

# The Voice of the Ghat: An Ecocritical Reading of The Ghat's Story by Rabindranath Tagore

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## Abstract:

Authors, poets, and artists, since the beginning of time have taken inspiration from the non-human organic elements to create something new. This very relationship between nature and man is explored through the concept of ecocriticism. More recent ecocritical scholarship has led to include several other related concerns such as sustainability, postcolonial ecologies, and environmental justice. In the literary corpus of Rabindranath Tagore, the ecological sensitivity of the author is reflected. While most of such evaluation predominantly focused on *Gitanjali* and other canonical poetic works, this paper seeks to analyze his short fiction, "The Ghat's Story" (*Ghāter Kathā*) that embodies the ecological sensibilities within everyday rural life and foregrounds the river Ganga not merely as a sacred symbol, but as a living being that shapes memory, identity, and ethical meaning.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, human, nature, Ganga

## Introduction:

Man is one with nature. From their existence, till after death, and everywhere in between, humans have owed their lives to nature. Yet in the discourse of academic studies, the dialogue between human and nature seldom finds the centre stage. Authors, poets, and artists, since the beginning of time have taken inspiration from the non-human organic elements to create something new. This very relationship between nature and man is reflected in literature as well. This approach is called ecocriticism. To state bluntly, it examines the relationship between literary texts and the physical environment, analyzing how literature represents, interrogates, and ethically engages with the non-human world.

The term was first introduced by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" to describe the application of ecological concepts to literary analysis. Later in the 1990s, with the growing recognition of environment and civilization debate, ecocriticism emerged as a coherent field within humanities. Cheryll Glotfelty offers one of the most influential definitions of the discipline, where he describes ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." It focuses on an earth-centred perspective that challenges anthropocentric modes of reading (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Expanding on this definition, Lawrence Buell argues that ecocriticism approaches literature "as if the environment mattered," thereby linking literary representation with environmental ethics, ecological imagination and cultural responsibility (Buell 7).

More recent ecocritical scholarship has led to include several other related concerns such as sustainability, postcolonial ecologies, and environmental justice. This led to the understanding that nature is deeply intertwined with historical, social, and cultural power structures (Zapf 136). Literary texts that shape

human civilization also reflect the environmental and cultural ethos, thereby playing an important role in promoting ecological consciousness among the masses.

Within the literary corpus of Rabindranath Tagore, nature appears not as a passive backdrop but as an agent with its own voice. It is an entity that engages with human subjectivity and cultural identity. Critical writings on Tagore have pointed out his ecological sensitivity, which is manifested through a critique of anthropocentrism, the interconnectedness between human and non-human life, and a philosophical expression of ecological coexistence (Borah 1379). However, ecocritical scholarship on Tagore has predominantly focused on *Gitanjali* and other canonical poetic works, leaving his short fiction relatively underexplored. His short fiction, "The Ghat's Story" (*Ghāter Kathā*) offers significant scope for an ecocritical analysis as it embodies the ecological sensibilities within everyday rural life and foregrounds the river Ganga not merely as a sacred symbol, but as a living force that shapes memory, identity, and ethical meaning.

### Literature Review:

Ecocritical scholarship positions Tagore overwhelmingly as a somewhat visionary ecological thinker whose works both predate and predict many of today's environmental debates, with a holistic, spiritual approach to nature itself, a critique of the exploitative attitude of modernity, and an appeal for sustainability that is considered out of time and urgently relevant (Biswas 40; Varghese 255). Although some research has highlighted how Tagore's ecological philosophy has roots in spirituality and culture rather than scientific environmentalism, this is seen rather positively, for it provides a more holistic approach to ecological awareness (Hossain 13).

It is to be noted that several scholars have explored his works such as *Gitanjali*, *Stray Birds*, and *The Crescent Moon*, that express a vision of spiritual unity with nature. They advocate for a thoughtful, sustainable relationship with the environment, and thus reinforces ecological consciousness among the readers (Jha 89). Nevertheless, some critical voices point to the potential insufficiency of Tagore's approach in dealing with the complexities of the current environmental crises (Bhutani et al. 285).

Scholars have attempted a more genre-specific reading of his works as well. Scholars have not confined themselves to a generalized and broad ecocritical reading. Rather, his plays such as *Raktakarabi*, *Muktadhara*, *Red Oleanders*, short stories, and essays are analyzed for their ecofeminist, eco-ethical, and socio-ecological themes. Thus, his works are blend of both aesthetics and activism, aligning with the modern concepts of deep ecology and cultural sustainability (Ghosh 28).

Apart from this, his works are also studied as a critique of modernity, materialism and colonialism. He warns against the vices, and the cost of modern human civilization and advancements, placing him as one of India's earliest ecological philosophers at an odd with the technological and industrial modernity (Shrivastava 125). For such an intensive understanding to Tagore's ecological thought, academicians have mostly focused on his canonical works, as well as on, Shantiniketan, his abode. This leaves aside most of his short fiction, and lesser-known poetical works open for discussion. As such, despite its distinctive narrative voice and ecological imagination, "The Ghat's Story" remains largely absent from ecocritical scholarship.

The story, narrated by the bank of a river ghat along the Ganga, provides agency, memory, and emotional depth to a non-human entity, thus challenging anthropocentric narration and foregrounding ecological witnessing. This lacuna in received scholarship brings into sharp focus the need for a focussed ecocritical reading that examines how the story articulates ecological consciousness, relational identity, and

environmental empathy. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by situating "The Ghat's Story" within ecocritical discourse, showing how Tagore's short fiction meaningfully contributes to the findings of the contemporary environmental humanities.

### Analysis:

One of the defining features of "The Ghat's Story," which is ecocritically significant, is that it has a non-human narrative voice. Tagore brings in a voice that is non-human in "The Ghat's Story." He gives his narrative voice to a river ghat. This is a very significant aspect because it breaks the mold of a story that is human-centred. "If events were etched in stone, you could have read many stories of many ages on each of my steps." The ghat of the Ganga is personified, presenting it as a living archive. Nature, here, is not silent. It records history quietly.

The ghat has a long history in terms of its perspective, while human existence is ephemeral. It remarks that unlike humans, for whom time so much of time has passed, for the ghat, "it seems just the other day." Ecological time is cyclic rather than linear, and it encompasses a holistic, rather than human-centric, perspective (Buell). By allowing the ghat some capacity for sight as well as some voice, Tagore makes the non-human world an active participant in the realm of human culture, an essential tenet of ecocritical theory (Glotfelty and Fromm).

The river Ganga is the framework of the ecological cycle of the story. The river with its cyclic pattern of fullness and emptiness has moulded the terrain and the memory of the ghat. The ghat remembers a phase "when the Ganga was full. Only four of my steps were left above water," which is a moment when "land and water had embraced." The river is unconfined. The river floods. Further, the ghat equates its own aging process with that of the river's movement: "Every day the Ganga moves a step further away from me; every day I too become a step older." Man-made and natural things share an equal process of aging. This is also an indicator of an ecologic perspective that regards culture and nature as co-dependencies on each other. Time thus runs in an equivalent manner to that of the river in the story.

The ghat shares its life with the people who lived nearby. In the story, man becomes inseparable from the river's ecosystem, as is true in real life. It is only in relation to the ghat and the Ganga that one sees the boatmen, women, priests, and children. The boatmen "uttering Lord Rama's name, released the boats"; women arrive "in ones and twos to draw water." Religious ritual, daily labour, social interaction among women and children, all unpack within an ecological space.

The ghat remembers generations of women, silently watching a young girl grow into a grandmother. The aloe-leaf floating child has grown old, but her instinctive actions are recalled like before. These kinds of minutest acts linger on in its memory, though human life passes by. This is ecological memory, where the place retains the experience even when the individual lives are long forgotten. Here, identity is placed-based rather than solely personal.

The closest relation between human and nature can be experienced through the central human character 'Kusum.' In the story, her identity revolves around the Ganga. From her childhood, through her youth, and her ultimate death, she maintains a close affinity with the river and the ghat. "There was a strange affinity between her heart and the water. She loved the water."

In a relational ecocritical identity, Kusum's selfhood develops through a sustained engagement with the natural world. In fact, in the moment when Kusum is married away, she is removed from the ghat, which uses the potent ecological vision. She is uprooted from her base, like a lotus out of water: "It was as if a

lotus had been taken out of the water to be planted on the land." In effect, Kusum is removed from nature, so she dies emotionally. It is a moment that is both social and ecological.

After Kusum's widowhood, she is able to return to the side of the river. The ghat feels her arrival even before she is in sight. It realizes the absence of the anklets and comments that "the evening murmur of the waters sound melancholy." Nature is sympathetic to the pain of humans. This is one of the important concepts offered by ecocriticism, where the natural world is participates in emotional human experience. The non-human agency is reflected strongly throughout the story. The roots of the peepal tree "grasp my cracked stone soul," while moss and weeds are seen to bear testimony to history. It is observed that all beasts and birds, frogs, wind, moonlight, and water all show response to actions in this story. The ghat also proclaims that had a single leaf from the young peepal tree been removed, "I felt the pain as my own." Such instances deconstruct the binary distinctions between humans and nature. Emotion is distributed through ecological systems. When Kusum stops visiting the ghat, the absence and the silence are experienced through the natural system itself.

In the end, when Kusum commits suicide by drowning herself in the Ganga, the author presents an ecologically charged conclusion. The ghat wonders, "From her earliest youth, she had lived beside these waters; now that she was weary, if the water were not to reach out to draw her to its lap, who else would do so?" It serves as her final refuge rather than simply a site of death. There is no dramatic judgment. The loss is absorbed silently by nature. There is a splash, and then there is darkness. Such restraint reinforces an ecological worldview whereby human suffering is folded back into natural cycles. The river, thus becoming her final solace, through life and death. Kusum's end signifies reintegration into a larger ecological continuum rather than annihilation.

### **Conclusion:**

A close ecocritical analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's "The Ghat's Story" discloses a text deeply preoccupied with redefining the relationship between humanity and nature. The author has endowed the ghat with a voice of its own, overturning the anthropocentric method of storytelling. This reaffirms an organic world wherein nature assumes a prominent role in human history as a lively, conscious agent. The river ghat serves not only as a backdrop for storyline development but also bears witness to time, tradition, and loss. Thus, nature in the guise of the ghat undergoes the periodic processes of human life. It silently endures all that happens in its vicinity and beyond, thereby structuring the narrative pattern and the lives entwined within it.

The representation of Kusum in the story adds further ecocritical meaning to it. The close relationship that Kusum shared with the river and her later return to it establishes her identity in relation to the ecological elements around her, rather than as a social being.

Nature in the story comes across, not merely as a narrator or a silent spectator, but as an empathetic entity that understands and participates in human grief. It is free of judgment and moral censure. Such depictions have been shown to demonstrate ecocritical concerns that literature plays an important role in inculcating environmental awareness through an understanding of human–nature relations that have an ethical and emotional component (Glotfelty and Fromm; Buell). Finally, "The Ghat's Story" foresees modern ecological ideas when nature is contemplated as memory, refuge, and continuity.

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