civilization was started under tree. But we have forgotten the indigenous relation between nature and man cutting the trees indiscriminately being too much absorbed in the ‘Materialistic’ desire as shaped by Arthur Sopenhauer. It is the guidance of nature that our human civilization has been flourished. The ungrateful, materialistic thought and desire of human being have been ruining the relationship between man and nature. We need to establish a reciprocal, symbiotic togetherness between the two. We have to understand the core of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose's remarkable dictum plants too have life. Rabindranath Tagore's famous short story ‘Bolai’ represents the value of the natural vegetation like Shimul tree, grass, saplings, green leaves, flowers for their matchless beauty, love for nature, tenderness and the spiritual world of biosphere. My present paper seeks to find out a ‘Ecosophical connection’ of the natural environment with the ‘Ecological Self’ of Bolai. We have to understand that nature never betrays. Later this very theme is echoed by William Wordsworth’s poem ‘The World is Too Much With Us,’ O Henry’s short story ‘The Last Leaf’ and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Bengali short story ‘Mahesh’.

**Key Words :** Ecosophy, Deep Ecology, Mother Nature and Tree Time, Oneness, Pancha Mahabhutas.

### Introduction

In the history of the literary world Rabindranath Tagore, an image of eminence, who does not need any introduction as such, a prolific poet, short story writer, novelist, literary scholar, political philosopher and celebrated personality. He has inherited adoration and love for nature from his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. He says in his ‘Reminiscences’ Just as he (Tagore’s father) allowed him to wander the mountains at will, so (father) left free to select his path in the quest for truth. Tagore viewed nature through the prism of Truth. Nature naturally looks most beautiful and its impact is universal. As John Keats says “a thing of

beauty is joy forever" (a remarkable line of poetry from Keats's famous poem *Endymion*) is personally experienced by Tagore in nature. His search for truth once again also confirms the invention of John Keats in his famous poem 'Ode to Grecian urn', i.e. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."<sup>1</sup>

With all its traditional past and natural phenomena, India best represents the Ecological diversity within the context. Tagore's masterpiece short story 'Bolai' deals with the symbiotic relationship of nature and literature which signals out deep Ecology, the bio-centric treatment of the universe. 'Deep Ecology'<sup>2</sup> belief is that human must radically change their relationship with nature. It is called sometime an 'Ecosophy'<sup>3</sup> that offers a definition of the self; i.e 'The Ecological self that differs from the traditional self.' 'Bolai' is an example of best nature writing short story that shows sensibilities and spiritual oneness with nature. 'Bolai' can be said to be the best nature loving character in any work of literature. "My nephew Bolai, my brother's son: in his nature, somehow, the fundamental notes of plants and trees sounded the loudest. Right from childhood he had the habit of standing and staring silently not exploring places like other boys. When the dark clouds massed themselves in layers in the eastern sky, it was as if his soul became dense with the most fragrance of the forest in July; when the rain came thrumming down, his whole body would listen to what it said. When the sunshine lay on the roof in the afternoon, he walked about bare-chested, as if gathering something into himself from all the sky. When the mango trees bloomed in the month of Magh, a deep happiness would enter his blood in memory of something inexpressible; his inner nature would spread itself in all directions, like a grove of sal trees flowering in Phalgun, would become suffused, become deeply colored."<sup>4</sup>

The discussion about context of Bolai would remain unfulfill, if it is not discussed about Jagadish Chandra Bose, the philosopher scientist and his historical discovery, plants too have life, in 1900. Jagadish Chandra Bose was a close association of Tagore. In the book 'Abyakto' (The Unexpressed, 1920) there was an essay named 'Bigyane Sahitya' (Literature in Science), in which he wrote a section called 'Brikkho Jiboner Itihash' ('History of Trees' Biography).

There is a connection between this wide kingdom of plants, expanded in front of our eyes, and us. Prolific scholars of botany deny that. Famous scientist Sanderson argued except two to four varieties of trees. Common trees do not reciprocate at the call of external stimulations, even if they get hurt. Problems in plants' lives are not easy to understand. So far, there had been no sensitive technological inventions which can address those problems of their lives. Due to that reason very often, we have to rely on fantasies and try to get the result from direct observation. To make that possible, one has to question the trees themselves and trees would write their own scripts. These scripts can only be considered as proof of such experiment.

The word 'Abyakto', had also been used in the story to explain that unexpresses memory of excitement, which Bolai feels, when he gets to see mango flowers in the trees at the end of 'Magh' (Bengali month of winter). So Tagore wrote this story, dedicating to Bose, and read out on (an occasion) the purpose of harvesting festival in Shantiniketan.

Tagore writes, when Bolai "saw the green grass that covered the slope all the way down to our house he was delighted. He didn't think the coverlet of grass was any fixed thing; he felt it was a playful, rolling mass, always rolling down. Often he would climb

up the slope and roll down himself - his entire body itself became grass- and as he rolled, the blades of grass would tickle the back of his neck, and he would laugh out loud.”<sup>5</sup> American director James Cameron has designed this kind of Ecosophical relationship in his famous movie ‘Avatar’ where the indigenous natives of Pandora linked their soul with the plant - the Mother Tree. The movie ‘Avatar’ uses the image of the Navi - homogenized indigenous people and their relationship with the nature to put forward a message of environmentalism. Cameron applies the concept of ‘Ecological Indian’ trope in his portraiture of the Navi through the homogenization, essentialization and naturalization of indigenous people.

Arne Naess, Norwegian Philosopher, coined the term ‘Deep Ecology’ and he first understood the instrumentalist, anthropocentric view of nature. Being subject of nature, humanity has led deforestation causing destruction of primordial life. Vandana Shiva termed this as ‘maldevelopment’, which is founded on some binary relationships like as - Public/Private, Mind/Body, Objective/Subjective, Colonizer/colonized and culture/Nature. Rabindranath Tagore magnificently based the idea of ‘Deep Ecology’ in his short story ‘Bolai’, which is unparalleled for its tenderness, charm and beauty to nature. According to him the dichotomy of human/nature relationship should be responsible and emotional. It should not be merely a rational – intellectual one. Bolai, the eponymous main character, is passionate about nature. Without it, he remains incomplete. Nature is the source of his happiness and sorrow. It is an integral part of the little boy's life. Nature is a living being to Bolai like “After the night's rains, the early morning sun would peer over the mountain tops, and its pale golden rays fell on the deodar forest; and without telling anyone he'd go quietly and stand awestruck in the motionless shadows of the deodars, his body thrilling all over, as if he could see the people within this gigantic trees -- they wouldn't speak, but they seemed to know everything, these grandfathers from long ago...”<sup>6</sup>

Nature is always unselfish. It always helps the mind which worships it. In the famous poem ‘Tintern Abbey’ William Wordsworth writes – “...Nature never did betray The heart that loved her;”<sup>7</sup> To him the equation between nature and universe is that all is in God and God is in all. More than his life he worships flowers, hills, brooks, rivers, trees - the natural environment. In a very typical form Nature's mysticism is expressed in the poem of famous poet William Wordsworth's lines.

... "Therefore am I still  
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
 And mountains; and of all that we behold  
 From this green earth ...”<sup>8</sup>

Tree is our life. We can't live without tree. So it is our duty to preserve them. It brings cloud and rain for us. Mother nature is very proud for her green trees, covered with green leaves and foliage. Famous Bengali poet Shakti Chattopadhyay's writes in his famous poem ‘Ami Dekhi’-

“Gachgulo tule ano  
 Bagane basao  
 Amar darker shudhu gach dekha.”<sup>9</sup>

Tree brings green world of spirituality. Sumana Roy, a well-known contemporary Bengali writer, sketches the necessity of this bonding – with plants in her book ‘How I

became a tree'. It is the story of transformation from 'Ecosophical' to 'spiritual' one. She likes to live to 'Tree time'. Trees have their own time zone and they don't bother about the clock time. They stand at one place and grow taller and higher. They are without any hurry to reach anywhere. New leaves, new branches come and old ones leave the place for new ones. They are without any complaint against the wind of non-movement and loneliness. In this book author's longing to become a tree emerges as an inspiration for every individual, as

- \* Their intimate connection with the earth.
- \* Their capability to cope with the loneliness.
- \* Non enmity of trees, simplicity of life.
- \* Trees interlink us to others and also the past or future.
- \* Trees are non violent being.
- \* They produce all of us the basic necessities of valuable O<sub>2</sub>, food, clothes and herbs etc.

Rabindranath Tagore portrays nature in the short story, 'Bolai' like a mother (nature). Mother nature is the personification of motherhood, fertility, creation – and destruction or one who can be regarded as the co-soul of nature. Thus the natural world is the direct reflection of the divine as all animate and inanimate created forms emerge from the womb of the cosmic mother. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Puranas contain the earliest message for environment preservation and ecological balance. According to the Hindu theology nature is the manifestation of the Goddess and nature should be treated with respect. With all ecological aspects, Tagore has paid homage to the natural environment. We can see the devotion towards nature in the following words of Ascetic:

"It hurt him whenever someone plucked a flower from a plant. But he realized his concern meant nothing to anyone else. So he tried to hide his pain. Boys his age would throw stones to knock amlokis off the tree; he couldn't speak, he turned his face and walked away. To tease him, his companions would stride down the garden, slashing with a cane at the rows of shrubs on either side, in an instant would break a branch off the bokul tree; he was too ashamed to cry, lest someone think it madness."<sup>10</sup>

Hence Bolai is doing the 'duty' to protect the environment and is maintaining the fundamental laws of universe and it is called Dharma while protecting the 'Subaltern'<sup>11</sup> i.e. the trees and the environment because they can neither speak, nor protest. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, a famous writer, has shown a deep sympathy towards the cow, by name Mahesh in his tragic short story Mahesh. The author loves the cow (Mahesh) like a son.

Notable Bengali poet, lyricist, music director and singer, Anupam Roy sings the same 'Ecosophical' connection with trees and he beautifully tunes it - "Ebare Morley Gachh Hawbo Ami," which indicates 'After death I shall become a tree'. The song is with the first stanza –

"Ebare Morele Gachh Hawbo ami  
 Shobuj shara gaaye  
 Ebare morle gach habo ami  
 Dariye Khali paaye."<sup>12</sup>

The above lines exemplifies the inner meaning of living to the Deep Ecology and Tree Time. He wants to become a tree, with all the green in his body after death striving

to link himself 'ecosophically' with the nature and likes the simple way of living. Other stanza of the song-

“Maatir khabar shekor chene Shokto kore rakhe  
 Ek thikanay bochor bochor Opekshate thake.”<sup>13</sup>

This line explores to us few valuable issues like 'Patience', 'Waiting', 'Determined' and 'Will-to- survive' existence of trees. The reciprocal relationship between root and soil is organic. They are living and helping one another symbiotically. They are standing with waiting eternally at the same place year after year.

In the short story 'Bolai', Tagore writes new seedlings as a form of nature and Bolai mutually understood one another. "I often saw him walking in my garden with his head bowed, searching for something. He was impatient to watch the new seedlings lift their curly heads towards the light. Every day he would bend low to them, as if asking: "And now what? And now what? And now what?"<sup>14</sup> In Hindu context Dharma is often described as duty. It can be interpreted as a responsibility to take care for the earth and the natural environment. Our nature treatment affects directly our 'Karma' "Pancha Mahabhutas"<sup>15</sup> (The five great elements - Air, Space, Fire, Water and Earth). To 'Mahabharata' "Pancha Mahabhutas" create a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and the interrelation of the cosmos and the human body. According to Hinduism, the human body is composed of and related to these five elements, and links each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human tongue is related to water, nose to earth, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This connection between the elements and our senses is the foundation of our human relationship with natural world.

The concept 'Yajna' is introduced by Lord Sri Krishna in the 'Gita'. 'Yajna' means sacrifice. Lord Shri Krishna speaks of many types of 'Sacrifice' like 'Yogic – sacrifice,' 'Austerity-sacrifice,' 'Wealth-sacrifice' and 'Knowledge sacrifice'. To Him one must sacrifice for the welfare of society. The result is that the entire world of animals and human beings are interrelated in such a magnificent harmony that it will be not possible for any being to survive in separation besides depending upon the rest. We should adopt a policy of mutual 'give-and- take.' "The self is the nucleus which can enlarge itself and embrace the whole world, with heart and mind in an intimate communion."<sup>16</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore has drawn remarkable aspect of 'Mother Nature'<sup>17</sup> by giving it human qualities in the short story 'Bolai'. He writes about the trees, leading all other creatures on the path of time, raised their hands to the sun and said "I shall stay, I shall survive, I am the eternal pathfinder, after death and amidst death, endlessly, I continue my pilgrimage of growth, my journey in sun and cloud, through night and day."<sup>18</sup>

Bolai's deep sensibility towards nature is really unparallel. Tagore airs his grievance that the common people are unaware of saving nature which should be given topmost, priority. The story with its ecological tone reaches its culmination when Bolai is dead-set against the removal of a Shimul (red silk-cotton) sapling that was taking root in the pathway. The boy prevents against attempts to uproot the unwanted tree. Bolai said, "No. Kaka, please don't, I beg you, don't have it uprooted."<sup>19</sup>

The tree is saved, for the time being. Next Bolai has to go to London to study with his father. But he could hardly forget his beloved tree. Later he asks his Kaka to send a picture of the tree. But alas! As the tree was getting in the way of passers-by the tree had



been cut down. This incident occurred without the knowledge of Bolai's Kaki (aunt). She mourns greatly the loss of the tree, on finding out. She cherished the tree as a replacement for Bolai, whom, she had affection and love like as her own son. The Shimul tree, in the absence of Bolai, is no longer a mere tree. It takes on the form of human character.

Thus we find the narrow mindedness of human being to nature. We harm nature. Sometimes even we try to kill them. On the other hand mother nature only gives and never betrays. 'Mother Nature' works uninterruptedly and unselfishly without expectation of any reward. A great mysterious cosmic law 'Yajna' is going on in nature without any sort of discontinuity. The earth revolves round the Sun around days and nights of all the year round without the slightest rest. The air has been blowing and will continue to do so for all time. Likely fresh water keeps constantly flowing into the river, fruits and vegetables grow afresh in plants and trees. Rabindranath Tagore has deliberately paints the character of Bolai, as lover of nature. He has also drawn a symbiotic relationship between human and non human. We should look at nature not for reward but an act of devotion.

"The Mahabharata's understanding of the nature of humanity would be incomplete without some references to the divinity of the self within. In the teachings of the Upanishads perpetuated in the Vedanta system of Philosophy, emphasis is laid on the oneness of the individual Atman with the supreme Brahman."<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

'Oneness' of the Universe talks definitely about the relationship between the supreme being (Brahman) and the human soul (Atman). Concept of 'equality of many' is transcended by oneness. The subjective self or life and the objective realm or world are separate aspects of same entity. Bolai's relation with the natural environment is intrinsic one and highlighted with the concept of 'oneness.' To Swami Vivekananda –

"The Background, the Reality, of everyone is that same Eternal, Ever Blessed, Ever pure, and Ever Perfect one. It is the Atman, the soul in the saint and the sinner, in the happy and the miserable, in the beautiful and the ugly, in men and in animals; it is the same throughout it is shining One."<sup>21</sup>

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(Actually this short story is written and narrated in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore for Barsha-Utsab, a festival to celebrate the onset of rains in Santiniketan. It is translated in English accurately by Prasenjit Gupta, translator, writer and fulbright scholar and published in Parabass, September 9, 2002.)
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