

## Voicing the Silent: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha"

Sakshi

Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies,

Panjab University, Chandigarh.

Email: sakshib258@gmail.com

Contact: +91-9814633389

### Abstract

*The idea of disability can be conceptualized as a power dynamic that operates between the disabled and the non-disabled. The latter negates acceptance of the former into the mainstream by constructing a difference based on performance or actions that challenge normalcy. Similarly, gender is conceived as a social construct based on the accepted norms, behaviors and ideologies that accord legitimacy to and subsequently essentialize the distinction between men and women in the society. As a corollary, "hierarchy and dualism" become an indispensable part in the experiences of individuals who exist on the margins of gender as well as indisposition. This paper aims to navigate the relationship between disability and gender that originates from deep-rooted ostracism and shared prejudices. An analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Subha" through an ecofeminist lens unravels the various dimensions of nature, gender, caste and disability as they interact in the 'subaltern' social space. Environment is used to establish a connection between nature and women and juxtaposing their characteristics to highlight the intensity of this connection. Ecofeminism, as the theoretical framework employed for this paper, focuses on addressing various forms of oppression, and it sees the interconnectedness of these issues, including sexism, racism, classism, and environmental exploitation. However, its primary emphasis is on gender bias and its intersection with the domination and exploitation of nature. Ecofeminists argue that Western culture, influenced by patriarchal and masculine value systems, has contributed to hierarchical structures that marginalize both women and the environment.*

**Keywords:** Agency, Disability, Gender, Patriarchy, Nature, Subaltern, Voice

## Introduction

Ecofeminism is a philosophy and social ideology that combines the fundamental standpoints of feminism and environmentalism. It aims to highlight the subaltern status of both women and nature, attributing this subordination to the influence of patriarchy and capitalism respectively. The correlation between women and nature within the larger field of study that is ecofeminism, can be understood through the yardsticks of empirical understanding, conceptual knowledge, and its epistemic sources (*Ecofeminism* 1996).

Empirically, ecofeminism observes that various socio-political and economic structures contribute towards the marginalization of both women and nature. Their co-option becomes evident in instances of poverty, environmental degradation, and economic dependence. Therefore, ecofeminists argue that these systems often exploit and devalue both women and the natural environment at a micro as well as macro level. On a conceptual level, ecofeminism identifies patriarchal ideologies as the root cause of the domination and subjugation of both women and nature. These ideologies are credited with prioritizing masculine values and power structures, which in turn, perpetuate the exploitation of women and the environment. From an epistemological perspective, ecofeminism recognizes the historical roles that women have played as providers, protectors, and preservers of nature.

Historically, women have been held responsible for nurturing and sustaining their communities and environments. Such an assessment suggests that the knowledge and feminine practices carried out by women since ancient times have enabled sustainable development and environmentally responsible actions at the societal level. Thus, the proponents of ecofeminism collectively assert a profound and interconnected relationship between women and nature. They argue for a deeply intertwined and mutually dependent relationship that they share with each other for their survival. By addressing the systems of patriarchy and capitalism that contribute towards their subservience, ecofeminism seeks to advocate for gender equality and environmental sustainability simultaneously. The

connection between women and nature becomes even stronger when instances of abnormalities or incapacities occur in either group. This enhanced proximity can be traced back as a result of the shared experiences of social exclusion for both the categories. Thereby necessitating a heightened response from those who are marginalized as both women and as individuals with disabilities. In such cases, a distinct category referred to as a 'subaltern within the subaltern' surfaces itself, and as a result adds an additional layer to the previously ongoing process of 'othering'. This process of 'othering' is now based on an exclusive factor of ability that becomes heavily intertwined with gender. Such marginalisation heightens furthermore when individuals face both gender-based and ability-based relegation (*Orientalism* 15).

A similar analogy holds true when one analyses environmental damage from the standpoint of patriarchal subordination owing to its ostensible preeminence. In India especially, we have witnessed movements like the Chipko movement where women stood as protectors for nature under threat. Eco-consciousness, indeed, refers to an enhanced awareness and concern for the natural environment. It has evolved into a global movement in the late twentieth century, primarily driven by the need to protect the Earth's ecosystems and resources. This movement emphasizes the responsibility of humanity to act as stewards of the planet rather than exploiters of its resources.

Eco-consciousness calls for a significant shift in the prevailing mindset, which often prioritizes short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability. Instead, it advocates for sustainable practices that maintain the health and vitality of the Earth's ecosystems, recognizing that these ecosystems are essential for the well-being and survival of all species, including humans. In essence, eco-consciousness is a call to action, urging individuals, communities, and governments to take proactive steps to mitigate environmental degradation, conserve resources, and promote ecological balance. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for responsible and ethical stewardship of the natural world.

As a movement, eco-consciousness encompasses a wide range of activities and initiatives, including conservation efforts, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy adoption, waste reduction, and advocacy for policies that protect the environment. It reflects

a growing recognition that our actions have far-reaching consequences for the planet and future generations, and it encourages a collective commitment to preserving and restoring the Earth's ecosystems.

Vandana Shiva underscores a fundamental issue concerning environmental sustainability and social justice. She suggests that the concentration of power and control, often associated with centralized and monopolistic systems, poses a significant threat to both the natural world and human societies (*Staying Alive*, 10). The call for diversity as the logic of production implies that monoculture and homogenization, whether in agriculture, industry, or other sectors, can be detrimental to long-term sustainability, justice, and peace. Diversity, in this context, can refer to biodiversity in ecosystems, as well as diversity in cultures, economies, and social systems.

She emphasises on the importance of bio-diversity which becomes essential for achieving ecological balance, resilience, and sustainability. When systems rely on a single approach or monoculture, they become vulnerable to disruptions, diseases, and other challenges. The reference to Mahatma Gandhi's principle, "Be the change you want to see", reflects the idea that individual actions and choices matter. It suggests that individuals have the power to influence positive change by embodying the values and practices they wish to see in the world. In the context of environmentalism and eco-consciousness, this principle encourages people to adopt eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyles, serving as examples for others and contributing to a broader shift toward greater ecological responsibility.

The sense of sacredness about nature highlights the spiritual and ethical dimensions of environmentalism. Many cultures and belief systems consider the natural world to be sacred or interconnected with human well-being. Recognizing and respecting this sacredness can inspire a deeper commitment to environmental stewardship and conservation. Overall, Vandana Shiva's work and advocacy align with these principles, emphasizing the need for a more sustainable, just, and eco-friendly world that values diversity in all its forms—ecological, cultural, and social. Her efforts contribute to conscientizing people about the interdependence of nature and culture and the urgency of preserving our planet's health and vitality. The symbiotic and co-dependent association becomes even more palpable in

situations where the subject position gets reversed; and we can observe nature coming to the rescue of culture and as an extension of its women. Such an interdependent relationship is vividly explored in the short story “Subha” by Rabindranath Tagore.

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Tagore portrays ‘Subhasini’, the third and only unmarried daughter of Banikantha as a dumb girl born in a middle-class Bengali family in a small town of Chandrapore. Her name, Subhasini, that means soft-spoken in Sanskrit stands in stark contrast to her actual nature of being awfully quiet. Her father, Banikantha named her to rhyme with her two elder sisters, Sukeshini and Suhasini but to his dismay she turned out to be dumb, completely speechless. Despite her silence, her father’s love of her remained pure akin to the affection of a doting parent.

This is reflected in his attempt to give her a short name, “Subha”, in the hope that a bright and promising day may dawn upon her someday. “Subha”, the beginning of nature, represents not only an uncorrupted, natural self but also possesses “a lonely grandeur like Nature’s own” (1). However, Banikantha’s love was never without the fears and concerns that typically overwhelm a father in a regular, traditional Indian household. Theirs was a middle-class family bound by middle-class ethics and obligations to fulfill. Therefore, the discovery of Subhasini being unable to speak only added to the burden of finding her a suitable husband, a responsibility that had weighed on Banikantha since her birth.

Ecofeminism indeed places a strong emphasis on addressing various forms of oppression, including gender bias, while highlighting their interconnectedness. While its focus is on gender bias, ecofeminism acknowledges that oppression is not limited to gender and that other forms of oppression, such as racism and classism, are intertwined with gender bias in complex ways. It recognizes that these multiple forms of oppression are interconnected and often stem from a common mindset and power structure. At the heart of the ecofeminist critique is the recognition of a patriarchal framework or worldview that has dominated Western culture and society.

This framework shapes how we perceive the world, ourselves, and our relationships with the natural world. It is characterized by a set of normative dualisms or binary oppositions, such as male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, and reason/emotion, where one side of each pair is typically associated with masculine attributes and the other with feminine attributes. In this patriarchal framework, the more masculine side of these dualisms is often valorised and considered superior, while the feminine side is devalued or marginalized. This creates a hierarchical system of values where masculine characteristics are elevated, and feminine characteristics are subordinated. This hierarchy extends not only to human gender roles but also to the broader relationship between humans and nature, where nature is often seen as passive, exploitable, and subordinate to human domination.

Ecofeminism challenges these normative dualisms and the hierarchical value system associated with them. It seeks to deconstruct and disrupt these binary oppositions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, including gender, race, class, and our relationship with the environment. By doing so, ecofeminism aims to address the root causes of oppression and promote a more equitable and sustainable world that values diversity, interdependence, and cooperation over domination and exploitation which can be analysed in Tagore's short story.

### **A Quiet Dialogue with Nature:**

The family, relatives, and friends would treat Subha with occasional pity or perpetual oblivion. Those around her took her existence for granted, just as casually as one would take the elements of nature around herself. Tagore expresses that, “the world seemed to think she did not speak; therefore, she did not feel” (2). This reflects the apparent parallels between Subha and her environment. Her inner nature, akin to the nature surrounding her, remains unheard by the people around her. Both she and nature are devoid of speech, yet they possess a voice that is resonated and deciphered only by each other. Consequently, the only respite for one is the other; they seek refuge within each other's company and pour their hearts out in

each other's presence. As a result, the only solace for Subhasini is found in nature, and vice versa.

Tagore employs a series of metaphors to express the intertwined consciousness of Subha and nature. He depicts Subha as being "endless in expression, deep as the sea, clear as the heavens, wherein play dawn and sunset, light and shadow" (2). But there is an inherent dichotomy prevalent in the existence of both Subha and nature. Despite their vastness and limitless potential, they are bound by certain constraints. They feel trapped even though their possibilities seem boundless. There manifests an unresolved contradiction of being suppressed by patriarchal hegemony despite possessing the potential to override the patriarch. This conflict is highlighted in Tagore's description of a local river flowing through their town. The river dutifully sustains the inhabitants around yet remembers its limits while doing so. He expresses:

The small river in the hamlet called Chandipur, kept to its narrow bounds like a middle-class daughter...It never overflowed its banks, but went about doing its duties; as a member of every family in the village (3).

The river here, an example of the most unrestrictive element in nature, that is water, is tamed conveniently, exploited for its use and acknowledged for being subservient. This portrayal underlines the struggle faced by both the nature and Subha in grappling with the paradox of being simultaneously bound and limitless.

The river, as described by Tagore, reflects the complex interplay of power dynamics and the tension between personal agency and societal restraints, a theme that stands in resonance with many women in a patriarchal setup. The existence of a naturally transformative element, such as the river, and by extension the flowing spiritual consciousness associated with the feminine being is proudly confined to the stringent boundaries dictated by patriarchy. That is exactly the reason why the river is compared to a daughter, since a similar conduct is expected of a woman in the role of a daughter. The uncivilized, barbaric, and wild "other" who ought to be taught, restrained and domesticated. A discount in stature, a wilful suspension of freedom and quiet acceptance of fate is reiterated when Tagore speaks of the river stepping down its "queenly throne", and instead

becoming a mere garden deity who is “forgetful of herself” as she “performs her task of endless benediction with swift and cheerful foot” (3). This portrayal is suggestive of a helpless surrender and fatalist tendencies which becomes a determinant of Subha’s existence.

Val Plumwood’s work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is significant in the field of ecofeminism, as it explores the historical connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Plumwood’s analysis aligns with ecofeminist thought, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of these forms of oppression and their roots in patriarchal and dualistic thinking. In the historical context, dualism often positions elements in pairs, where one is considered superior to the other. This hierarchy results in the instrumentalization and subjugation of the “lower” half to serve the needs of the “higher” group. Women and nature have both been placed in these lower positions due to their historical association and the supposed shared traits attributed to them. This historical association between women and nature has been used to justify their exploitation. For example, women have often been associated with qualities considered “closer to nature”, such as nurturing, caregiving, and emotional sensitivity.

These associations have been used to justify women's confinement to domestic roles and their exclusion from positions of power. Similarly, nature has been characterized as passive, wild, and available for exploitation. This perception has justified the relentless exploitation of natural resources for economic gain, often at the expense of environmental degradation. Ecofeminism seeks to challenge and deconstruct these dualistic hierarchies and the associated oppression of women and nature. It calls for a re-evaluation of the intrinsic value of both women and the environment and advocates for a more equitable and sustainable relationship between humans and the natural world. Plumwood’s work contributes to this broader ecofeminist project by highlighting the historical roots of these interconnected forms of oppression.

Subha is portrayed as a shadow image of the ideal “nature”, the accommodating, inaudible, always accepting nature that a woman is often expected to possess in a patriarchal setup. When motivated by fear, vulnerability, and tenderness, she seeks consolation in her environment since she often stands “silent and companionless as a noontide” (4). The reason



for her response is to escape the persistent nudging offered by the world around her: an unrelenting, ceaseless reminder of her handicap that came to be associated with her. She felt miserably stuck in the position where she had so much to express but no one to hear, as the humans around her were only receptive to the verbal tongue and not to the emotive language.

Therefore, she felt unheard, unloved, and unworthy throughout her life. Despite enduring these feelings, she found solace in the idea of being forgotten by others. She yearned to escape from a world where her future and accompanying anxieties were continually discussed in her presence. Her coping mechanism habitually led her to seek refuge in a world that was carefree and untamed, in the lap of nature. It was in Mother Nature that she found a sense of connection and freedom simultaneously, allowing her to escape society's judgments. The natural world became her sanctuary where she could escape from suffocating conclusions, explore her wild, untamed side, and embrace her liberated, authentic self.

### **Language of the Unspoken:**

Nature becomes an integral part of her, speaking for her. It's not just she who is a representative of nature, but vice versa, and both give each other the much-needed voice. Tagore expresses that “the murmur of the brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatmen, the crying of the birds, and the rustle of the trees that mingled were one with her trembling heart”. Subha lacked speech but had a pair of dark eyes shaded with long lashes. Her eyes, the only medium of communication with the world, served as a natural mirror to her mind, emotions, and her soul. The expressions transmitted through her eyes needed no translation, for their meaning went beyond any other that could be deciphered within a structured syntax. Tagore argues that it is in the eyes that a “thought opens and shuts, hangs steadfast like a moon, or illuminates the sky like lightning”(3).

Tagore beautifully compares Subha's eyes to two elements: the moon and the sparkling night sky. Her eyes are like the moon, representing slender sparks of hope amidst profound darkness, much like the emotional and life patterns in Subha's existence. Tagore

draws parallels between her eyes and the moon, which waxes and wanes, changing in shape and size daily, greatly influenced by the atmospheric conditions, occasionally obscured by dark clouds, and sometimes washed away by heavy rains, yet persistently striving to shine. This comparison symbolizes Subha's resilience and endurance in the face of adversity.

The lightning, on the other hand, symbolizes the sudden disruptions that caused significant upheavals in her otherwise tranquil life. Tagore's portrayal of nature in the story aligns with how women's bodies and sexual pleasures have been depicted in patriarchal discourses: as passive, docile, submissive, and complementary. The elements of nature in the story serve as powerful metaphors for Subha's inner world and her experiences. The story indeed highlights the intricate relationship between the construction of nature and gender. It deviates from the pastoral conception of nature-as-woman and instead presents nature as a dynamic and embodied subject that humans can engage with in various ways. This approach challenges the traditional view of nature as a passive backdrop or resource.

In line with the calls for "dynamic objectivity" made by scholars like Donna Haraway and Evelyn Fox Keller, the story portrays nature as an active participant and agent rather than a mere backdrop or resource. This perspective aligns with ecofeminist arguments that emphasize the need to unveil the metaphorical and conceptual connections between the representations of women and nature. By doing so, it becomes possible to develop a more sustainable and ethical environmental ethos.

"Subha" underscores how the construction of gender and the representation of nature are deeply intertwined, and it encourages readers to rethink their relationships with the environment. This story serves as a powerful example of literature's capacity to provoke critical reflections on the intersections of gender, nature, and society. Tagore's representation of the intimate association between nature and Subah in "Subha" serves as a powerful means to decipher and challenge structures of injustice, particularly those related to the social construction of gender. By drawing parallels between nature and Subah, Tagore illuminates the ways in which both have been marginalized, misrepresented, and diminished in various contexts.

The narrative skillfully highlights the commonalities between Subah and nature, both of which have been “designified, truncated, reduced, misread, diminished, derogated, left out” in societal equations (*Ecofeminism*, 220). This comparison effectively underscores the injustices faced by both Subah and the natural world, shedding light on how patriarchal ideologies tend to subjugate and silence both women and nature. Tagore's portrayal of nature looking down on the quiet and sleeping earth, reminiscent of lonely Subah, emphasizes the shared experiences of isolation and turmoil. This connection between Subah and nature transcends their individual loneliness, portraying them as kindred spirits in a world that often overlooks and underestimates their significance.

Through this intricate interplay between nature and Subah, Tagore prompts readers to critically examine the societal norms and prejudices that perpetuate injustices against both women and the environment. The story invites reflection on the interconnectedness of gender, nature, and social structures, ultimately advocating for a more equitable and sustainable world (“Subha”, 3). Tagore’s portrayal of the relationship between Subha and nature in “Subha” indeed brings attention to the issue of motherhood and how it has been used as a means to deny women equality and rights while perpetuating discrimination against them. This narrative reflects the historical and patriarchal view that has tied women's identity primarily to motherhood, relegating them to the realm of immanence and nurturing roles.

The concept that motherhood is a defining feature of women, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir and Carole Pateman, has been a central tenet in patriarchal constructions of sexual difference. It has not only limited women's roles and opportunities but has also been used to justify their subordination and victimization within patriarchal structures (*The Second Sex*, 23).

In “Subha”, Tagore challenges these essentialist notions by depicting Subha’s deep connection with nature. Subha’s cry for help and her plea not to leave her “mother” nature illustrate the profound bond she shares with the natural world. However, Tagore also highlights the powerlessness of both Subha and nature in the face of a rigid patriarchal arrangement (*The Disorder*, 15). By juxtaposing Subha’s vulnerability with nature’s powerlessness, Tagore underscores the ways in which patriarchy and capitalism have

constrained and oppressed both women and the environment. This narrative serves as a poignant critique of essentialist thinking and the oppressive gender roles associated with motherhood, advocating for justice and liberation for both women and nature from the clutches of patriarchal systems.

### **Linked through Aphasia:**

Tagore's portrayal of Subha as a young girl on the cusp of psychological and biological realizations underscores the complex intersection of her dreams, desires, and the treatment she receives in a patriarchal society. She is depicted as an adolescent who is becoming increasingly aware of the stark contrast between the treatment she desires and the treatment she actually receives from the people and circumstances around her. Subha's contemplation and introspection provide her with a means of coping with this stark reality. Her connection to her natural surroundings, her environment, becomes a source of solace and reflection. In moments when the "busy world" momentarily pauses in its relentless activity, Subha finds herself in communion with the silent and unjudgmental nature. This communion occurs in the interplay of sunlight and shadows, symbolizing the duality of her emotions and experiences.

The contrast between the "dumb nature" and the "dumb little girl" highlights the limitations of human language and societal norms in expressing the depths of one's inner world. While Subha may be unable to articulate her feelings and desires verbally, her connection with nature serves as a silent yet profound form of communication and expression. This portrayal speaks to the idea that nature often provides a refuge and a language for individuals who find themselves marginalized or silenced within social structures, particularly young women like Subha in a patriarchal society. Tagore holds that when "the busy world paused in its toil there were only dumb nature and a dumb little girl sitting silent; one under the spreading sunlight and other where a small tree cast its shadow" (4).

Tagore's use of the recurring image of the full moon in describing Subha's growth and awareness is rich with symbolism. The full moon represents a stage of maturity and enlightenment, suggesting that Subha has evolved in her understanding of both her inner world and the external environment around her. It signifies a sense of completeness and fulfillment in her consciousness. However, Tagore also employs the metaphor of the moon's phases to convey that Subha's journey of self-discovery is not a linear progression but rather characterized by cycles of growth and retreat. Just as the moon waxes and wanes, Subha experiences moments of heightened awareness and periods of introspection or withdrawal. This cyclical nature of her awareness mirrors the natural rhythms of life and the human experience.

Subha's relationship with Pratap Gosain is significant in the story as it highlights her longing for connection and companionship in a world where her voice remains unheard. Pratap's appreciation for her silence and the nickname "Su" reflect a genuine fondness and acceptance of her. For Subha, this companionship provides a source of emotional fulfillment, even though it remains unspoken due to her inability to communicate verbally.

Subha's secret infatuation with Pratap Gosain illustrates her yearning for a deeper connection and her desire to be seen and admired by someone she cares about. Her fantasies and daydreams reveal the depths of her emotions and her longing for a love that transcends her silence. This unspoken longing adds a layer of complexity to her character and underscores the isolation she feels due to her inability to express herself in the conventional manner.

Subha's connection with the domestic cows, Sarbbashi and Panguli, reflects the profound and unique bond she shares with the natural world. Her ability to communicate with them through non-verbal means, such as eye contact, touch, and empathy, underscores her deep connection to nature and the animals that inhabit her environment. This connection offers her a form of companionship and understanding that she struggles to find among humans who cannot comprehend her silent language.

Subha's attachment to these cows is not just a casual or superficial connection; it runs deep, and they become her closest and most cherished friends. Through this relationship,

Tagore emphasizes the idea that nature can provide solace and companionship to those who are marginalized or silenced by society. In Subha's case, her silent communication with the cows becomes a source of emotional support and understanding that she cannot find elsewhere.

The impending pressure for Subha's marriage highlights the constraints and expectations imposed by societal norms, particularly on women in a middle-class context. Her father's decision to arrange her marriage is driven by a desire to conform to social conventions and maintain the family's reputation. This decision adds to Subha's sense of helplessness and isolation, as she faces the prospect of being separated from her beloved animal companions and being forced into a life she may not desire.

Tagore's portrayal of Subha's connection to nature and her impending marriage reflects the broader theme of societal expectations and the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to traditional roles or norms. It also underscores the idea that nature can provide a refuge and a source of understanding for those who are marginalized or voiceless within society. Tagore's depiction of Subha's impending marriage to an elderly man for utilitarian purposes highlights the harsh reality faced by many women in patriarchal societies. Subha's fate is determined not by her own desires, emotions, or aspirations but by the patriarchal values and economic interests that prioritize the convenience and desires of men. Her father's decision to arrange her marriage solely for the purpose of sending her abroad and extracting utility from her reflects a stark form of commodification and objectification of women.

In this context, Subha becomes a symbol of the dehumanization of women within a profit-driven, patriarchal system. Her voice, emotions, and agency are disregarded in favor of economic gain and societal expectations. She is offered as a sacrifice to fulfill the utilitarian goals of her father and the elderly man, mirroring the way nature is often exploited and sacrificed in the pursuit of profit and economic interests. Tagore's critique extends beyond the individual characters in the story to address broader issues of societal values and priorities. He highlights the destructive consequences of a system that values profit and utility over the well-being and autonomy of individuals, both human and natural. The story serves as a

powerful commentary on the dehumanization of women and the exploitation of nature within a capitalist and patriarchal framework.

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