

## The Soul where Nature Lives, the Mind where Nature Breathes: A Study of Tagore's "Streer Patra"

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### Abstract:

Nature in Indian classical literature has not been a mere backdrop against which human life and its drama unfold. It presents the human mind as organically connected with the spirit of Nature; severed from it, it loses its bearings. In the essay "Tapovan," Tagore writes that the Nature of the world which has embraced mankind is intimately connected with human thoughts and activities. He further believes that if the world is just filled with human beings, where there is no space for Nature, the consequence would be the human mind and actions being contaminated, choked with trash. Nature is not an ornamental presence for Tagore. It is not silent and motionless. It is, in fact, always ceaselessly at work not just in the physical space of the world, but in the psychological enormity of the human mind. Tagore's outlook on the interconnectedness of man and nature is a philosophy, the manifestation of which can be found in the various aspects of his life and creations. To just call him a nature-lover would be erroneous; he does not see Nature as something external to man; rather feels his being and the spirit inside him to be formed by the forces at work in Nature. Tagore's Nature is not simply a guide and mentor, a mother and medic, rather it is the life-force without which one is not truly alive. To understand how this belief is unmistakably present in Tagore's works, this paper shall attempt to study the short story "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Letter"). By primarily focusing on the protagonist Mrinal's journey penned in her letter to her husband, we shall analyse the power which enables her to speak her mind unobstructed by the forces that try to thwart her. Mrinal's spirit remains undefeated. The paper shall try to understand how Nature intrinsically and intimately present in Mrinal's thoughts and actions, plays a vital role in this.

**Keywords:** Nature, Mind, Soul, Life-force

Have you not heard his silent steps?

He comes, comes, ever comes....

- Tagore, Song 45, *Gitanjali*

Education where Nature is an inseverable part in forming the human mind is one of the ideals that is central to Rabindranath Tagore's works. In *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* Tagore observes that Indian civilisation had its birth in the forests; it was surrounded by the vast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her, it had the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects and the civilisation "took a distinct character from this origin and environment" (1954, 4). Here as in many of his other writings and speeches Tagore writes about the "fundamental unity of creation" and the "life-object" of realising this "great harmony in feeling and in action" (1954, 7). India, he believes, "cultivated her consciousness in such a way that everything had a spiritual meaning to her" (1954, 7). The earth, water and light, fruits and flowers, to her were not merely "physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside"; they were necessary to her "as every note is necessary to the completeness of the symphony" (1954, 7). Like many of his works, this belief is also reflected in a short-story largely known for its foregrounding of a woman's voice, her expression, agency and empowerment – "The Streer Patra." But "The Wife's Letter" or "Streer Patra," originally written in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore and published in 1914 is more than that. At its core lies Tagore's idea of the interconnectedness of the human soul with that of Nature and the realisation of the Infinite. The voice of the woman in the story that remains indomitable and rebels against regressive limitations is the voice of one who has realised this.

"Streer Patra" is in the form of a letter written by a wife, a young woman of about twenty-seven. She was married at the age of twelve and after spending fifteen years with her husband and her in-laws in the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata), leaves it behind, goes away for a pilgrimage to Puri (a holy place in Odisha, India) and writes a letter to him for the first time from there. Mrinal's pilgrimage to Puri was initially planned as a ruse for her in-laws, so that she could save a girl called Bindu by helping her escape from her insane husband and unsympathetic mother-in-law. When she told her in-laws that she wanted to go to Puri with one of the female relatives, it made them happy; they instantly agreed as they thought it to be a sign of her piety. For Mrinal, going to Puri becomes a pilgrimage in a deeper sense of the term; in the sense Tagore thought true pilgrimage to be – a journey of spiritual awakening. Religion is another name for man's pact with the cosmos (Ghose 1986, 83). Religion as dogma, ritual, or

establishment did not matter much to Tagore, what mattered was a sensitiveness to the beyond (Ghose 1986, 85)<sup>1</sup>. Tagore observes that in India those places had been chosen as sites of pilgrimage where there was “in nature some special grandeur or beauty” so that this could enable the mind to “come out of its world of narrow necessities and realise its place in the infinite” (1954, 9). This observation emphasises Nature’s role in building human consciousness. Mrinal’s retreat to Puri is not a pilgrimage because it is the seat of Lord Jagannath, but because it is here under the open sky and near the vast sea that she is able to come out of the narrow confines of her life, to have inner realisation and the freedom of the spirit. Removing herself from her husband’s feet, she reaffirms her ties with the Universal Soul which she feels in the presence of Nature. She says, the “blue ocean is before me today, and the rain-clouds of Asharh are gathered overhead” and “I am no longer afraid of your lane” (Tagore 2002, 218), that is, the confines of her husband’s home and her married life.

The brick-and-mortar walls of modern civilisation affect the minds of men and in the words of Tagore:

They set up a principle of ‘divide and rule’ in our mental outlook, which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another. We divide nation and nation, knowledge and knowledge, man and nature. It breeds in us a strong suspicion of whatever is beyond the barriers we have built, and everything has to fight hard for its entrance into our recognition. (1954, 3)

Nature has a pivotal role to play in Mrinal’s liberation from this “divide” in life she has seen at the in-laws’ house in the city. In that house man is divided from man, man is divided from nature and is even separated from himself. Of her husband Mrinal says that the city has grown into his body and soul, his attachment with it is like that of a snail with its shell (Tagore 2002, 205). Tagore says in *Sadhana*:

[...] in the city life man naturally directs the concentrated light of his mental vision upon his own life and works, and this creates an artificial dissociation between himself and the Universal Nature within whose bosom he lies. (5)

In “Streer Patra” Mrinal, the *Meja Bou*<sup>2</sup> (in Bengali), the second daughter-in-law in the family, begins the letter with the word “*Sricharankamaleshu*” (শ্রীচরণকমলেশু) (Tagore 1969, 3:669) in Bangla, translated in English as “My submission at your lotus feet”<sup>3</sup> (Tagore 2000, 205). This beginning becomes significant when we note the closing words of the letter, “*Tomader Charantalashraychinna*” (তোমাদের চরণতলাশ্রয়ছিন্ন) (Tagore 1969, 3:680) which can be rendered in English as “cut off/removed from the shelter of your feet”<sup>4</sup>. She is no longer the *Meja Bou*, that is, the second daughter-in-law of the house, who is expected to submit to

the husband against her better judgement, and consider her place under his feet. The “supreme instance” of “wifely devotion” quoted by her husband was that of a wife carrying “a leprosy-stricken husband herself to his whore’s house” (Tagore 2002, 215). This for Mrinal is not an example of devotion, but “of the greatest cowardice in the world” (2002, 215), the citing of which should have made him feel ashamed. For Mrinal, duty towards truth as a human being is more than the duty as a wife. That which she comprehends as good, it is not her nature to call it otherwise to appease anyone else (Tagore 1969, 3:672)<sup>5</sup>. She says that in her husband’s household she did not suffer as suffering is usually perceived in the lack of material comforts – “there was no lack of food or clothes” (Tagore 2002, 217). What she lacked is something else. Bindu’s arrival to her house and her departure from the mortal world, struck Mrinal most strongly. It is then that although Bindu could not go, she herself felt that “there was need” for the pilgrimage (2002, 217). At the pilgrimage the awakening makes her write to her husband that she will not return to his house. Bindu’s fate has shown her the position women have in their domestic sphere; such a space she does not require (Tagore 1969, 3:679)<sup>6</sup>.

What makes Mrinal see all this with clarity? This paper attempts to reflect on that. What makes her say that she fears no more and sign off her letter as Mrinal, the one who has removed herself from the feet of her husband or that of his family? The whole letter, from the opening salutation to the closing words, reveals the factors which enabled this realisation and assertion. Among other things, this assertion has come with a deep realisation of the human mind and soul being part of the Universal Spirit, united with Nature and its infinite spiritual power. Nature herself has played an indubitable role in this realisation. “[S]tanding by the ocean’s shore,” Mrinal realises, “I have a different relation with the world and the Lord of the world” (Tagore 2002, 205). And it is this which has given her the strength to write the letter and say, “it is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law of your family” (2002, 205). Signing off the letter as Mrinal, therefore, becomes an affirmation of her existence beyond the confined role of the second daughter-in-law. As she was the *Meja Bou* in the confines of the city household, her mind’s growth and her soul’s natural inclination to expand and bloom, were met with resistance. The habits and customs were like a shroud trying to envelop her in its darkness (2002, 218). Mrinal feels the divine in Nature, sees the earth beckoning her, “holding out the nectar-bowl of the six seasons” and wonders why she cannot cross “the tiny threshold” of the women’s quarters, the “petty shelter of brick and wood,” to be a part of God’s creation, the “universe of joy” (2002, 218). In the presence of the “Beauteous One” gazing at her through the whole sky the realisation happens – the “walls of masonry,” “the thorny hedges of domestic

laws” cannot imprison the human soul (2002, 218). With this Mrinal’s soul awakens and the “second daughter-in-law is dead at last” (2002, 218). Mrinal in Bengali means “the stem of a lotus.” When Mrinal finally writes her name, she upholds her true self unthwarted by the concrete walls of her husband’s house and unburdened by her role as the Meja Bou. Her name bears the promise of a stem that shall blossom without constraints, at one with Nature. “I too shall live. At last, I live,” she pronounces (2002, 218).

In *Sadhana*, Tagore has stated,

when by physical and mental barriers we violently detach ourselves from the inexhaustible life of nature; when we become merely man, not man-in-the-universe, we create bewildering problems, and having shut off the source of their solution, we try all kinds of artificial methods each of which brings its own crop of interminable difficulties. (1954, 9-10)

As Meja Bou of her husband’s house, the free flow and expansion of Mrinal’s heart and the oneness with “the inexhaustible life of nature” had been hindered. Instances of this can be seen throughout the story. As she had married and moved from a remote village to a family in the city, she did not feel at one with her material surroundings. It is then she found joy in feeding the animals, which the family kept. With the bovines, tied and helpless in the confines of the city, deprived of the open sky and vast grazing grounds, Mrinal felt a kinship. She writes, “[m]y heart wept for them. I was a country girl – when I first entered your house, those two cows and three calves seemed to me my only familiar relatives in the whole city” (Tagore 2002, 208). Mrinal found her state to be similar with that of the creatures. The cattle “had no room to move in except the courtyard” (2002, 208). The shed of the cattle was near the women’s quarters, the *andarmahal*. The women’s quarters were also a place which mostly restricted the mobility of women within its confines. To someone like Mrinal who had spent twelve years of her life in the open space of her village, the shift to the boundaries of the *andarmahal* was aggrieving. Mrinal is the “man-in-the-universe”; her intelligence, her sense of reason, rebels against the “limits laid down by rule.” This intelligence she says was given to her by God. For Tagore the visionary, this God is the Infinite, who can be felt in the presence of Nature. When the servants forget to feed the cows, Mrinal feeds them her own food. Nature for Mrinal, as for Tagore, is not presence outside man, separate from man, from which he will extract. Mrinal’s feeling of kinship with the creatures is an embodiment of Tagore’s belief that all creatures including human beings are a part of the Infinite, everyone is a part of the Universal Soul, no one is higher or lesser. In *Sadhana* Tagore observes that Man’s superiority lies not in “the power of possession” but in “the power of union” with Nature (1954, 9). In his essay “Tapovan” he argues that “it is not about dominating nature, nor about consuming nature, but about being in

harmony with nature” (2020, 87-88; my trans.)<sup>7</sup>. In *Sadhana* he says that in ancient India the “constant contact with the living growth of nature” taught man that there is “no such thing as absolute isolation in existence, and the only way of attaining truth is through the interpenetration of our being into all objects” (1954, 4). Mrinal says that if her daughter had lived “she would have brought to my life whatever is great and true” as she would have “become a mother” because in her words, a mother, “even within the confines of her own family, belongs to the family of the world” (Tagore 2002, 208). The mother in Mrinal even at the death of the newborn daughter connects in love with the living around her who need it.

Mrinal’s heart embraces and connects with Bindu, the girl who is neglected and abandoned even by her own relatives. Bindu is the sister of the elder daughter-in-law of the house. Her arrival in Mrinal’s life is described as a “seed which though tiny, is blown by the wind to take root as a peepul shoot in a mortared house” and “in the end its rib of brick and timber are cracked apart by that tiny seed” (Tagore 2002, 209). She is the “little speck of life” which blew into the “mortared arrangements” of Mrinal’s city household and cracked its tough surface (2002, 209). Mrinal does not have any blood ties with her. If there is a connection, it is one of love and empathy; they are both kindred parts of the infinite which interconnects all. Bindu is a part of the infinite which the city-bred fail to comprehend. When Bindu, oppressed by her situation, takes her own life, Mrinal clearly sees the meaninglessness of her life in the city which ruptures/disconnects. She goes to the vast nature for her pilgrimage and decides never to return to the place which has fortified itself with so much concrete in guarding the meaningless that it has closed itself to the very life-force of existence, the interconnectedness of all beings. This realisation of “fundamental unity” (Tagore 1954, 7) makes one care and love deeply, find fulfilment in sacrifice of personal self-centred desires. True *sadhana* is in inner realisation that by living in harmony with Nature and with others the divine can be felt. Tagore idea of human existence is not in isolation but in union with all that is around. Also, for him, suffering does not make one selfish rather it opens the vastness of the heart and soul and makes one realise the oneness with the Infinite. Mrinal had lost her brother to death when she was a child, then her new-born daughter, and then Bindu the who had filled her with love. But these sufferings do not make Mrinal selfish; suffering does not take away her faith – rather it opens her soul further to love, to life and the presence of the Infinite in it. In Song 45 of *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes,

[...] In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.

In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine. (2006, 32-33)

And in *The Religion of Man* Tagore says, “this world that we perceive through our senses and mind and life’s experiences is profoundly one with ourselves” and in this “ideal of unity” man realises “the eternal in his life and the boundless in his love” (1931, 15).

Mrinal’s in-laws do not show compassion to Bindu, they treat her as a burden even when she contributes extensively to the household chores and does not seek material comforts for herself. Bindu’s initial fear when she entered her sister’s house shows her completely broken sense of self-worth because of the mistreatment she had received so long in her life. She was so ill-favoured that if she fell and hurt her head, people would be concerned more about the damage to the floor than her (Tagore 2002, 210). But when Bindu finds Mrinal’s genuine care and concern for her, her heart becomes vibrant. It is human love which gives comfort to the girl. The power of care and love is so boundless that a girl, despite long neglect, is moved and her soul responds and connects with the source of this boundless love. Bindu responds in a way that makes Mrinal say, “I have never seen such an image of love in my household” (Tagore 2002, 211). She sees the “unloved girl’s heart” has started to “glow with colour” (2002, 211). For Mrinal, this is akin to the effect that spring has on Earth – bringing life to it and filling it with vibrant colours. The association is significant to note. In the women’s quarters of her in-law’s house in the city where even a small patch of earth was not visible, Mrinal sees a gab tree<sup>8</sup> to have “somehow taken root by the north wall near the gutter” and when “the leaves of that tree flush red” it was a sign to her that “spring had come to the earth” (2002, 211). And when Mrinal sees Bindu’s love for her, it makes her say “in the heart’s world too, there is a breeze of spring-time” which “comes from some far-off heaven” (2002, 211). Truth, love, Nature, are all connected with the Infinite. One who realises the Infinite is permeated with its life-force.

The organic unity in vivid diversity of Nature shows that to attain tranquil contentment it is essential for man to realise the “great harmony between man’s spirit and the spirit of the world” (Tagore 1954, 4). The connection that Mrinal feels with the bovine creatures, with orphaned and neglected Bindu, reflects this. Her spirit sees itself at one with theirs. Hence, in spite of all the taunt and resistance of the family of her in-laws, she holds them closer to herself. Tagore believed that “life’s progress should be a perfect progress of the inner self itself and not



of materials and machinery; the non-living must not continue outgrowing the living” (1931, 34). Material possessions cannot be of more value than love,

freedom and fulfilment is in love, which is another name for perfect comprehension. By this power of comprehension, this permeation of his being, he is united with the all-pervading Spirit, who is also the breath of his soul. (Tagore 1954, 15)

Mrinal gets that love from Bindu which makes her shun the superficial comforts of her in-laws’ house when she sees that the person bringing the most honest form of love is slighted. The power of Bindu’s genuine love for Mrinal was such that she says, “that love made me glimpse a true image of myself, one that I had never seen before. This was the image of my free self” (Tagore 2002, 211). This free self cannot be bound by mercenary interests. So, when Mrinal’s husband, by stopping her allowance, tries to curb the freedom she shows in caring for Bindu, she remains undaunted. She starts wearing the most inexpensive clothes and refuses other assistance from the household help for chores like the washing of dishes. This shows that for Mrinal the living matter; she knows that attachment to lifeless possessions shrouds the soul which is meant to be free with boundless love and the realisation of its connection with the vast Infinite.

Describing the life in ancient India where forest was an integral part of the people, particularly the sages, Tagore observes that it is because of the “constant contact with the living growth of nature” that man’s “mind was free from the desire to extend his dominion by erecting boundary walls around his acquisitions” (1954, 4). This contact with nature shaped his mind and soul in a manner that his “aim was not to acquire but to realise, to enlarge his consciousness by growing with and growing into his surroundings” (1954, 4). This makes Tagore refer to the “Universal Spirit” (1931, 18) and the “Universal Self” (1931, 23). Drawing from the Upanishad he explains that this world is pervaded by “one supreme unity” and therefore true fulfilment can never be had “through the satisfaction of greed, but only through the surrender of our individual self to the Universal Self” (1931, 23). Mrinal’s contact with “the living growth,” her organic unity with Nature, enlarges her consciousness and makes her surrender to the Universal Spirit and in this surrender, she finds her liberation.

In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore observes that when people express compassion, create art, or engage with the world ethically and imaginatively, they participate in the divine unity. In Mrinal, we find compassion, an ethical and imaginative connection, and the creation of art. The natural bent of Mrinal is not curbed by the limitations set on a married woman’s life in the andarmahal. The andarmahal literally translates as the inner quarters where ‘andar’ means



‘inner’ and ‘mahal’ stands for ‘place.’ The inner quarters/place in the Bengali context was the private area reserved for women, which had a barrier to entry from the people of the outside space of the house. Movement of women was restricted to this space and only men who were close kin were allowed entry. This shows the lack of free and spontaneous interaction and correspondence with the outside world. This physical limitation could cause a limited or at best pruned development of the mind. Mrinal describes the inner rooms as the reverse of a piece of embroidery, where there is neither beauty nor grace; the light shines dimly here and the winds enter with obstruction. Mrinal says that in spite of all the restrictions after her marriage, the fifteen years of attempts at pruning her spirit, her husband and her in-laws never had an inkling of the poems she wrote and could not take it away from her. In the poems, she says, “lay my freedom – I was myself in them” (Tagore 2002, 207). Mrinal tells her husband about it only when she is away for the pilgrimage. Mrinal’s walking away from the dim lit poor ventilated rooms to the open sky and shining light is significant. Nature communicates to her the true meaning of being. The meaning of the beauty of Nature is a “personal communication” (Tagore 1931, 106) which enables Mrinal to pen the letter telling her husband that she would not return to the fake and hollow life in his apparently respectable house. She shuns the arrogance of their material accumulations, the puny mindset and the narrowness of their outlook which is shrouded in darkness yet smugly guarded. Mrinal sheds off the meaningless, gives free voice to her spirit and embraces that which is truly meaningful, the divine union of beings. As in her soul Nature lives, in her mind Nature breathes, she realises her oneness with the Infinite and hears the ‘silent steps.’

It would be, therefore, myopic to just note Mrinal’s journey and her voice in “Streer Patra” as that of an emancipated woman, without seeing how this spirit and strength is connected inseparably with the vast life-force of Nature. This philosophy of the oneness of human life, nature and the divine is not only found in this story, Tagore’s works of various genres and forms deeply contain this very belief. Tagore’s many reflections in his autobiography, *Jibansmriti*<sup>9</sup>, show his deep connection with Nature. One can see the ways in which his sensitive soul has realised the spiritual significance of her various forms, and how his thoughts and actions are imbued with it. It would be best to conclude with the man’s own words giving a glimpse of this:

[...] The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of those trees. As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced

in a moment through the several strata of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light. (Tagore 1917, 216)

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Song 11 of *Gitanjali* where the poet urges people not to find God in temples but in the world of common men and nature.

<sup>2</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri's translation keeps the transliteration *Meja Bou* of the Bengali 'মেজোবউ,' meaning second daughter-in-law, in certain places.

<sup>3</sup> From translation by Supriya Chaudhuri.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase I have attempted to translate myself as according to me the English translation of Supriya Chaudhuri which the paper otherwise mostly refers to, has not been able to capture the essence in the phrase. Chaudhuri translates the section as, "bereft of the shelter of your family's feet" (Tagore 2002, 218). In my humble opinion the implication of the use of the word 'bereft' can be completely different from what Mrinal wants to convey. 'Bereft' is mostly used in the context of being deprived of something valuable to a person; it carries a sense of loss. However, Mrinal, I believe, intends to say that she is removing/detaching herself from being the obedient wife the family seeks, the one who is expected to submit to their feet, their will; she will henceforth not be the Meja Bou but Mrinal. This does not mean that she is deprived of it; the suggestion which the use of the word 'bereft' might carry can lead to a misinterpretation that misses the very point of Mrinal's assertion. Mrinal's removal of herself from a position of submission as Meja Bou is not a loss but an awakening.

<sup>5</sup> The extract in Bengali is: "আমি যেটাকে ভালো বলে বুঝি আর-কারো খাতিরে সেটাকে মন্দ বলে মেনে নেওয়া আমার কর্ম নয়" (Tagore 1969, 3:672)

<sup>6</sup> The translation of Supriya Chaudhuri for this passage has not been taken because I found it to be insufficient in capturing the sentiment of the Bengali original. Hence, I have attempted to paraphrase the section myself to convey the idea. For the readers versed in Bengali, here is the extract from the original: "কিন্তু আমি আর তোমাদের সেই সাতাশ নম্বর মাখন বড়ালের গলিতে ফিরব না। আমি বিন্দুকে দেখেছি সংসারের মাঝখানে মেয়েমানুষের পরিচয়টা যে কী তা আমি পেয়েছি। আর আমার দরকার নেই।" (Tagore 1969, 679).

<sup>7</sup> The Bengali original is quoted for clarity of readers well-versed in the language: "আমাদের এ প্রকৃতির প্রতি প্রভুত্ব করা নয়, প্রকৃতিকে ভোগ করা নয়, এ প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে সম্মিলন" (Tagore 2020, 87-88).

<sup>8</sup> Indian persimmon; scientifically known as *Diospyros Peregrina*. It belongs to the same family as Ebony trees.

<sup>9</sup> *My Reminiscences* in English translation.

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