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Never the Twain Shall Meet?:
Representations of Nature in Children's Literature by Rudyard Kipling and Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

Rudyard Kipling and Rabindranath Tagore: two astonishing writers, both of whom lived in colonial India, wrote about the Indian environment, crafted texts for children, were born and died within years of each other and yet who appeared to live "lives that ran coldly parallel, like sets of railway tracks" (Nair). Even their careers followed similar trajectories. Both rose to immense international fame, being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature only six years apart (1907 and 1913) and then experienced a decline in reputation (in the West), during their lifetimes, for different political and aesthetic reasons. Kipling was often derided as a pro-imperial jingoist; Tagore as an anti-nationalist, sentimental mystic.

These evaluations do not do justice to their writing and ignore the role both writers played in representing nature and the natural environment in colonial India. Addressing this gap, in a discussion of Kipling's *Jungle Books* and selected poems, plays and stories by Tagore, I ask a number of key questions: What might these texts suggest about attitudes towards nature and the natural environment in in colonial India? How is nature represented – as a backdrop, a character, a resource, or a sacred entity? What ecological relationships (hierarchical, symbiotic, exploitative) are modelled in the literary works? What kind of environmental subjectivity, if any, is being cultivated in the implied child reader?

While recognising Kipling's pro-imperial stance, and without seeking to claim, anachronistically and mistakenly, that he was an environmentalist in the current sense of the term, I argue that Kipling's stories offer insights, if unconsciously, into the negative ecological effects of colonial practices in India. Contra many postcolonial evaluations of the *Jungle Books*, I argue the stories are more than allegories advocating the imposition of imperial "Law" on India's people and landscapes. They reveal a deep love and respect for the life of India's jungles/forests. I explore how, in the *Jungle Books*, Kipling offers detailed, accurate representations of Indian fauna and flora *as* animals and *as* plants, not mere symbolic cyphers. Further, I argue that, in a variety of ways, the stories ambivalently document, and at times lament, the ecological disruption caused by deforestation, water diversion, bridge building, the hunting and extermination of wildlife, and the introduction of non-native plant species. The *Jungle Books* offer an equivocal testament to the colonial era's conflicted environmental anxiety where admiration for nature is in tension with an ideology that demanded its subjugation. I extend existing readings of Kipling by examining the

ecological agency and complexity of the non-human world alongside the imperial and allegorical meanings that critics have identified.

I argue that critical analyses of Tagore's spirituality, mysticism, educational philosophy and anti-colonial politics give scant regard to his ecological prescience. Recent scholarship, including Ramachandra Guha's account of Tagore as an important figure in the history of Indian environmental thought, has established the significance of Tagore's ecological concerns. This thesis extends that discussion by examining the spiritual and philosophical foundations of those concerns and by tracing their expression through Tagore's children's writing and his representations of children, education and the natural world. Rather than treating Tagore's environmental thought simply as an early form of modern environmentalism, I argue that it emerges from a broader conception of interconnectedness rooted in Indian intellectual and cultural traditions. In plays like *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi*, Tagore shows the destruction caused by dams and mining long before these became global issues. In his writing for children, as in that for adults, he drew on ancient Indian religious and philosophical sources that saw nature as sacred and alive. He promoted a vision of the symbiotic, non-hierarchical co-existence of humans, non-human animals and non-animal life forms. Further, Tagore posits that authentic adulthood is achieved by reclaiming the child's innate ecological consciousness, capable of healing the rupture imposed by colonial and anthropocentric modernity. Tagore's child – of whom and for whom he writes – *demonstrates* the ontology of living within a sacred, reciprocal natural network. True maturity, therefore, is not an exile from the garden of childhood innocence but a conscious reawakening of foundational empathy, wonder, and sense of unity with creation.

By reading Kipling and Tagore together, I show colonial Indian children's literature was a complex site in which competing relationships between humans, non-human life, childhood and nature are represented and negotiated. Both writers articulate an elegiac sense of the loss of prelapsarian childhood and pre-colonial natural India, whether this involved unconscious documentation or conscious condemnation. I thus resist the reduction of the works of both writers to imperial allegories or oriental mysticism and read them with an eye open to what they reveal about nature in colonial India why this is important today. In all their complexity, the visions of "the twain," Kipling and Tagore, "meet" in the awe both express in the face of the Indian forest/jungle and the anxieties they express about its future.

Key Words: Rudyard Kipling, Rabindranath Tagore, *Jungle Books*, children's literature, colonialism, eco-criticism, Indian spirituality

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Critical Contexts

Introduction

Most theorists of children's literature, at least since the middle of the twentieth century, agree that children's literature is never neutral. Whether overtly instructional or not, it conveys social values, anxieties, and aspirations that are distilled and offered to its young readers. Comparative analysis of children's literature produced within the same period by authors with different values and beliefs can reveal social tensions prevailing at the time. This is certainly the case, I argue in this thesis, with respect to attitudes towards nature in literature written for children in or about colonial India.

South Asia, which is ecologically diverse and has a complex colonial history, is a charged site for comparative exploration. In this region, the stories, poems and dramas written for children are acts of world-making, encoding visions of nature, humanity, identity, and power. A key claim in this thesis is that Indian colonial children's literature highlights and negotiates human-nature relationships, serving alternately as an instrument of imperial ideology, a medium of cultural resistance, and a forum for contemporary ecological consciousness. The development of South Asian children's literature is intrinsically linked to the era of British colonialism. The advent of the British Empire in India not only changed administrative systems and economic models but also transformed cultural norms, including the very concept of a separate literary genre for the young. According to scholars like Jeffrey Richards and Supriya Goswami, this imported genre was then used as a potent source to propagate "aesthetic imperialism." The children's books written in the early colonial era (mostly written by English authors), often portrayed India as a wild, chaotic space in need of order – a narrative that reflected and justified the political project of conquest. The Romantic concepts of innocent childhood and sublime nature were selectively applied here. The "innocent" child was racialised in two repeated figures: the white, civilizing youth was set against the "half-devil and half-child" native, in Rudyard Kipling's infamous phrase. Similarly, the lush Indian landscape was simultaneously romanticised as exotic and demonised as a dangerous wilderness that demanded the rational, ordering hand of the coloniser. As I will discuss, it is widely theorised that the aim of this literature was to socialise both British children at home

into their future imperial roles and Indian children into a subservient acceptance of foreign rule and environmental mastery.

This study explores two colossal literary figures – Rudyard Kipling and Rabindranath Tagore[1] – who offer starkly contrasting visions of the Indian landscape. On the surface, Kipling's *Jungle Books* (1894-95) are thrilling adventures, anthropomorphic fables that have captivated generations. Yet, as a vast body of postcolonial criticism asserts, they also function as sophisticated allegories of imperial rule. The "Law of the Jungle," it is often argued, is a metaphor for colonial administration, a rigid code that imposes hierarchy, discipline, and punishment, ultimately serving to separate the civilised human (Mowgli) from the animal world so he can graduate to govern it. Mowgli's journey from a wild "man-cub" to an agent of the Imperial Forestry Service in the precursor story "In the Rukh" maps a colonial *Bildungsroman* of maturation through mastery over nature.

However, a purely political-allegorical reading, this thesis contends, misses an important and complex layer in the stories. The *Jungle Books* reveal a deep, elegiac love for the very ecological complexity they seem to subordinate. Kipling's meticulous, often scientifically observant descriptions of flora and fauna, his haunting portrayal of drought's devastation in "How Fear Came," and his vivid documentation of environmental disruption in "The Undertakers" create a powerful counter-narrative, whether deliberate or not. They archive the fragile beauty of an ecosystem under siege by the engines of colonial "progress." The result is a work of great ambivalence, where the rhetoric of control is persistently undermined by a lyrical lament for a vanishing wildness, leaving the reader with a sense of loss as poignant as Mowgli's tearful farewell to the jungle.

In contrast, Kipling's near contemporary Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of nature and its relationship with human beings in his children's stories, poetry, drama and essays reveals an overt celebration of India's natural environment, especially its trees. If Kipling personifies/exemplifies the conflicted voice of Empire, Tagore articulates a comprehensive, decolonial alternative. Tagore composed a vast body of children's writings, which are rooted in emphatically Indian traditions of philosophy, religion(s) and mythology. Drawing from Upanishadic notions of non-duality (*Advaita*) and Bengali spiritual traditions, Tagore crafted a vision of ecological harmony and spiritual unity. For him, nature was not a passive resource

[1] I refer to Rabindranath Tagore as Tagore throughout this thesis. When I mention his relatives (father grandfather, nephew, daughter, etc.) I provide their first and last names.

or a threatening wilderness but a sacred, communicative, and pedagogical presence. In works like *The Crescent Moon* and *Gitanjali*, the child is not a figure in need of civilising discipline but a conduit for and expression of this innate, unspoiled connection to the cosmos. Tagore's child lives in a world where "stars talk" and the sky "stoops down," embodying a state of being that modern, colonial adulthood has tragically abandoned.

Tagore's philosophy and his approach were not merely theoretical; rather, he enacted his philosophy through the founding of Santiniketan, his experimental school conceived as a *tapovan* (forest) school. Here, education took place in open communion with nature, making way for "joyous learning" and an ethics of care that stood in direct opposition to the rigid, desk-bound "parrot's training" of colonial pedagogy, which he savagely satirised. His literary works for children, such as the story "Bolai," which celebrates a boy's deep, wordless kinship with trees, or the play *Muktadhara*, which dramatises the conflict between a life-giving waterfall and the despotic control of a dam, are explicit acts of environmental and anti-colonial critique. Tagore's legacy articulates an ecological ethos grounded in reverence, reciprocity, and a principle of "enough-ness," presenting a direct critique of the extractive and hierarchical paradigms underpinning both colonialism and industrial capitalism.

This study aims to establish the dialectic between Kipling's ambivalent, law-bound jungle and Tagore's spiritual, unifying ecology. The comparison developed in this thesis is therefore not based simply on the opposition between a British and an Indian (South Asian) writer, or between imperialism and anti-colonialism. Instead, it asks how two writers working within the colonial environment of India imagine the relationship between human beings and the more-than-human world. Kipling's jungle is shaped by systems of law, hierarchy, belonging and exclusion, but it also repeatedly exceeds the meanings that human characters attempt to impose upon it. Tagore's natural world, by contrast, is grounded more explicitly in ideas of unity, reciprocity and spiritual interconnectedness, particularly those associated with Indian philosophical and literary traditions. Reading the two writers together makes it possible to examine not only these differences but also the tensions within each writer's representation of nature. This comparative framework is developed across chapter 3, 4 and 5 and brought together in the conclusion, where I argue that children's literature in colonial India, epitomised in the work of Kipling and Tagore, provided a significant space for negotiating competing ideas about nature, childhood, knowledge and human responsibility.

These competing legacies influenced and were transformed in the post-colonial development of children's literature across South Asia. It was originally my intention to trace these developments in my thesis, however, as in many PhD proposals, this proved to be too vast and ambitious to include. Suffice to say that children's literature has burgeoned since the 1947 partition of India, and has evolved along distinct national lines in the sub-continent. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (in 1971) navigated the twin imperatives of building national identity and addressing pressing social realities. In India, early decades saw a surge in retellings of epics and folktales, a project of cultural reclamation. Over time, as scholars like Michelle Superle observe, a new wave of English-language Indian children's literature emerged, often featuring child protagonists as "powerful agents of transformation" confronting modern issues, including ecological degradation (Superle 7). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, children's literature developed with strong Islamic and nationalistic undercurrents, though a growing, if still emergent, contemporary strand directly engages with environmental crises, as seen in the eco-conscious picture books of authors like Rumana Husain in Pakistan.

This thesis draws on eco-critical insights and employs the close reading of the selected texts as its central methodology and considers how these texts offer insights into the perception and value of natural India. I seek to move beyond the analysis of plot and character to ask fundamental questions: How is nature represented – as a backdrop, a character, a resource, or a sacred entity? What ecological relationships (hierarchical, symbiotic, exploitative) are modelled in the narrative? What kind (if any) of environmental subjectivity is being cultivated in the implied child reader?

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a literature review that establishes key approaches, critical texts and contexts. Chapters Two and Three are devoted to Kipling's *Jungle Books*. I outline and discuss the very common critical approach of reading Mowgli and the animals in the stories in allegorical terms, often to support a postcolonial reading of Kipling as pro-imperialist. I suggest that alongside such approaches, it is fruitful to consider the animals *as* animals in the stories, rather than as proxies for humans or human personality or psychological traits. I discuss the jungle as a thriving ecosystem under threat from human intervention and draw attention to how the stories portray the impacts of deforestation, water diversion and bridge building, and what makes this particularly urgent is the way Kipling shows these disruptions not as distant tragedies but as events that ripple through every layer of the forest – from the animals who lose their homes, to the rivers that change course, to the

very balance of life that holds everything together, and I think that is exactly the kind of thing young readers today need to sit with and think about.

Chapters Three and Four focus on Tagore's writing for children. I first aim to establish him *as* a children's writer, at least in some of his important texts, drawing on a variety of critical sources to make this case. I then seek to situate Tagore as more than an oriental mystic (which was how he was first received in the West), and as more than what we might today call an environmentalist "tree hugger." I argue that the vision of nature portrayed in Tagore's writing for children is deeply eco-conscious: drawing deeply on various forms of indigenous Indian spirituality, he understands humans as part of nature, not dominant over it. He promotes an ethic of sustainable interdependence between all living things: humans, non-human animals, plants and the soil, water and sun. In my final chapter I provide a comparative analysis of the two authors and discuss their opposing visions of law versus unity, exile versus return, and hierarchical ambivalence versus egalitarian care.

Through my comparative analysis of Kipling's and Tagore's writing for children I suggest the ways in which their writing is a repository of divergent thought about India's natural environment, understood in its fullest sense as encompassing all life forms elements. Their literature is a rich source of colonial environmental knowledge from which we may glean insights about the conflicting attitudes towards nature that were at play in South Asia during the era of its imperial occupation. I aim to reveal the value of children's literature to debates about the environment that are ongoing today, with a pressing urgency evident, presciently, in Tagore's work. From its origins as an instrument of imperial environmental imagination to its contemporary role in propagating climate consciousness, the genre has been a central space for debating what nature means and what our place within it should be. By unpacking the green worlds built by Kipling and Tagore, we gain more than literary insight. This enables us to uncover a history of how a region has imagined its relationship with its land, its animals, and its forests – a history vital for understanding the past and essential for mediating the precarious environmental future that today's children will inherit. This thesis, therefore, is an invitation to read these stories anew, to listen for the whispers of the forest and the laws of the jungle, and to recognise in the pages of children's books the extensive and ongoing struggle to define a sustainable and just way of being in the world.

Critical Contexts

The growth of children's literature in Europe: changing perceptions

The genre of "children's literature" has passed through several historical phases and the changes that are evident in European attitudes towards and evaluations of children's texts over the past few centuries have some equivalents in the South Asian region, given the impact of Britain on the Indian subcontinent since the mid-eighteenth century. There was very little literature written specifically for children in Europe before the eighteenth century because the very idea of childhood as a distinct phase of life only arose in the seventeenth century and was not widely accepted until the end of the nineteenth. Even child labour laws, which aimed to protect young workers, were not enacted in England (and Europe more generally) until the early 1900s. In fact, it has been argued, initially by Philippe Ariès in his influential (if also divisive) book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1960), that before the seventeenth century, the concept of childhood as we understand it today "did not exist" (125). Infant mortality rates were high, and parents did not invest much in the very young; surviving children lived and worked alongside adults in subsistence farming and trades and, according to Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, were considered to be miniature adults from the age of six or seven (4). As living conditions in Europe improved through the seventeenth century, children lived longer and increasing affluence (for some) meant more leisure time became available. In contrast to the earlier idea that children were 'born in sin,' they began to be seen as innocent beings who needed protection from the corruption and strife of the adult world.

John Locke played a pivotal role in shaping changing perceptions about childhood with his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Locke emphasized the importance of childhood education and considered the minds of children as blank slates to be cultivated by elders. This revolutionary idea introduced the need for educational literature specifically designed for children, catering to their interests and understandings. Locke's perspective marked a turning point, as it called for a very new kind of book (Bryan et al. 14); Tunnell and Jacobs 80-86). However, as Mihai Androne states, "[i]n the good old Protestant tradition, John Locke evinces the importance of discipline in human life and as a means of shaping human personality: education is supposed to shape mainly because the young being is malleable. (75)

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European children primarily engaged with fables, fairy tales, pamphlet tales, chapbooks, and occasionally lengthy chivalric romances (Tunnell and Jacobs 82). Literature aimed at young readers in this era served didactic purposes, emphasising religious teachings and moral lessons. Early books for children were often instructive, like spelling books, schoolbooks, and conduct books (Grenby 3-18). As the eighteenth century progressed in Europe and its colonies, there were gradual shifts in attitudes towards both children and literature for young readers. While early books were instructive and heavily influenced by religious (Christian) beliefs, later works began to embrace more diverse themes and imaginative storytelling (Grenby 11). This rise in the number and variety of children's books is congruent with further changes in attitudes towards children, particularly in the growing middle class (see O'Malley; Horne). The Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Émile, or On Education* (1762), argued quite differently to Locke about childhood and children's education. He asserted that children had a unique way of perceiving the world and should be left to develop naturally (Cohen 20; Horne 11-12). This idea was very influential during the Romantic era (c. 1780-1815), in which children were increasingly regarded as being both closer to God and having more wisdom than adults. In the famous words of William Wordsworth, in his "Intimations Ode" (1804), "trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home: /Heaven lies about us in our infancy" (lines 64-66). Later in the poem he addresses a child, "Thou little child, yet glorious in the might/ Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height" (121-122).

Importantly for my purposes in this thesis, European Romantic authors, and artists not only idealised childhood but also Nature. In many respects, this was the result of a reaction against the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment, but it was also a response to the burgeoning industrialisation and capitalism that centred in urban areas. Factories sprung up during this time, turning natural resources into saleable commodities (and using natural resources like water and coal to propel machinery); pollution was rife, as was poverty and labour exploitation for those who left rural areas in the hope of making money in cities. Children, pressed into degrading and dangerous employment, were victims of this consumption and exploitation. It is not surprising that many people – ironically including many of the privileged elite – reacted against this by idealising Nature and childhood. Nature was seen as a corrective force, place, or even entity, in which 'healthier' (and more traditional) values and morals could be located. In fact, it is widely argued that our current ecological thinking can be traced to European Romanticism (see the collection of essays edited by Dewey W. Hall,

Romantic Ecocriticism: Origins and Legacies). James C. McKusick, for example, claims that "much Romantic writing emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world and expresses an anxious endeavour to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between mankind and the fragile planet on which [we] dwell" (123).

The Romantic period also witnessed a significant shift in the representation of children in literature and culture with an emphasis on the innocence, imagination, and the emotional world of children. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789-1794) is exemplary in its contrast of the joyful simplicity of childhood with the complexities of adulthood. Wordsworth's poetry, as noted, portrayed children as having a closer connection to Nature and the sublime, emphasizing their ability to perceive the world's beauty through unspoiled eyes. Anne Higonnet, in *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998), traces the ways in which art and visual culture contributed greatly to shaping the idealised image of childhood at this time. Romantic-era paintings, illustrations and other visual mediums depicted children and their attitudes towards their surroundings. Diana Gittins, in "The Historical Construction of Childhood," similarly argues that the evolution of childhood representations is intertwined with the concept of Nature. Nature, often considered in opposition to culture, was increasingly linked to childhood (36). Such changing attitudes found their way to the colonies, including India, as Dane Kennedy discusses in her chapter "Nature's Children" (54).

The Romantic era's idyllic portrayal of childhood, characterised by innocence, purity and intuitive wisdom, held profound implications not only in Western literature but also in colonial contexts. So did Romantic attitudes towards Nature. A proverb by Rabindranath Tagore, in his 1928 collection of brief aphorisms and epigrams, *Fireflies* (1928). could aptly summarize this: "The butterfly counts not months but moments and has time enough." Just as the butterfly's brief existence is filled with significance, the Romantic ideals of childhood may have fluttered across cultures, leaving a mark on narratives that resonates far beyond their ephemeral moments. The influence of Romanticism and of British children's literature on children's literature in the Indian colony is the subject of Debasree Ghosh's unpublished PhD thesis, *A Literature of One's Own: British Literary Influence on the Development of Indian Children's Genres* (2023). However, she argues that Indian writers for children (her particular focus is on Bengali children's literature) adapted and changed aspects of British

children's literature, making it their "own," as her thesis title suggests. I will return to this idea when I discuss Tagore's writing for children.

Childhood and children's literature in colonial India

The account above mainly focuses on the changing representation of children and childhood in British society and Europe more generally, but what of children in the colonies – the children of the colonisers and the colonised – in the eighteenth and, especially, the nineteenth centuries? How were they portrayed in children's literature? What kinds of literature were they given to read or was read to them? There are three distinct bodies of texts to be considered here. The first are texts in English, adapted from British texts, presented to children in India. Initially, these came via missionaries who, according to Anna Johnston, "were the servants of God and civility as well as empire" (37). She notes that "Christian texts were used as pedagogical tools" with the ultimate aim of conversion (68). Further, Thomas B. Macauly, in his infamous "Minute on English Education" (1835), stated the aim of creating " a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect" (249) by promoting western education in English. He famously stated, "[w] e must educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue" and asserted that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." This was not about religious conversion but about using English literature to control Indians under the guise of a liberal education, enlisting 'educated' Indians to serve as interpreters, administrators and assistants for the British Empire in India. It began with the education of children and so, the books to which they were introduced. Writing in 2002, Jean Webb avers, of English books for children in the colonies,

> [w]herever the world map was coloured pink by the march of imperialism, so English children's literature appeared. … Reading materials were imported from the home country, the seat of industrial power in the nineteenth century, and therefore the ideological forces derived from imperialist England were also carried along. (71)

In this thesis I don't discuss missionary or pre-Raj literature for children in India, however the ideological and nationalist thrust evident in this reading material informs the other two categories of texts I consider: (a) those written for a British child-audience, set in India or about Indian or Anglo-Indian children; and (b) those written by Indian or Anglo-Indian

authors for Indian children. In this thesis I discuss Kipling's writing for children, specifically the *Jungle Books*, as representative of the former and Rabindranath Tagore's writing for children, in a range of selected texts, as representative of the latter. As Rashna Singh states, "nineteenth-century Western colonial rule in South Asia often imposed Western cultural values on colonized societies, as seen in children's literature, where Western ideals were promoted, potentially erasing indigenous elements and reinforcing colonial superiority through education, thus perpetuating stereotypes about indigenous people" (117).

Colonial texts written for a British child-audience, set in India or about Indian or Anglo-Indian children

In In the past few decades, a fairly substantial body of criticism has developed that is devoted to the representation of colonial children, or is set in the colonies, in British children's literature. In what follows I will focus on discussions of representations of India and Indian children; however, one early, general essay is worth mention. This is Perry Nodelman's "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism and Children's Literature" (1992). Nodelman explores "parallels between Said's descriptions of Orientalism and our representations of childhood in both child psychology and children's literature" (20) to defend his claim that children's literature is "inherently imperialist" (34). He is less concerned with imperialist representation *in* children's fiction than he is the "inherent" tendency of children's literature to distort, silence and diminish otherness. Nonetheless, the parallels he theorises have influenced later critics who explore the representation of non-British "others" in colonial children's literature.

An early collection of essays edited by Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (1989), set the tone for many later, and more nuanced, studies. Together, the collected essays argue that one of the British Empire's most effective propaganda tools was books and periodicals for young (largely British) readers. A great deal of emphasis is placed on young male readers (although books for girls are also discussed in some essays) and the ways in which popular fiction set in and about the colonies inculcated imperial ideologies, not least by portraying 'ideal' young men equipped with the characteristics and qualities – like manliness, athleticism, militarism, and racial superiority – that would make them great colonisers. Peter J. Hugill argues along the same lines and quotes G. Avery who asserts that many British writers "sent boys scurrying over pampas and veldt, surging over the seas, cutting their way through forest and jungle, and, as the [19th] century advanced and the mood

of the country became more bellicose, smiting the foe on the various battlefields" (qtd. 323.) The first extensive book-length study in the vein is Joseph Bristow's influential *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (1991), which includes discussion of Kipling. Building on this is a book-length study by Don Randal, *Kipling's Imperial Boy: Adolescence and Cultural Hybridity* (2000). I draw on this in my chapters on Kipling's *Jungle Books*.

The figure of the child-orphan looms large in colonial texts about and for children. Satadru Sen has written broadly about the conception of childhood in India and the British encounter with colonial children, in *Colonial Childhoods: The Juvenile Periphery of India 1850-1945* (2005), and, in his essay "The Orphaned Colony" (2007), discusses the proliferation of orphans in British India from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (largely due to famine), many of whom became "clients of the state" (464) as the "native orphan overlapped with the juvenile delinquent" (467) and was "a threat to whiteness" (470). So too was the "mongrel" Eurasian orphan, and even the British orphan who needed to be contained and educated to ensure "racial recovery" (471). Such children served as a complex nexus for colonial anxieties and agendas, involving concerns about reinforcing racial superiority, managing subalternity, and safeguarding colonial frontiers, with the orphaned child in Indian literature embodying both absence and contested markers of race, gender, and authority. It is perhaps no coincidence that two of the best-known child-protagonists in Anglo-British literature, Kipling's (Indian) Mowgli and (Anglo-Indian) Kim, are orphans (although many suggest this reflects Kipling's sense of being 'orphaned' when sent to England for schooling by his parents at a very young age). This is something discussed at length by David Floyd who argues that "Kipling repositions that locus of conflict endemic to imperial narratives to the psychological landscape of the orphan" (136).

The ways in which the colonial discourse negatively adopted terms like *childlike* and *childish* to stereotype native subjects as noble savages or rebellious primitives has been discussed by scholars like Ashish Nandy in "Reconstructing Childhood" (1984) and Satadru Sen in *Colonial Childhoods* (2005). The latter points to Rudyard Kipling's telling phrase, used to describe colonised subjects, in his infamous poem, "The White Man's Burden" (1899): "Your new-caught sullen peoples/ Half devil and half child" (lines 7-8). He argues that in the mid-nineteenth century, "the dominant metropolitan assumptions about childhood were its plasticity and innocence"; however, these qualities were not uniformly attributed to children: "When such ideas were transplanted to the colonies and applied to natives, they not only

reinforced each other, they also undermined each other in extraordinarily productive ways" (1). While western children were relegated to the periphery of the adult colonial world as needing to be moulded and appropriately matured, native children were doubly marginalised. They were seen as "essentially small, perverse adults" (1), as deviant or "inauthentic" children. In Sen's pithy summation, "a native [child] who was not a child to begin with would never outgrow the periphery" (3). Since the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the number of journal articles, book chapters and books about colonial children's literature by Western critics increased significantly and many of these include analysis of children's literature set in or about India, most of which contain discussions of Kipling's writing for children. Donnarae McCann makes the case that British children's literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected and endorsed the undercurrents of imperial culture (196). Works like *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857)*, The Water Babies* (1863) and *The Secret Garden* (1911) "readily disclose the imperial ideologies that inform them" (196). These texts 'other' lands and peoples outside of the British Empire, reinforcing the notion of Europe's superiority. Moreover, she argues that childhood agency is not homogenous across class and race in nineteenth-century British literature for children. Children who are privileged by race rarely display the submission or powerlessness often associated with childhood.

An important early postcolonial reading of Kipling is John A. McClure's *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* (1981). McClure reads Kipling as confirming, yet occasionally challenging British imperial ideology about "the white man's burden" in India. He argues that in the *Jungle Books* and *Kim*, Kipling proposes a model for imperial education that would train more resilient colonial administrators. McClure ultimately argues that Mowgli is a figure for the more responsible and resilient coloniser and "behav[es] towards the beasts as the British do to the Indians" (60). Another well-known postcolonial analysis of Kipling's the *Jungle Books* is John McBratney, in "Imperial Subjects, Imperial Space in Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*" (1992). This influential early essay (later incorporated into a book published in 2002), asserts that The *Jungle Book* "provides a powerful analogy for the British imperial subject caught between individual desire and social restraint" and that this is reflective of Kipling's anxieties about "racial typography" (281). Nonetheless 'liminal' figures, like Mowgli, who represent racial boundary-crossing, are only allowed in the "felicitous space" of the childhood domain or a "psychological return to childhood" (283). Mowgli's "name captures perfectly his unambiguous, amphibious selfhood … 'Mowgli' is Hindi for 'frog'"

(285). Much in McBratney's analysis turns on his reading of "In the Rukh" which he mistakenly refers to as "the concluding tale of *The Jungle Book*" (288). Here older Mowgli and his family sit in a glade apart from imperial foresters and the "walls" of this glade are "permeable," "bel[ying] the clear distinction between inner and outer on which Kipling's conception of felicitous space depends" (289). Mowgli appears to be both of the jungle and its animals and apart from them, but ultimately, he cannot "escape the straight jacket of a unitary adult self-hood to enjoy the liberty of juvenile castelessness, imperial ideology, with its need for clear distinctions between colonizer and colonized, forbids such murkiness of identity" (290). So, in a move that became common in later *Jungle Book* scholarship, McBratney reads the distinction between humans and animals, and between adults and children, as fixed and analogous to the distinction between coloniser and colonised.

The main thrust of M. Daphne Kutzer's argument in *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books* (2000) is that literature for children produced in the colonial era portrayed and consolidated notions of European superiority and the inferiority of the colonised. Kutzer offers a chapter that summarises existing scholarship on Kipling's children's literature and serves as a useful introduction to claims of this kind. A more complex account is offered by Jopi Nyman in *Postcolonial Animal Tale from Kipling to Coetzee* (2003) although his argument, like that of so many others, is based on an allegorical reading of the animals (as Indians): "Kipling's *The Jungle Book* [offers an] imagining of an animal Other that is harnessed to serve the Empire and its British rulers" (38) and "the stories' racialized and interrelated images of Indian children and animals contribute to an imagining of Englishness as a site of power and racial superiority" (38-9).

This approach to the *Jungle Books* (and Kipling's works more broadly) is challenged by Jan Montefiore, in *Rudyard Kipling* (2007), who states of the writer that he was a "disciplinarian imperialist who sympathized with children and outlaws" (jacket). Her discussion of Kipling seeks to position him as a proto-modernist. Of more interest to my project is her chapter "Kipling as a Children's Writer and the *Jungle Books*" (2011). In this she asserts, "[i]deological and/or imperialist readings of Kipling's *Jungle Books* are … not wrong; they just don't quite do the books justice. To concentrate too heavily on these aspects of the *Jungle Books* is to risk oversimplifying them" (102). Further, she claims, "although the animals speak and have their own society, they never become simply humans in disguise"

(104) and to read them as symbolic proxies for humans is problematic. She concludes by affirming Mowgli's distinction from the animals:

> For all the apparently human qualities of the 'Jungle People', Mowgli is finally defined by his difference from them. Kipling's writing for children was undoubtedly fired by the pieties of empire and by the imperialist fantasy of mastering otherness, but its lasting achievement was the creation of the Jungle which readers could enter in imagination to discover the meanings both of wildness and of humanity. (108)

This insistence on reading the animals in the stories as animals, is one I adopt in my thesis.

Sue Walsh, in *Kipling's Children's Literature: Language, Identity and Constructions of Childhood* (2010), argues that the various categories or identities in the stories (animal, human, child, adult, brown, white, etc.) are not as clearly demarcated as earlier critics suggested. She also seeks to question the categorisation of some Kipling texts as children's literature and others as written for adults. Walsh takes issue with Tess Cosslett's claims, in *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction* (2006) that the jungle language(s) in the *Jungle Books* is a hybrid of high and low, primitive and civilised that fixed Mowgli and the animals in a "primitive, poetic" position as if it were a "'native' dialect" translated for readers by Kipling's civilised translator. Walsh argues that all ostensibly binary categories are challenged in the stories. Jessica Straley goes even further, claiming, in *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* (2016), that "[m]ore than a celebration of heterogeneity … language in *The Jungle Books* also enables the man-cub's perpetual, anti-progressive, and lyrical adolescence that need not move forward into formalized notions of white, Western manhood" (130). In contrast, as I discuss under the subheading "Green Approaches," below, some recent critical readings challenge reading Kipling's animals as merely allegories for India's colonised population and urge a more complex reading of his representations of non-human life forms. simply as allegorical stand-ins for human populations, pushing instead toward more complex understandings of how Kipling represents non-human animal life

In the last decade or so, several important studies on the representation of India and Indian children in Victorian children's literature have been published by Indian scholars, and these frequently include chapters on Kipling. A dominant claim in these works is that non-human animals function as 'subaltern' – analogous to natives – within Kipling's *Jungle Books*

stories, as that which needs to be subdued and controlled by the British Empire and Mowgli as a figure for the British and their "colonial gaze." Supriya Goswami's *Colonial India in Children Literature* (2012) stands as a pioneering study that delves into the intersections between children's literature and significant historical events in colonial India. Goswami engages with key theoretical and critical literature that tackles the themes of colonialism, imperial hegemony, and racial marginalisation within children's literature. The book puts forth the argument that British, Anglo-Indian, and Bengali children's literature can be understood as responding to five pivotal historical events: the debates surrounding missionaries before the Charter Act of 1813, the defeat of Tipu Sultan, the Mutiny of 1857, the rise of Indian nationalism and the Swadeshi movement resulting from the partition of Bengal in 1905. Goswami explores how children's literature engages with these significant historical events, each of which disrupted Britain's imperial ambitions in India. Centrally, Goswami argues that "nineteenth-century British and Anglo-Indian children's literature and early-twentieth-century Bengali children's literature attempts to represent, control, and evade momentous historical events in colonial India" (3). In nineteenth-century British and Anglo-Indian texts, she asserts, "[British] children are not only the spokespersons for British colonisation but are also central to the process of consolidating power in India. They are active agents who are able to rescue the Orientalized Englishman and simultaneously attempt to redeem the vast population of India" (4). She claims that pre-Mutiny authors like Mary Martha Sherwood and Barbara Hofland employ conversion and captivity tropes to awaken British children to the perceived perils of India. In contrast, Francis Duncan and Kipling shift the focus to martial prowess, adaptability and empirical knowledge as defining for British and Anglo-Indian children. These writers, she argues, "respond to the post-Mutiny unease" and "to the rise of Indian nationalism" (8). Of particular note, she asserts that in his *Jungle Books*,

> Kipling's desire to legislate all aspects of jungle life in the Mowgli stories can be traced back to his rejection of the Indian National Congress. In the *Jungle Books*, there is a desire to curb the potency of native activism as the animals that are most vocal and threatening to the law of the jungle and to the Anglo-Indian child are ruthlessly ignored or suppressed. (9)

I will return to and contest some aspects of this claim, notably the (straightforward) allegorical reading of the animals, when I discuss the *Jungle Books* in later chapters. Notably, Goswami's study goes beyond the traditional canon by examining early twentieth-century Bengali children's literature as a counterpoint to works by British authors. She argues that Bengali children's literature not only draws inspiration from British children's literature of

the nineteenth century, reflects themes shaped by the empire and grapples with western notions of childhood but interweaves strong Indian nationalistic themes and local folklore. This provides important contexts for my discussion of Rabindranath Tagore's writing for children.

Indians in Victorian Children's Narratives: Animalising the Native 1830-1930 (2017), by Shilpa Bhat Daithota, was published five years after Goswami's book. Daithota reflects upon the impact of Eurocentric discourses on colonial children's literature, particularly in the century leading up to India's Purna Swaraj Declaration (Declaration of Independence) in 1930. Her study encompasses "Prize-Books" for children circulated during the Great Exhibition; British kindergarten primers focused on colonisation/India); Edward Lear's "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World"; and adolescent literature by writers such as Alma Buley, G.A. Henty, Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, E. Nesbit, Hofland and Duncan. Daithota argues that this literature perpetuated Western cultural and economic dominance while dehumanising indigenous Indians, often through the allegorical use of animal imagery, as her subtitle suggests. The book's premise is that argues that British colonial children's literature was used to normalise and justify imperialism, often portraying indigenous Indians as subhuman or inferior. As do many postcolonial critics, she claims the Bandar-log in the *Jungle Tales*, "symbolize 'the natives'… . They are lawless, disorganised … and riotous" (71). Of "Her Majesty's Servants," she asserts that the animals also symbolise "natives" who are portrayed as "disorganized, undisciplined and incapable of ruling themselves" (71).

In *Reading the Animal in the Literature of the British Raj* (2012), Shefali Rajamannar offers an analysis of Kipling's writing, claiming to "build upon [Nyman and Kutzer's] work by including a post-humanist dimension to further investigate how Kipling's use of animals permits the juxtaposition of animals with 'Man' as an important part of the fictional strategies to depict and speak for India." Kipling's use of animals, he asserts further, "allowed him to present the hierarchies of imperialism as 'natural' by invoking 'The Law of the Jungle' as part of nature itself" and the stories thus "underline hierarchies between species as well as within them." In this thesis I seek to complicate the charge of speciesism laid against Kipling by Rajamannar and others. Interestingly, he argues that close analysis of the stories "reveals small but significant ambivalences in the narratives, and, occasionally, even the possibility of alternative readings that tantalizingly beckon the reader into more subversive territory". He

gives the example the discussion of the two sets of eggs or "babies" in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, those of the tailorbirds and those of the cobras, suggesting "Kipling realizes the possible difficulties involved in convincing readers about the virtue of killing one set of 'babies' over another." Most often, Rajamannar draws attention to some instances of ambivalence in the narratives but does not explore these at length.

Literary portrayals of India, Indians, and Indian children in children's literature written in English by Indians in the colonial era

As the above summary suggests, there is a solid body of criticism that reflects on the ways in which India, Indians and Indian children are portrayed in British children's literature. I suggest, however, that one aspect that remains understudied is the literary portrayal of the experiences of colonial Indian literature produced for children, *by* Indian writers. This is an area of study that scholars have only recently begun to explore. According to Nivendita Sen, "In India, childhood has not been theorized with the same vigour as it has in the West" (128). Sudipa Topdar makes a similar claim: "Childhood as a category of analysis remains largely unexplored in Indian historiography" (2). The same could be said of Indian (South Asian) children's literature. Until recently, there has not been much scholarship that discusses Indian children's literature written in English (or translated into English) by Indians during the colonial era. This is understandable for at least two reasons. Firstly, there was not a great deal of literature produced for children by Indian writers through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the significant exception of the flourishing of children's literature in Bengal in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Secondly, when such literature was written and published it was not often in English. An exception is the stories, poems, songs and plays for children that Tagore penned in English and/or translated into English, in addition to his vernacular writing. It is for this reason that I focus in this thesis on Tagore and Bengali children's literature more generally. According to Swapna M. Bannerjee,

> The genealogy of children's literature in Bengali has been generally divided into three broad periods: the age of School Book Society (1818-1846); the age of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1847-1891); and the age of Rabindranath Tagore (1891-1942) or post-Vidyasagar. Scholars have tended to treat the periodical literature separately, which both overlapped and coincided with the books both thematically and temporally. (par 9)

While I mention Tagore's role in creating and promoting periodical literature for children, this is not a main focus in my thesis. An important source in this regard is Sreemoyee Dasgupta's unpublished PhD thesis, *Nationalism, Genre, and Childhood in Colonial Indian Children's Literature* (2021), which focuses on Bengali children's literature, especially that published in periodicals. Dasgupta asserts that this literature was a site for nationalist discourses and modern identity construction and argues against the simple transfer of western notions of childhood onto Indian children or Indian literature for children. She seeks to advance "an alternative non-Western epistemology of childhood, [that] problematiz[es] the already troubled idea of a universal childhood (6). She argues that

> Children's literature emerging from the former colonies can create or enable visions of power and hegemony that have the potential to replicate endlessly the colonial hierarchies of power by inculcating in young minds historical legacies of inequality. Or, these texts can move towards the decolonization and liberation of knowledge by enacting border thinking and decolonizing young minds. (9)

In my thesis I extend this valuable observation by considering how attitudes towards (Indian) nature, revealed in colonial children's literature can "replicate endlessly the colonial hierarchies of power" *or* "move towards the decolonization and liberation of knowledge" with respect to the natural world.

South Asian children's literature, as it has developed in the past century and a half, reflects the vibrant cultural, linguistic, and social tapestry of the subcontinent, offering stories, poems, folktales, and fictional narratives that engage with themes of tradition, identity, and universal values, while also addressing the unique challenges and experiences faced by children in this part of the world. This writing often draws from a deep well of Indian mythology, religion, culture and history making it a valuable resource for both education and entertainment, and serving as a means of preserving and transmitting the rich cultural diversity of the region to younger generations. This is also what makes it difficult for many western scholars to fully understand or appreciate as they lack extensive knowledge of the religious (mainly Hindu but also Buddhist, Jain and Muslim) and mythological texts to which South Asian children are introduced from infancy. I offer a brief summary of some of these important mythological and spiritual narratives, and how the influence of these are evident in the work of Tagore, in my fourth chapter.

Pre-colonial South Asian children's narratives: the rich oral heritage

Before the expansion of colonialism by Great Britain and other European nations, children's narratives in various regions around the world, including South Asia, primarily consisted of oral storytelling, folklore, myths, and religious texts. These traditional narratives were often shaped by the social, religious and cultural contexts of the societies they originated from. They had a strong educational and socialising function, instilling important life lessons and cultural norms. They also frequently evoked nature or non-human animals, as central to the morals they imparted.

The ancient Sanskrit text *Panchatantra*, attributed to Vishnu Sharma thousands of years ago,[2] provides profound insights into human behaviour, often through its portrayal of animal characters (Rohit Mishra 239-249). Many of the fables in this collection, written in prose and poetry, were written for children and impart practical wisdom and knowledge, guiding readers in the art of intelligent living, imparting moral values and practical knowledge that were fundamentally based in nature. Its influence can be seen in subsequent South Asian children's literature, with writers drawing upon its narrative techniques, animal characters, and moral themes. Significantly for my purposes, Tagore draws on both the *Ramayana* and the *Panchatantra* in his writing for children. Also interesting is that Kipling is said to have derived the plot several of his stories from ancient Indian beast fables. Nagai asserts that "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" owes much to the tale "the faithful Mongoose" in the *Panchatantra* and "The King's Ankus" has similarities to a Jakata tale called "The Robbers and the Treasure "(Nagai *Imperial Beast Fables* 35). Nagai quotes from a letter Kipling wrote to Everett Hale, an American author, in 1895: "The idea of the beast-tales seems to me new in that it is a most ancient and long forgotten idea. … Most of the native hunters in India think pretty much along the lines of an animal's brain and I have 'cribbed' freely from their tales" (qtd. Nagai, 36). Nagai asserts, then, that"["[t]he imperial beast fable is created through the coloniser's appropriation of this living oral tradition" (38).

Of particular importance to my discussion of Tagore's writing in this dissertation is the vital role played by nature in ancient Hindu religious narratives, such as the Vedas. The Vedic

[2] The surviving text is dated to 200 BCE but the fables it collects are thought to be much more ancient. Some attribute the text to Vasubhaga, not Vishnu Sharma, but both names may be fictitious. There are versions of the text in almost all major Indian languages, and it has been translated into at least 50 global languages.

hymns honour deities and are suffused with a love for the beauty of the environment. Of this Meera Baindur writes,

> If we examine the philosophy and the belief system behind the praise of these various gods including the earth, we find that the Vedic people had a give-and-take relationship with the universe or cosmos. A review of the philosophy behind rituals and myths shows that the people lived by a rule of reciprocity. … According to this view, all nature participates in a cycle where nothing is wasted or lost. (141-141).

Similarly, Susheel Kumar Sharma and Debajyoti Biswas write, "[t]he Vedic literature, considered to be the foundational text of Hindu practices, provides glimpses of environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, hydrologic cycles, rainfall phenomena and related subjects through hymns and rituals. In the Hindu consciousness, there is no duality between the environment and man" (35). They continue, "Hindus feel God's presence around them through nature; they consider all the natural forces to be the manifestations of the Supreme Being or God named Brahman" (36).

The influence of the Vedas on Tagore's thought and writing cannot be overemphasised. Alexander P. Varghese claims, "[t]he Vedic hymns have been described by Rabindranath Tagore as 'a poetic testament of a people's collective reaction to the wonder and awe of existence'" (103). Equally important are the Upanishads, philosophical texts exploring the nature of reality, self, and divinity and from which Tagore drew the ideas of the universal self (Atman) and its unity with the ultimate reality (Brahman) that would become central to his own spiritual and literary vision. According to Santosh Chakrabarti, for example, "the mystique of faith and man that led to Tagore's sublimation from humanism to world-humanism was without doubt rooted in his close study of the Upanishads" (24). Beyond the Vedas and Upanishads, Tagore drew deeply from the broader well of Indian epic and mythological literature including the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (which incorporates the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the Puranas; texts that offered him not only stories and characters but also complex explorations of dharma, duty, devotion, and the tangled relationships between gods and humans in which nature is not a mere backdrop but a sacred, interconnected and living entity, all of which find their way into his poetry, plays, and fiction in ways both direct and subtly transformed.

As I will discuss later in this thesis, Tagore had a deep, reverential respect for trees and forests. According to ecologist David Lee, the popular epic narrative *Ramayana* encodes precisely this attitude towards forests. He asserts, "[t]he challenge in the preservation of India's natural resources is not to exclude people from the resources, but to encourage inhabitants living in forests to live in a fashion that sustains the use of the natural resources and the protection of the biota" (257). This is an idea promoted by Tagore, whose veneration of forests, and nature more generally, does not seek to exclude humans; his vision is one of co-existence and mutual sustainability of the human and non-human forms of life. An excellent resource on ecology and environmentalism, Hindu mythology and religious texts is Gavin van Horn's survey of contemporary "scholarly investigation[s] of the convergences between Hindu traditions and the natural world" (5) in "Hindu Traditions and Nature: Survey Article" (2006). A more recent book chapter elaborates further, Gavin Flood's "Hinduism and Nature" (2024). Flood notes that "Hindu conceptualizations of nature are varied and depend upon different kinds of metaphysical systems and conceptions of the self" and "[e]ach conception of nature has different implications for the environment, and each entails a distinct anthropology."[3] (See also Sharma and Biswas, mentioned above.) For further reading, Pankaj Jain's *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* (2011) offers detailed ethnographic case studies of how contemporary Hindu communities, such as the Bishnois and Swadhyayis, enact ecological principles drawn from their religious traditions, demonstrating that these are not merely textual ideals but living practices (209). Additionally, Christopher Key Chapple and Pankaj Jain's "Ecology in Hinduism" (2011), provides a comprehensive overview of scholarly approaches to the subject, surveying traditional resources from the Vedas and epics to contemporary movements and activist figures like Vandana Shiva, and includes valuable sections on forests, sacred groves, rivers, and animals within Hindu environmental thought.

Also of interest is recent research by Subhadipa Dutta that challenges the "one-way diffusionist model" that "narrowly projects colonized Bengali subjects as passive recipients of Western-derived ideas about childhood" (169). Dutta argues that in pre-colonial Bengali society, Maṅgala-kāvyas, religious verse narratives from the thirteenth to eighteenth

[3] It is of course problematic to assume "Hinduism" endorses a singular and monolithic set of religious tenets. Further, Tagore's "Hinduism" was a complex blend of multiple traditions. He was born into a Brahmin family, but their Brahmo Samaj faith was of a reformist and monotheistic. His personal beliefs were universalist and humanist and were strongly influenced by not only Upanishadic philosophy but also Sufism and Baul mysticism.

centuries, served as a means of cultural transmission, reflecting a strong concern for childhood and "the folk-literary construction of children and childhood play in the texts helps us understand how the Bengali folk tradition *viewed* children and their playful activities in accordance with the gender- and caste-based arrangement of the prevailing society" (170). The significance of Dutta's research lies in her challenge to the idea that the concept of childhood in India was a colonial import. Her work suggests new ways of conceiving (colonial) Indian children's literature too, inviting the consideration that it blends traditional ideas and values with ones received from Europe.

The rich legacy of the prior Muslim dominance in the Indian sub-continent, like that of the Mughal Empire, also influenced narratives for children or educational narratives and learning more generally, prior to colonisation by the British (see Ali Riaz). Many folktales shared with children reflect the basic cultural elements from this heritage. Folktales contained in *One Thousand and One Nights*, composed over centuries during the Islamic Golden Age in the Middle East and Asia, were also highly influential. Apart from this, the teachings of Qur'ān (the holy book of Muslims) also manifest in the characters, narratives, and moral lessons prevalent in pre-colonial children's stories, especially in the area that now forms the Pakistan nation and connected children to their religious and historical past.

Contemporary research on colonial children's literature written by Indian authors

Several scholars have traced the impact of colonisation on the development of children's literature in India. One region that has attracted particular attention is Bengal. According to Rimi B. Chatterjee and Nilanjana Gupta, in their introduction to *Reading Children* (2009), a collection of essays and articles on writing for children in India in the nineteenth century, the concept of children's literature was introduced to India by the British and was embraced enthusiastically by Indian readers. Although, as noted above, India had a rich tradition of oral folk and fairy tales, the introduction of print culture in Bengal (for example) through British missionaries in the late-eighteenth century led to the production of the first books explicitly designed for child readers. Initially, these included primers, moralistic chapbooks, and other materials aimed at not just entertaining Indian children but instructing them. Throughout the nineteenth century, Bengal witnessed a flourishing publishing climate that promoted literature tailored for Indian children, often inspired by British literary forms. The

development of Bengali children's literature is thus intrinsically linked to the histories of colonial and missionary endeavours in India. Within this imperialist framework, authors, publishers, critics, and educators all played roles in promoting culturally hegemonic literature, disseminating it through schools and entertainment platforms. However, there was also growth in the creation and dissemination of children's literature by local authors, and this has only recently begun to be analysed by scholars.

In a recently completed, unpublished PhD dissertation, *Nationalism, Genre and Childhood in Colonial Indian Children's Literature* (2021), Sreemoyee Dasgupta asserts that childhood in the colonial era has been predominantly studied through European historical, sociological, and anthropological lenses, while "children's literature of the Global South is still understudied" (5). She seeks to explore "the political impact of the construct of the Romantic child as a bulwark against epistemic and physical violence in colonial India" (125). That said, she makes the following important point:

> If we recognize that the figure of 'the child' is a construct and that there is no one formulation of childhood that all children adhere to, we must equally also admit that the figure of 'Indian childhood' is a mere figuration with differing significances and serving diverse functions depending on the changes in the socio-political climate. … There is no one Indian childhood, and perspectives on childhood and reading, education, literacy and textual consumption vary across regions, states. (19)

I remain mindful of and alert to this diversity despite limiting my discussion in this thesis to children's literature produced in colonial Bengal, notably by Tagore.

As I have discussed, it has been widely argued that the impact of British colonialism on the South Asian subcontinent brought about changes in perceptions of childhood, aligning with European developments and, especially, with elements of Romantic thinking. However, while the emergence in South Asia of childhood as a distinct phase of life paralleled the European evolution, this shift was also influenced by indigenous cultural factors (Cunningham 684). It is essential to recognise that while the European child's narrative was shaped by philosophers like Locke and Rousseau, and the writing of the Romantics, in the South Asian context it was shaped by a blend of indigenous perspectives and colonial influences. British ideals often coexisted with the unequal power dynamics and the demands for cultural assimilation

inherent to colonialism. The analysis of South Asian children's literature reveals how these ideals intersected with local narratives, whether as vehicles for resistance or assimilation.

Such an analysis is the task undertaken by Debasree Ghosh in a recently completed PhD dissertation, *A Literature of One's Own: British Literary Influence on the Development of Indian Children's Genres*. She summarises her central thesis thus:

> [T]the consumption of and engagement with British literary genres by Indian writers of juvenile literature helped define a local literary identity of the colonised child. Significantly, Indian children's literature from the 19th century onwards is not merely a derivative discourse, which would have only furthered the colonial agenda. Instead, its complex interactions with English literature result in a range of localised adaptations, radical appropriations, and subtle subversions of British genres, all of which developed in accordance with the evolving notion of Indian childhood. (iv)

Ghosh notes that colonisation was "a precondition of the existence of the children's genre in India" (1), a fact that shapes her approach in the thesis in which she considers the impact of British writing on (largely) Bengali children's literature, while still arguing for its hybrid nature insofar as it also reflects indigenous elements and concerns. Rimli Bhattacharya similarly argues that while colonisation is largely responsible for the existence of children's literature as a distinct genre in India, nonetheless this literature is unique for its blending of British and indigenous traditions, influences and genres. This is something discussed by Laurence Brockliss, albeit not in relation to India or Bengal specifically, in his introduction to *Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After* (2016). Brockliss comments on "how partial, fine and complex the imprint of Western theories of childhood and childhood development could be on movements for national reform and regeneration in non-Western countries in the decades before and after the First World War" (11). Henry Schwarz uses the term "aesthetic imperialism" to discuss how literature produced in India aided the "conquest of India" (563). Schwarz notes that by 1857 the Vernacular Literature Society (VLS), or Bangla Anubadok Samiti [Bengali Translators' Society], had published the following (mainly children's) works, translated into Bengali, in sixty thousand volumes: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Paul and Virginia*, *Parley's Wonders of History*, Hans Christian Andersen's *Wild Swans*, Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, Percey's *Anecdotes*, *The Tinder Box*, *Chinese Nightingale*, *Story of a Mother*, *Indian Romance*, *Four Winds*, *Elizabeth or the Exiles of Siberia*, and *The Ugly Duckling* (579). However, these British-sanctioned translated texts were not the only ones

available to Indian children. Supriya Goswami, in *Colonial India in Children's Literature*, discussed above, not only traces the influence of colonisation on British and Anglo-Indian children's literature but insists that "one can hardly underestimate the impact of anti-colonial Bengali children's literature on Bengali children" (12). She argues that "early twentieth-century Bengali children's literature is an excellent example of the power of Indian defiance – emerging from the most subaltern of sources – to counter colonial rule" (12). To this end, she closely analyses the writing of Upendrakishore Ray (Raychaudhuri) and his son Sukumar Ray. Tagore was a close friend of Upendrakishore and Sukumar was one of Tagore's students and also, later, a close friend. The Rays influence on Tagore is especially evident in the 'nonsense' writing for children he produced in the last decade of his life.

Goswami provides an informative summary of the rise of Bengali children's magazines from about 1870 (139 – 141), drawing on Satadru Sen's research from which she quotes: "Beginning in the 1870s, the Bengali press had articulated a desire to construct its experimental terrain of childhood, i.e., a juvenile periphery of its own that might resist, overlap, complement or render redundant the histories and geographies of Bengal that were produced by British writers" (qtd. 140). According to Goswami, the developing Bengali children's literature engaged in a revival of traditional Indian folklore that was not simply mediated by British orientalist scholarship: "As in the case of the Brothers Grimm and their collection of German folktales, these efforts aimed at appealing to a collective Bengali identity grounded in folk culture, while addressing a dual audience of children and adults" (141). A key figure in this revival, notes Goswami, was Tagore. As Suchismita Sen argues, Tagore's initiatives resulted in "a spurt of activity in the editing and publishing of folk songs, folktales, and nursery rhymes during this period" ("Tagore's *Lokashahitya*" 2). I discuss this in my fourth chapter.

Sudipa Topdar further elaborates on the contestatory nature of Bengali children's periodicals. She focuses on the period 1870 to 1925 and considers both the colonial school and its curriculum, with a particular focus on textbooks and physical education and local sites of knowledge production beyond the confines of the school. This latter involves the nationalist pedagogy found in Bengali children's magazines in which "the colonised Bengali intelligentsia engaged with Western knowledge and exercised their agency in producing parallel and competing strands of knowledge" for local children (177). She investigates the colonial child, the colonial school curriculum, the child's body as politically charged sites of contestation. As Indian nationalism emerged in the late nineteenth century, the native child

began to gain political significance, and their politicisation was seen as desirable. In response, the British colonial state sought greater control over curriculum selection and regulation to counter its anxieties and shape loyal imperial subjects especially via physical education, bodily discipline and cleanliness. She charts the British attempt to regulate, censor and control the texts of school children, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries to foster ideas of British superiority (moral, racial, intellectual), deny Indian agency and allay nationalism. Against this, he contrasts the growing body of Bengali children's periodical literature and the nationalism they encouraged.

Gautam Chando also highlights the role of juvenile magazines in promoting awareness about nature and the physical world among Indian children in the colonial era. Chando is of the view that, through the juvenile magazines, the physical world (nature) was portrayed in all its fascinating strangeness and variety, which motivated young readers to take interest in the physical world and delight in it. Magazine articles were published regarding the role of the sun, the moon, and the stars, for example, and in this way the young readers were introduced to the celestial bodies like Dhruba, the pole star and the Saptarshim or the Great Bear Constellation. Indian (Bengali) children were regaled with stories of visits to distant locations like Amritsar (Punjab) in the north and Tiruchirapalli in the south, the hill stations of Darjeeling and Shimla, and adventures in the jungles of Assam and Burma (53).

As the above researchers suggest, in the late-nineteenth and 20th century, South Asian children's literature – certainly in Bengal – began to evolve from something that merely emulated British sources to provide a forum for indigenous voices, influenced by a growing resistance to colonisation, world wars, and the partition of India. British colonisers initially dominated children's literature with western adaptations, reflecting British values and themes. As the century progressed, South Asian authors increasingly incorporated their cultural identities and vernacular languages, drawing inspiration from indigenous folktales, legends, and traditions to create literature that resonated with South Asian children. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh each developed their distinct approaches to children's literature, reflecting their unique contexts (Talukder 274).

Exploring the essence: representation of nature and ecological issues in children's literature world-wide

In the vast realm of children's literature around the world, a profound exploration awaits as we delve into the representation of nature and ecological issues. This journey encompasses the fusion of storytelling and ecological consciousness, resulting in narratives which not only captivate young minds but also instil an appreciation of the natural world. From the roots of classical poetry praising the beauty of trees and flowers to contemporary interdisciplinary analyses, the relationship between literature, the environment and ecological sustainability has been an evolving discourse. My thesis contributes to this growing area of literary analysis, drawing inspiration from pioneers like Rachel Carson and the subsequent emergence of eco-criticism. One of the premises that underpins my discussions of Kipling's *Jungle Books* and selected writing for (and about) children by Tagore is that literature can convey attitudes towards nature (positive and negative), if not always deliberately, in ways that can have a profound effect on children and their environmental attitudes. Lea Baratz and Hanna Abu Haveira are not alone is their belief that literature has an important role to play in "the assimilation of values and instilling of an ideological infrastructure which will become a way of life" (31). This is also an idea promoted by John Stephens in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), who argues that "the discourses of children's fiction are pervaded by ideological presuppositions, sometimes obtrusively and sometimes invisibly" (1-2). His focus in not on environmental attitudes – he explores the ways in which literature "socialises" children in picture books, historical fiction and fantasy texts, but his central idea is one that many critics have adopted, including those of an ecocritical bent. Mushin Yanar, for example, asserts, "[c]hildren's literature plays a significant part in children's imaginative and socio-emotional development, as it facilitates the shaping of their worldview, nurtures their imagination, fosters empathy, and cultivates environmental consciousness" (852).

Many claim that the intersection of literature and ecology gained significant attention with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, a work that blended scientific research with compelling literary prose. Reviewers noted the effectiveness of Carson's rhetorical strategies, her use of pastoral and apocalyptic imagery, and literary allusions, while also suggesting that her work could benefit from a more literary or cultural analysis (Garrard Ch.3). Carson's book prompted an increased interest in an interdisciplinary approach to literature and ecology. In 1974, in *The Comedy of Survival*, Joseph Meeker introduced the concept of *literary ecology,* proposing that coexistence or separation from the natural world

could define comedy and tragedy respectively. Meeker argued that comedy aligned with survival and existence within the natural world, while tragedy involved estrangement from other life forms, distancing characters from the natural world. Building on Meeker's ideas, William Rueckert coined the term *eco-criticism* in 1978. Rueckert aimed to explore the application of ecological concepts to literature, emphasizing the relevance of ecology to the present and future of our world (107). Modern eco-criticism finds its roots primarily in Rueckert's broad definition, although scholars have endeavoured to refine this concept further, considering Rueckert's theory to be overly expansive. In 1989, Cheryl Glotfelty proposed her own rephrased definition, stating that "eco-criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature ... it negotiates between the human and non-human" ("Introduction" to *The Ecocriticism Reader* xix). This redefinition aimed to incorporate eco-criticism into the study of nature writing, contributing significantly to the popularisation of the term. A key foundational text in this regard is Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995). In recent decades, scholars have continued to seek ways to enhance both Glotfelty's and Ruecker's definition and a number of essay collections and 'readers' have been published that expand on aspects of the growing field, including *The Literature of Nature: The Eco-critical Reader* (1998), edited by Patrick D. Murphy, and *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000), edited by Laurence Coupe. These later eco-critics understand 'nature' as intrinsically bound up with the human world, which has been altered by humans. In *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), for example, Timothy Morton seeks to undermine conventional romanticised notions of nature and Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism* (2012) defines eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (5) in cultural productions of various kinds, moving away from pastoral and nature writing. Rob Nixon's influential *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), considers the gradual impacts of climate change, deforestation, oils spills, and so on, and how this exacerbates struggles and suffering of the poor and disempowered. Environmental justice is also the focus of *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* (2014), edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, which explores the ways in which environmental degradation impacts the subordination of women from a variety of feminist perspectives. More recently, *Contemporary Ecocritical Methods* (2024), edited by Camilla Brudin Borg, Rikard Wingård, and Jørgen Bruhn, offers an account or more contemporary approaches, and surveys a range of eco-philosophies.

While Rueckert's eco-critical theory gained traction in the '80s and '90s, only a few scholars applied it to the analysis of children's literature. In 1995, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) dedicated a special issue to *Children's Literature and the Environment*. Simultaneously, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, a scholarly journal focused on children's literature, published a special issue themed "Green Worlds: Nature and Ecology," edited by Suzanne Rahn. Rahn's contribution to this discourse highlighted how nature writing for children can translate into activism, emphasising the positive portrayal of animals in children's stories as advocates for the environment. Her work underscores the importance of childhood investment in environmental causes, as reflected in various youth-led environmental campaigns.

Building on these discussions, the year 2004 saw the publication of Dobrin and Kidd's *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Eco-criticism,* a collection of essays exploring the interplay between children's texts and environmental experiences. One notable essay by Kamala Platt, "Environmental Justice Children's Literature," addresses issues of environmental racism and emphasises the symbiotic relationship between nature and humanity. Platt argues that stories of victories over environmental challenges must be continually told and rephrased for new generations (125). In subsequent years, scholars like Aïda Hudson and Rachel Sakrisson further expanded the eco-critical exploration of children's literature. Hudson's work, *Children's Literature and Imaginative Geography* (2019), examines how fantasy environments in children's literature invite engagement with real environments. Meanwhile, Sakrisson introduces the concept of the "benevolent forest," emphasizing a departure from narratives that either excessively romanticise or portray nature as dangerously untamed. This evolving trend in eco-critical approaches to children's literature leans towards advancing/ supporting the representation of a harmonious human relationship with nature, serving as a model for fostering eco-conscious future generations.

Green approaches to the *Jungle Books* and Tagore's children's writing

In recent years, a growing body of eco-critical scholarship has complicated earlier readings of the *Jungle Books* that treated the animal characters primarily as allegorical figures for human and specifically colonial subjects. Such discussions advance a more complex understanding of how Kipling represents non-human animal life and share a commitment to reading the nonhuman in Kipling on its own terms, not merely as metaphor, while remaining attuned to

the destructive ecological dimensions of the imperial project I draw on these in my discussion of Kipling in Chapters Two and Three. Sue Walsh, in her book-length study *Kipling's Children's Literature* (2010), deconstructs the animal/human binary altogether, arguing that the Mowgli stories "call into question the borders between child and adult, human and animal, 'native' and 'white'" (63). Jan Montefiore, in "Kipling as a Children's Writer and the *Jungle Books*" (2011), offers a balanced assessment of Kipling's place in the children's literary tradition, acknowledging his imperial leanings while also recognising the enduring appeal and complexity of the stories. Taken together, these critics suggest that reading the *Jungle Books* today requires holding multiple frames in view: the imperial context, certainly, but also the ecological, the animal, and the deeply ambiguous ways Kipling writes across all of them.

Sune Borkfelt, in "Colonial Animals and Literary Analysis" (2009), warns against reading the animals "only in terms of what the animals can be said to represent metaphorically," arguing that child readers are "apt to take some of the descriptions of animals and their characteristics at face value" (559). According to Borkfelt, the stereotypes attached to different species – the "lazy" camel, the "wicked" snake, the "bloodthirsty" tiger – matter because they shape young readers' (judgemental) perceptions of actual animals and the environments they inhabit and result in the vilification of some species at the expense of others.

Christie Harner offers perhaps the most sustained ecocritical reading of the *Jungle Books* to date. In "Geopolitical Temporalities and Animal Ecologies in the *Jungle Books*" (2019), she insists that dominant postcolonial readings have focused too narrowly on "Mowgli's fraught identity" while neglecting "the animal characteristics of the non-human characters" (135). She asserts that "imperialism was concurrently sociopolitical and ecological," with effects on the natural world "as immense as those on indigenous peoples" (136). She critiques the dominant postcolonial approach for focusing "less on the impacted jungle ecosystem and more on Mowgli's fraught identity," thereby "neglecting the animal characteristics of the non-human characters" (135). Drawing on theories of ecological regime shifts, Harner shows how Kipling portrays human disruption like deforestation, bridge-building, water diversion, as affecting every layer of the jungle, and she attends to the tension between linear historical time and cyclical ecological time, arguing that the stories unsettle any simple faith in imperial "progress." Harner demonstrates how human actions, deforestation, bridge-building and water diversion, fundamentally alter animal ecosystems, and she attends to "the multiplicity

of temporal rhythms" in selected *Jungle Book* stories, tracing the tension between linear historical time and cyclical ecological time (137). The human-made bridge in "The Undertakers," often read as signifying imperial progress, is shown to unsettle rather than confirm such ideologies: "The startling conflation of a specific event [the 1857 Mutiny] with a longer evolutionary course ... works to unsettle projections of the British conquest of the natural world and native people, to challenge ideologies of progressive, future-focused improvement" (142). Harner's approach, like those of Roy and Nagai, stresses that the *Jungle Books* must be read both geopolitically and ecologically, recognising that the rupture each story depicts is always simultaneously imperial and environmental. In what follows, I augment and expand, via extended close reading, her observation that "'The Undertakers' introduces an indigenous ecosystem defined by cyclical routines but interrupted by the linear imposition of a British-built railroad bridge" (141). I also draw attention to other "ruptures" that are "simultaneously imperial and ecological" in my analysis of a number of other stories.

Other recent scholarship also complicates postcolonial allegorical readings. Kaori Nagai, in "The Beast in Chinese Boxes" (2015), suggests that Kipling's portrayal of the British Empire's technological expansion like railways, steamships, infrastructure, creates a "global network that intertwines humans, animals, and modern technologies," and she highlights how local animals adapt to these changes while "bearing witness to the transformative effects of colonization" (240). Her focus is on "In the Rukh," "Servants of the Queen" and "The White Seal," which she reads as evidencing the nineteenth-century fascination with non-European beast fables. Her argument is that Kipling's rewritings such fables both assert the ideologies of the British Empire and covertly challenge these. This emphasis on Kipling's indigenous narrative borrowings is not a concern I address in this thesis in any sustained way. However, Nagai's insistence on covert critique is an idea I carry through in my readings of Kipling stories she does not discuss, such a Rikki Tikki Tavi," "When Fear Came" and "The Undertakers."

Parama Roy, in "Kipling's Bestiary" (2017), writes from a postcolonial perspective as an Indian expatriate scholar, insisting that Kipling reminds us "of the degree to which the nonhuman is key to a comprehensive grasp of the imperial world" and that postcolonial theory has too long engaged the category of the human "without sufficient consideration of other orders of life in the colony" (833). Her interest in this essay is on Kipling's story, "The Mark of the Beast," a text I do not consider in this thesis, and during her discussion she

stresses elements in the text where Kipling blurs the boundaries between animals and humans. Roy's argument is that "Kipling makes the human-nonhuman contact zone the *mise-en-scene* for thinking about the limits, sometimes but not invariably uneasy, of their proximity and co-habitation. Thus the lesson to be learned in the colony, albeit with great difficulty, is how to distinguish occasions for domination of nonhuman life from occasions for dependence on it or for maintaining an uncompromising distance from it" (824). I do not directly follow this approach regarding the animal/human "contact zone" in what follows, but the "uneasy" "proximity and co-habitation" of animals and humans is something I explore in my analysis of several *Jungle Books* stories, especially in *The Second Jungle Book*. In "The Strange Ecologies of Empire" (2021), Roy comments positively on Victorian literature scholarship that draw attention to the ways in which imperial landscapes "encompass more orders of the animate than the human," presenting "a teeming environment bursting with energy, perhaps even with agency," where nonhuman life – animal, vegetal, even machinic – proliferates (74). Roy stresses that imperial landscapes were never purely human but rather "a complex mesh of transversal and co-constitutive human and extra-human ecologies" (74). Kipling is only mentioned in passing in the essay which offers a complex account of how, in selected imperial texts, "human and nonhuman predation brings into visibility the degree to which imperial sovereignty in the Victorian period entails traffic across human and extrahuman domains" and, thus, "thinking about the sanctioned killing of fearsome animal predators comes to be twinned with thinking about wars of pacification against dangerous humans and noxious deities" (75). These observations have influenced my analysis of the ambiguous and selective ways in which predatory animals are portrayed in the *Jungle Books*.

A parallel ecocritical turn has emerged in Tagore scholarship, with recent work – mainly by South Asian scholars – seeking to position Tagore as a significant ecologically-aware thinker. Amartya Mukhopadhyay's *Tagore and the Margins of the Nation under Colonialism* (2024) delineates what he terms Tagore's "Upaniṣadic ecologism," showing how it "creatively evoked anticolonialism and patriotism" and tracing Tagore's "journey from shallow to deep ecology" across his writings. The edited collection *Ecodisaster Imaginaries in India* (2023), edited by Scott Slovic, Jojit Ghosh and Samit Kumar Matai, addresses "the staunch ecological consciousness reflected in Rabindranath Tagore's writings from the early twentieth century," positioning him within postcolonial disaster studies and the environmental humanities. Goutam Buddha Sural's chapter "Romanticizing Greenness: A Reading of Rabindranath Tagore from an Eco-theological Perspective" offers a sustained

ecocritical analysis that situates Tagore's nature-focused spirituality within broader environmental frameworks. Recent scholarship has also explored Tagore through posthumanist and ecological lenses: Bratati Barik's "Blurring of Boundaries in Selected Short Stories of Tagore" adopts a posthumanist perspective, analysing how stories like "Hungry Stones" and "Chutti: The Homecoming" highlight "the significance of bringing flora, fauna, and the natural environment back into the domain of human existence" while questioning anthropocentrism. Mukherjee's *Interrogating Eco-Literature and Sustainable Development* (2023), edited by Sharbani Banerjee Mukherjee and Soumitra Roy, further examines Tagore's work within the framework of ecological crisis and sustainable development, analysing his "oriental representations of ecological consciousness" alongside the thought of contemporary environmental thinkers. The collection includes an essay by Nilanjana Chatterjee that reads Tagore's play *Red Oleanders* from an ecofeminist perspective. A number of recent articles, published in Indian journals, also discuss Tagore in ecocritical terms, as I discuss later in this thesis. What unites these recent approaches is a recognition that Tagore's vision, whether in his creative writing, non-fictional prose or educational philosophy, consistently affirms what Mukhopadhyay calls "the inseparable bond between humans and the natural world," and promotes not only environmentalism but an ecological consciousness that anticipates and speaks to twenty-first-century concerns about the damage caused by anthropcentism.

Colonial attitudes to nature in lands colonised by Europeans / the British Empire

In order to set the scene for what follows in this thesis, it is necessary to outline both colonial attitudes towards the lands they colonised and the environmental impact of colonisation on colonial environments, notable in South Asia. A repeated theme in discussions of colonial attitudes towards nature in colonised lands is that these attitudes were mixed and in tension. The Romanticisation of nature, which had its origins in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century European reactions against scientific rationalism, and increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, stands in ironic contrast to the reality of colonial exploitation and ecological disruption in the 'mission' to 'civilise' landscapes (and people) that appeared wild and threatening, make captured lands fertile and productive and, at first glance surprisingly, enact various conservation strategies. Most often, these latter were motivated by the desire to

manage environmental resources for the use and benefit of the coloniser. However, as Kavita Philip reminds us,

> The practice of colonial science was not the simple execution of an instrumentalist exploitation of native and nature. Its full complexity includes the dialectic between two forms of post-Enlightenment perception of the jungle and the primitive: as a potential source of material resources to be harnessed to production, as well as a site to rediscover the Romanticist harmonies and aesthetic resources which industrial progress seemed to have dispelled from the mother country's hinterland. (*Civilising Natures* 10)

This "dialectic" or tension is a theme that I trace in this thesis through the analysis of Kipling's portrayal of the Indian "wilderness" or "jungle."

Important early books on the subject of colonial attitudes towards the land they colonised were generally penned by historians and include Alfred W. Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* (1986; focused on Australia); William Beinart and Peter Coates's *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (2002) and *Imperialism and the Natural World* (1990), a collection of essays, edited by John M. MacKenzie. Contributors to this volume are particularly focused on the influence of the emerging natural sciences – botany, geology, geography – in British colonies, and on the ways in which colonial conservation efforts were, ironically, a form of "ecological hegemony" (15), in the words of one contributor, Richard H. Grove. By this he means the dominance of western powers over global ecosystems and natural resources through colonisation was deeply exploitative and involved the imposition of their (often vastly unsuited) environmental ideologies and practices. Landscapes were exploited for commodity production, and this radically (and almost always destructively) transformed traditional relationships between people, forests, non-arable environments, and the animals that lived within these. Ironically, this resulted in the introduction of conservation strategies – but only to protect colonial commercial interests. One of the first texts to trace the origins and early history of environmentalism in its complex global manifestations is Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (1996). Other important earlier studies in the field include *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (1997), edited by Tom Griffiths; Libby Robin and Thomas R. Dunlap's *Nature and The English Diaspora: Environmental History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and*

New Zealand (1999); Peder Aker's *Imperial Ecology* (2001); and William Beinart and Lotte Hughes's *Environment and Empire* (2007). These books explore vastly different landscapes and forms of occupation; but all, in one way or another, grapple with the interaction of (indigenous) "nature" and (colonial) "science." They focus on two broad areas: studies on the causes and impacts of colonial landscape interventions and alterations to 'civilise' and enhance productivity (such as deforestation, dam or canal construction, the building of roads and railways, etc.) and colonial environmental policy, aimed at the protection of the landscape when commercially valuable natural resources diminished.

Of particular relevance to my project are publications that address such issues in the South Asian context. A vast majority of the books and articles on these themes focus on India, although other South Asian countries are also discussed in some critical literature. A groundbreaking early study on colonial alterations to the South Asian landscape is K. Sivaramakrishnan's study on deforestation, *Modern Forests: State-making and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (1999). Published in the same year, Gyan Prakash's *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (1999) considers the impact of European scientific thinking on colonial India. In a discussion that covers 200-odd years of Indian colonial history, Prakash argues that while nature's purity was celebrated in Romantic terms by the colonisers, they also used advances in science and technology to legitimise and maintain their control over the Indian landscape (123). This paradox illustrates the intricate interplay between rhetoric and reality and raises important questions about the extent to which ideals can mask exploitation. Also significant is S. Ravi Rajan's *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development*, *1800-1950* (2006). More recently, Pallavi V. Das's *Colonialism, Development, and the Environment: Railways and Deforestation in British India, 1860-1884* (2015) explores the environmental consequences of railway construction and operation in the Punjab region. Das notes that "in the period of high imperialism, the colonial regime had great confidence in its ability to conquer nature through the use of technology and railways" (4). Of interest, too, is Janine Wilhelm's *Environment and Pollution in Colonial India: Sewerage Technologies along the Sacred Ganges* (2016) and *The East India Company and the Natural World* (2014), edited by V. Damodaran, A. Winterbottom and A. Lester, a collection of essays that consider the role of the East India Company as a "catastrophic" "agent of environmental change" (xii).

From jungles to gardens and farms: cultivating/civilising the threatening and fearful "wild"

In contrast to, and in conflict with, the Romantic perception (or fantasy) of non-European lands as untouched paradises peopled by noble savages, there was the fear of untamed, tropical wildernesses swarming with savages, dangerous animals, noxious plants, and diseases. This was certainly the way many British colonisers looked on the Indian "jungle" which was regarded as something that needed to be domesticated and controlled. This is something Kakoli Sinha Ray explores in her unpublished PhD dissertation, *Ordering the Wild: Shikar* [Hunting]*, Wildlife and Conservation in Colonial Bengal (1850-1947)* (2016). She writes of the "jungle":

> The untamed wilderness of Hindustan was a site which needed to be ordered and integrated within the Empire, as a chaotic domain could not be permitted to exist in British India. The vast unclaimed tracts and the *jungles* per se were 'savage' and even those woodlands which were kept as reserves defied the notions of order, hence the imperial power took it upon themselves to transform the *jungles* of India into 'forests' – ordered entities which conformed to the standards of 'forests' that existed back 'home.' (4)

Ray details the massive destruction that resulted from colonial attempts to control India's jungles and comments on the great irony that this resulted in remedial attempts to protect and restore them via a series of "Forest Acts" from the 1860s onwards. These aimed to turn 'wild' areas of indigenous flora into managed ones for resource extraction and leisure activity (hunting).

In pursuing the aim of civilising – and later 'protecting' – the wild and extracting its resources, the colonisers banned the access of local communities to their own lands and natural resources to achieve their commercial interests. Ramachandra Guha was an early contributor to discussions about colonial attitude towards South Asian/Indian forests in his work *Forestry in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis* (1983). Guha is of the view that the British rulers in South Asia initially disregarded the need for conservation of forests because of their focus on export trade and military needs. The South Asian forests were first considered as obstacles to the development of the economy and the collection of revenue. Later, in 1806, the discovery of teak reserves in Malabar sparked the interest of the British Empire in South Asian

forests. They started felling trees for the ship-building industry, and later construction of a network of railway tracks to facilitate troop communication and to enhance the export of raw materials from the colony and the importation of finished goods from the European centre. Under colonial rule, the indigenous forest communities lost their rights over their lands and natural resources, which often resulted in revolts against confiscation and encroachment from locals.

Imperial transformation: connecting landscapes via roads, railways and canals.

In the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, timber (especially teak) was harvested from Indian forests, initially on the East Coast, and later on the West Coast for European ship-building purposes. V. M. Ravi Kumar notes that "by 1780s most of the timber forests in England were exhausted by an unprecedented expansion of the ship building industry. It was this shortage of timber that forced the British to look for an alternative source of durable timber" ("Colonizing Greens" 228). At the same time, efficient transportation of resources (timber and the products of intensive farming), for refinement and manufacture in cities in India but, also, especially, back home in England, was crucial to the success of the British enterprise in India in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, there were military justifications for an efficient railway transport system: "The Indian government [in the 1840s] began to view railway development as vital to maintain a military policy of expansion, annexation and defence," writes Ganeswar Nayak in *The Railways in Colonial South Asia* (2021). In the various mutinies and insurrections that plagued the Raj in the coming decades (including the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857), railways played a crucial role in transporting troops and equipment. There were socio-political reasons for the development of railways, too: "The railway development was used by the British colonial administration to facilitate the formation of the modern Indian colonial state. …The railways allowed the British Raj to establish its hegemony [and spread Western 'civilisation'] over the entire Indian subcontinent" (Nayak 26).

There have been numerous books published on railways (and consequent deforestation) in India. Some, like Nayak, argue that railways were first developed to serve military purposes (see Sinha; Ahuja); others that economic and trade considerations were at the heart of the massive enterprise (Goswami). Yet others stress that both were important drivers (P.V. Das). Nonetheless, it is incontestable that the colonial government began an extensive program of

railway construction and by the end of the nineteenth century, India possessed a massive and sophisticated railway system, expanding from 20 miles of railway in 1853 to a staggering 23,627 miles by 1900 (Morris and Dudley194; Klein 553). As Pallavi V. Das, a leading expert in the history of colonial railway development in India, states, the expansion of railways in India "became necessary so that the colony could meet the needs of the metropolitan capitalist" (25). This expansion came at significant environmental cost.

The expansion of railways resulted in a rising demand for timber for sleepers and fuel for powering engines. There were two major consequences: "firstly conversion of forests as resources used in the construction of railways and secondly institutionalization of forest management for sustained supply of timber" (Kumar, "Colonizing Greens" 231; see also Gadgil and Guha 122; Nayak 61-63). V. M. Ravi Kumar explains, "The hegemonic control of the British over forests was facilitated by desiccationist discourses advocating the preservation and expansion of green cover under the guardianship of the state for the well-being of the country" ("Green Colonialism" 102).[4] These ideas served to justify state intervention in the management of forests under the cover of conservationist rhetoric. Forests were cleared and replanted, "hardly leaving time for its regeneration" and many were "totally exhausted" (Mann 201). As Michael Mann notes, other consequences of large-scale tree-felling include a decrease in levels of precipitation by up to 20%, loss of temperature regulation, greater evaporation of water and increased erosion, "causing the loss of topsoil and thus of the soil's fertility, resulting in a dramatic drop in crop yield" (204-205). Greater levels of dust led to a reduction in rainfall, too, and this, in combination with the drainage of wetlands, increased droughts with catastrophic effects. Despite this, more and more lands were cleared and used to produce cash crops – such as cotton, indigo and sugarcane –which generated far more revenue to the British than food crops.

The construction of railways did not only impact forests: "Railway embankments often crossed (and thus blocked) ground- and surface-water flows, producing water logging and disease-breeding grounds on the upstream side" (Fisher 143). Ritika Prasad notes how the high embankments built by railway companies had inadequate drainage outlets, and so trapped rain and floodwaters caused increased intensity of flooding in some areas. In others, seasonal flooding patterns, which had been a vital part of cultivation, were altered, and

[4] Kumar: "the dessicationist discourse branded forest utilisation by the natives as the main culprit for deforestation and the consequent reduction of the water flow of some rivers in South India" (101).

insufficient water reached crops (*Tracks of Change* 7). Radha Kamal Mukherjee similarly argues that the low number of culverts meant even monsoon water was blocked (53; see also Kumari). Water logging in turn created problems like increased salinity and multiple deaths from malaria:

> Cutting down hundreds of trees for every mile of railway ties for every mile of trackage laid, left poorly rooted trees nearby open to buffeting by winds which soon toppled them over. These collapses greatly increased the area of thin soil exposed. Blasted during the dry season by the rays of the sun and by torrential downpours during the rains, these laterite-based soils were soon leeched out, forming water-filled cracks and potholes which female mosquitos' intent on laying eggs found irresistible. (Watts 267)

Forested lands became valuable assets and under the guise of scientific forestry indigenous inhabitants were dispossessed of land and restricted from accessing forests (Sarkar 223 and Banerjee 213). The deliberate strategic and political occupation of natural resources led to an erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and traditions related to land use (Govind and Yadav 35).

Living in India at this time of immense and destructive environmental change, Kipling and Tagore were certainly not unaware of these practices and their impacts. How their writing for children (and adults) reflects this awareness, ranging in the expression of anxiety to outright protest, is the subject of what follows.

Original Contribution and Critical Position

This thesis builds on existing scholarship on Kipling, Tagore, colonialism, children's literature and eco-criticism, but its contribution lies in bringing these fields into a sustained comparative reading of how nature is imagined in their writing for children. Rather than treating Kipling and Tagore simply as opposing representatives of British imperialism and Indian nationalism, or reducing their writing to imperial allegory and spiritual mysticism, respectively, I examine the more complex ecological relationships reflected in their representation of the natural world. My argument is that their writing reveals different, and sometimes internally contradictory, ways of understanding the relationship between human beings and nature, and that these differences become especially visible when the texts are read through both children's literature theory and eco-criticism.

The thesis extends Jan Montefiore's argument that ideological and postcolonial readings of Kipling's *Jungle Books,* while not wrong, do not fully account for the complexity of the stories they contain. Building on this position, I examine the animals and the jungle not simply as symbolic representations of human political categories but as elements of a more complicated and ecologically interdependent world in which animals possess forms of agency, social organisation and value that cannot always be reduced to human allegory. My readings of the stories such as "Rikki Tikki Tavi," "The Undertakers, "Letting in the Jungle," "When Fear Came, "Red Dog," and other less frequently discussed animal and environmental narratives therefore extend existing allegorical and post-colonial readings by asking what becomes visible when the non-human world is treated as more than a symbolic extension of human concerns. This approach allows me to identify ecological tensions withing Kipling's writing: The jungle can be a space governed by law and hierarchy while also exceeding the meanings imposed upon it by human characters.

The thesis also extends scholarship on Indian childhood and colonial children's literature by taking seriously the cultural and historical specificity of the child represented in these texts. Sreemoyee Dasgupta's observation that there is no single "Indian childhood" is particularly important to this study because it challenges the tendency to treat childhood as a universal category derived primarily from European models. I build on this insight by examining how representation of children are connected not only to colonial constructions of childhood but also to different relationships with nature, education and cultural knowledge. In Tagore's writings especially, the child is not simply an innocent figure opposed to the adult world. The child can also function as a figure through whom alternative forms of knowledge, attention and relationship with nature become possible. My reading therefore treats childhood as culturally and ideologically constructed while also considering the ecological possibilities that Tagore associates with children's curiosity, wonder and openness to the natural world.

My treatment of Tagore further extends existing scholarship by bringing his environmental thought into closer relationship with the spiritual and philosophical traditions that inform it. Scholars have increasingly identified Tagore as an important ecological thinker, and Ramachandra Guha, for example, places him centrally within the history of Indian environmental thought. Aseem Shrivastava writes:

> He (Tagore) experiences life in wholes larger than his mortal self, feeling and thinking holistically in the most generous and expansive sense of even that inclusive term. This enables him to understand human life and death, as well

> as our place in nature and the broader scheme of things, in an ecological key. In varied genres of creativity, he demonstrates what it means not just to think but to *live and die* ecologically, never forgetting the power of nature within and around us. (323)

Rather than simply agreeing with this assessment, in this thesis I examine the spiritual and intellectual foundations through which Tagore constructs his relationship with nature. I argue that his environmental imagination cannot be fully understood without considering his engagement with Indian philosophical and religious traditions, particularly the Upanishadic and Vedantic emphasis on unity and interconnectedness, as well as Bengali literary and Vaishnava traditions. These ideas are not treated as an abstract philosophical background added to the literary analysis; I trace their significance through Tagore's representation of trees, rivers, seasons, animals, childhood and education. In doing so, I advance the argument that Tagore's ecological consciousness is inseparable from his understanding of the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world. This is what makes him more than a nature poet who sings of the beauty of the natural world. Long before the advent of modern "green" movements, he advocated for environmental stewardship and the kinship of all living species. For Tagore, all forms of life are deeply, intrinsically intertwined and interdependent. For him a tree is never simply a tree, it is a living bridge and an active entity that connects the earthly and the divine: "Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven" (*Fireflies*).

Understanding this is particularly important because Tagore has frequently been interpreted through a western lens of the other-worldly, foreign, "mystical" or "spiritual". My approach does not reject the importance of spirituality in Tagore's writing but instead asks what that spirituality means within the cultural and philosophical context from which it emerges and how it shapes his representation of nature. By connecting spirituality with ecological relationships, childhood and education, I move beyond a reading of Tagore's spirituality as either an exoticising western construction or a generalised celebration of nature. His spirituality becomes instead a conceptual framework through which his literary representations of the natural world can be understood.

The comparative structure of the thesis is itself part of this contribution. Existing scholarship has frequently examined Kipling and Tagore separately, while discussions of colonial literature can also divide British and Indian writers into relatively fixed ideological positions. Reading them together makes it possible to identify significant differences and unexpected

convergences. Kipling's writing constructs a world in which the jungle is place of contested belonging, a realm that is prelapsarian but must succumb to law, hierarchy and control. In contrast, Tagore's writing repeatedly imagines nature through spiritual unity, reciprocity and interdependence. Neither writer's position is entirely simple or consistent, however, and their comparison allows these tensions to remain visible rather than reducing either writer to a single ideological category.

My interpretation is also informed by my own cultural and educational location. Coming to these texts from a South Asian cultural background has made particularly visible to me questions about Indian philosophical traditions, colonial education, childhood and the cultural meanings attached to nature. I do not treat this personal location as evidence in itself, nor as a substitute for textual or scholarly analysis. Rather, it has shaped the questions I bring to the texts and has encouraged me to examine aspects of the literature that I believe are become less visible when it is approached solely through western critical categories. The arguments developed throughout the thesis remain grounded in close textual reading and engagement with existing scholarship, but my cultural perspective has helped me recognize the importance of reading Tagore's ecological thought within the intellectual and cultural traditions from which it emerged.

These extensions appear throughout the thesis, but the comparative findings are mostly concentrated to the last (conclusion) chapter because I have explored both the writers individually in their respective chapters. The central contribution of this thesis, therefore, is not simply the identification of ecological elements in Kipling and Tagore. Rather, it is the comparative account of how representations of nature in their children's and related writings are shaped by different understandings of human / non-human relationships, childhood, colonial modernity and cultural knowledge. By placing these dimensions in dialogue, I argue that colonial Indian children's literature was not a simple vehicle for either imperial ideology or anti-colonial resistance. It was also a complex literary space in which competing understandings of nature, childhood, knowledge and human responsibility were imagined, negotiated and contested.

Chapter 2: Colonial Perspectives and Environmental Representation: A Case Study: Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Books

Situating Kipling and the Jungle Books

Rudyard Kipling's reputation has changed significantly in the 130-odd years since he first started publishing his writing. Although highly popular in his lifetime and the first British Nobel Laureate for literature (in 1907), critical opinions of his work have changed considerably over the years, not least due to what Charles McGrath calls his "toxic" politics and his use of literature to promote these:

> Kipling has been variously labeled a colonialist, a jingoist, a racist, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a right-wing imperialist warmonger; and – though some scholars have argued that his views were more complicated than he is given credit for – to some degree he really was all those things. ("Kipling in America")

What McGrath calls Kipling's pro-colonial, racist, jingoist politics can be detected in much of his writing, perhaps most famously and overtly in his poem "The White Man's Burden" (which some seek to defend by suggesting it is satire). Nonetheless, McGrath also comments favourably on his writing style and the remarkable success of his children's literature, especially his *Jungle Books* and *Just So Stories*. The stories in the former are probably the best-known and most loved works of his oeuvre and have been adapted for film many times (1942, 1967, 1994, 2016 and 2018). However, as Jan Montefiore writes, "Kipling is neglected as a children's writer because his reputation for imperialist racism and more recently, for warmongering, makes him unpopular with the adult teachers, librarians, critics of children's literature and parents who purchase children's books, and influence their production and consumption in the twenty-first century" ("Kipling as a Children's Writer" 95). She continues, "Kipling was unquestionably an imperialist whose views not only coloured but, in some respects, inspired his writings for children" (96). She asserts of the *Jungle Books* that they offer "a double fantasy of the [Indian] child as both noble savage and embryo good citizen" (102) but concludes that "ideological and/or imperialist readings of Kipling's *Jungle Books* are … not wrong; they just don't quite do the books justice" (102). She adds that, "Kipling's writing for children was undoubtedly fired by the pieties of empire

and by the imperialist fantasy of mastering otherness, but its lasting achievement was the creation of the Jungle which readers could enter in imagination to discover the meanings both of wildness and of humanity" (108).

Before I turn to a discussion of some of the *Jungle Books* stories, it will be useful to offer some brief biographical information and broadly outline the changing critical responses to Kipling's work over the past century or so. As Benita Parry writes, "[the history of Kipling criticism] is emblematic of changes in Western attitudes to the modern imperial experience" (*Delusions and Discoveries* 186). So, too, is it reflective of changing attitudes towards the role and function of children's literature more generally.

Rudyard Kipling was born on December 30, 1865, in Bombay (now Mumbai) to British parents, Alice and John Lockwood Kipling. His father, an artist and journalist appointed as the principal of the J. J. School of Art, and his socially adept mother, who had connections to pre-Raphaelite artists like Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, both significantly influenced his artistic development. Kipling's early childhood in India is often regarded as idyllic, shaping not only his literary voice but also his worldview. According to his biographer, Harry Ricketts, living in the vibrant, multicultural milieu of colonial-era Anglo-Indian society, as a young child Kipling developed close social and linguistic ties with the local Indian servant class – a relationship largely inaccessible to many adult Anglo-Indians due to the rigid class structures of the Raj (27).

This unique upbringing immersed young Kipling in India's rich culture, sounds, and colours. As he later wrote of his early morning trips to the Bombay fruit market with his *ayah*, in his posthumously-published autobiography *Something of Myself* (1937), "My first impression is of daybreak, light, and colour, and golden and purple fruits at the level of my shoulder" (1). Of their evening walks he writes,

> Our evening walks were by the sea in the shadow of palm-groves which, I think, were called the Mahim Woods. When the wind blew the great nuts would tumble, and we fled – my ayah, and my sister in her perambulator – to the safety of the open. I have always felt the menacing darkness of tropical eventides, as I have loved the voices of night-winds through palm or banana leaves, and the song of the tree-frogs. (2)

This vivid imagery encapsulates the sensory richness of his early experiences, filled with the sights and sounds of Indian nature that he describes as having "imprinted itself upon him"

(3). But amongst all the beauty and colour, he notes the "menacing darkness of the tropical eventides" and the "heat and cruelty" (2) of the Indian landscape. Even as a young child, then, he regarded Indian nature with mixed emotions.

The autobiography also records that when young, Kipling was fluent in Hindi, and more comfortable speaking it than English:

> In the afternoon heats before we took our sleep, she [his *ayah*] or Meeta [the *hamal* or Hindu bearer] would tell us stories and Indian nursery songs all unforgotten, and we were sent into the dining-room after we had been dressed, with the caution: 'Speak English now to Papa and Mamma.' So, one spoke 'English,' haltingly translated out of the vernacular idiom that one thought and dreamed in. (3)

Kipling's childhood experiences undoubtedly enriched his storytelling, allowing him to create works infused with Indian vernacular and cultural references. He viewed India as a "restless, sentient being, full of mysteries never fully understood" (*Something of Myself* 13), emphasising his complex relationship with the land. Unlike other many Anglo-Indian writers, who either romanticised the East's allure or portrayed it as threatening and 'other,' Kipling's perspective was more multifaceted due to his early childhood experiences in the country. However, this idyllic childhood was abruptly altered when, at the age of five, Kipling and his younger sister, Alice, were sent to England for schooling, to live with foster parents, while their parents remained in India. The transition marked the beginning of a harrowing chapter in Kipling's life, as Ricketts and other biographers have conveyed. Left in the care of the Holloways at Lorne Lodge in Southsea, the fostering arrangement, intended to be temporary, turned into a near six-year ordeal characterised by severe emotional and physical abuse, especially at the hands of his foster mother, Mrs. Holloway, whom Kipling later portrayed, thinly disguised, as "Aunty Rosa" in his autobiographically-influenced short story, "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" (1888; Allen, *Kipling Sahib* 17).

Kipling's experience at Lorne Lodge, marked by fear and loneliness, starkly contrasted with his memories of India. He endured isolation and cruelty, which left him with deep emotional scars. "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" reflects this painful period, with "Aunty Rosa" embodying coldness and fanaticism. In his autobiography, he poignantly writes, "If you cross-examine a child of seven or eight on his days and his doings, you will find a good deal that he does not understand" (*Something of Myself* 7), indicating the complexity of his suffering and the confusion of his childhood trauma.

The traumatic experience of his foster years forced Kipling to retreat into his imagination as a means of escape. He later described his time in Southsea as the period where he felt "solitary and afraid, and nothing of me showed but the few qualities I possessed which might lead to an intelligent interest" (*Something of Myself* 210*).* The emotional wounds from his time at Lorne Lodge would continue to shape his life and writing, particularly in terms of themes involving abandonment, adoption and resilience. Biographer David Gilmour claims that these experiences "must also have been partially responsible for his most endearing quality – his deep understanding of the vulnerabilities of children" (9). When he left Southsea to attend the United Services College boarding school at the seaside village of Westward Ho! at the age of twelve, the damage from those formative years remained. However, life at the new school was infinitely better: he made close friends, recalling these later in his later novel *Stalky & Co*. (1899) and began what he refers to in *Something of Myself* as a "a tide of writing."

After these often-traumatic years in England, Kipling returned to India in 1882 at the age of "sixteen years and nine months" (*Something of Myself* 39) and started working as a journalist, which played a significant role in his literary career. He recalls a sense of immediate reconnection with the land of his childhood on arrival: "I found myself at Bombay where I was born, moving among sights and smells that made me deliver in the vernacular sentences whose meaning I knew not. Other Indian-born boys have told me how the same thing happened to them" (*Something of Myself* 39). Within days of arriving in India, Kipling later wrote, "my English years fell away, nor ever, I think, came back in full strength" (*Something of Myself* 39). There followed seven years of journalism, first working on the *Civil and Military Gazette* (in Lahore) and later on its sister paper, *The Pioneer* (in Allahabad). During these years Kipling published prose sketches and verse in the various journals for which he worked. He published prolifically: in 1886 he published a verse collection, *Departmental Ditties*; in 1888, a short story collection, *Plain Tales from the Hills*; between 1887 and 1889 he released six volumes of short stories, including *Soldiers Three*, *The Phantom Rickshaw* (which contained "The Man Who Would be King"), and *Wee Willie Winkie* (containing "Baa Baa, Black Sheep"). His reputation flourished and on return to England in 1889, he was received with great acclaim. This was further cemented by the publication of *Barrack-Room Ballads* in 1892, several novels and story collections through the 1890s, including *The Jungle Book* (1894*)* and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895). There followed *Kim* (1901), the *Just So Stories* (1902), *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910).

The books and collections listed above are only a partial record. Suffice it to say, Kipling's output was astonishing. His work was extremely popular at the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. The well-known novelist Henry James wrote to his brother, William, in 1892, "Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius (as distinct from fine intelligence) that I have ever known" (qtd. Rutherford ix). Studies on Kipling's work began to appear, one of the first being Richard Le Galliennes's "Rudyard Kipling: A Criticism" (1900). W. Arthur Young offered *A Dictionary of the Characters and Scenes in the Stories and Poems of Rudyard Kipling: 1886-1911* (1911) and Ralph Durand, *A Handbook to the Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* (1914). He was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature in 1907.

Although widely popular, Kipling's ardent nationalism, Tory conservatism and support for colonisation were a matter of concern for some even when he was at the height of his career. Howard J. Booth notes that at the time of his Nobel Laureateship, "Kipling's reputation was already on the turn, mainly because of his strong views on Empire and a preparedness, especially in his poetry, to use his writing for political ends" ("Introduction" 1). Writing in 1960, Noel Annan had this to say:

> Criticism has not yet come to terms with Kipling: the man and his works symbolise a part of British political and social history about which his countrymen have an uneasy conscience. Ever since the turn of the century when Max Beerbohm began to caricature him with loathing, he has been regarded as a strident geranium, red as a map of the colonies and the antithesis of the green carnations of the nineties; and at the root of every assessment of Kipling lies the problem of his morality. (322)

By "morality" Annan means his attitude towards non-European others, encapsulated in his stance on colonialism and his admiration for the "self-sacrifice" of imperial administrators in places like colonial India. According to James Thrane, Kipling's fiction "had little attention from critics between the success of the early 1890s and his death in 1936" (222).

In addition to the studies mentioned above, a notable exception to this trend was R. Thurston Hopkins' *Rudyard Kipling: A Literary Appreciation* (1915). Hopkins compares Kipling to his contemporary Lafcadio Hearn,[5] noting the physical energy Kipling brought to his depiction of life's larger themes. Also published in 1915 was Cyril Falls's *Rudyard Kipling: A Critical*

[5] Hearn was a British writer, translator and teacher.

Study, which places much emphasis on Kipling's humour. Falls argues that Kipling's humour, often influenced by American writers like Mark Twain, was coarse but authentic, marked by a sudden, striking wit. He contends that Kipling's humour was never gratuitous and was used to explore the bitter realities of life. (Falls 42).

At the time of his death, in 1936, views on Kipling remained divided, with perhaps more on the side of antagonism than admiration. Even the writer of an anonymous obituary article published in *The Times Literary Supplement* was guarded, if ultimately complementary, concluding:

> He was a man of strong prejudices, strong political views, with little tenderness for the opinions of others, and – though to lesser extent than now – he may always divide men into camps. So much granted, there will be, we are convinced, in years to come a general agreement upon the high merit of a great part of this man's work. The perfervid admirers will come to admit that there is dross – dross, why he threw it up in a heap about him as he worked, till at times we could scarce see him over the top of it! Those of the type of mind which is antagonized by a loud-voiced patriotism and Toryism will allow those English songs and stories which we last considered to be free from that offence and will perhaps even pardon it elsewhere for the vigor and skill with which it is presented. Both will proclaim him a magician in the art of the short story, who raised it to a higher station in our literature than it had known before his coming. As novelists they will call him author of one, but one only, of the finest romances of his time. ("Rudyard Kipling's Place in English Literature" 392)

Critical opinions of Kipling were thus polarised in the first half of the twentieth century and this continued into the 1960s. Five years after his death, during the Second World War, H.E. Bates compared him to Hitler in his "love of the most extravagant form of patriotism, flamboyant stage effects and sadistic contempt for the meek" (Bates 111). At about the same time, a number of established authors wrote essays, mainly favourable, on Kipling's work. In 1941, T.S. Eliot published an edition of Kipling's poems, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, prefaced by an essay on Kipling that was later collected in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). In the essay he praises Kipling for "writing transparently" (235) and asserts:

> An immense gift for using words, an amazing curiosity and power of observation with his mind and with all his senses, the mask of the entertainer, and beyond that a queer gift of second sight, of transmitting messages from elsewhere, a gift so disconcerting

> when we are made aware of it that thenceforth we are never sure when it is not present: all this makes Kipling a writer impossible wholly to understand and quite impossible to belittle. (241)

He also broaches the contentious subject of Kipling's imperial leanings in this way:

> But we must accustom ourselves to recognizing that for Kipling the Empire was not merely an idea, a good idea or a bad one; it was something the reality of which he felt. And in his expression of his feeling, he was certainly not aiming at flattery of national, racial or imperial vanity, or attempting to propagate a political programme: he was aiming to communicate the awareness of something in existence of which he felt that most people were very imperfectly aware. It was an awareness of grandeur, certainly, but it was much more an awareness of responsibility. (243)

George Orwell's essay on Kipling, "Rudyard Kipling" (1942), published a year later, reflected more seriously on views that had been forming since the early 20th century. Orwell addresses Kipling's political legacy, particularly the criticisms that labelled him a "fascist" and a jingoist. He argues that these labels are oversimplifications and that Kipling's works reveal a deep sense of moral responsibility and critique of power politics. Kipling's nuanced worldview, he insists, distinguished him from mere imperial flag-wavers, marking him as both a product of and a critic of 19th-century British imperialism. Another important contribution at this time, again from a well-known writer, was W.H. Auden's "A Poet of Encirclement" published in *New Republic* (October 1943) and reprinted in *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973). Auden argues that Kipling had an "anxiety about encirclement from both within and without" (112) and this is reflected in the repeated concern in his writing with the fear of containment.

In the decade that followed, critic and biographer Bonamy Dobrée and historian G. M. Trevelyan were notable defenders of Kipling. Dobrée originally offered a (positive) pioneering essay in *The Criterion* (1927) and followed this more than two decades later with two books, *Rudyard Kipling* (1951) and *Kipling: Realist and Fabulist* (1967). Dobrée, with his firsthand experience in the East, and Trevelyan, who admired Kipling's historical imagination, offered positive assessments of his artistic abilities. In the second of his books, Dobrée explores Kipling's artistry and challenges the reduction of Kipling's work to mere imperialist propaganda. However, most critiques during this period tended to focus on Kipling's craftsmanship and literary technique than on the broader moral or political

implications of his work (Annan 323). Indeed, it appears that discomfort about the political nature of Kipling's work saw trends in criticism, from about the 1960s, shift to a greater focus on his craft and stylistics than his political themes, and to viewing his experiences in India in broadly favourable terms. This vein of criticism is represented in books such as: C.A. Bodelsen's *Aspects of Kipling's Art* (1964); Louis L. Cornell's *Kipling in India* (1966); Kanatur Bhaskara Rao's *Rudyard Kipling's India* (1967) and Alan Sanderson's *The Wheel of Empire* (1967).

J. M. S. (Joyce Marjorie Sanxter) Tompkins, one of the prominent commentators on Kipling's artistry from the mid-twentieth century, highlights the intricacy and economy of Kipling's storytelling in her work *The Art of Rudyard Kipling* (1959). Tompkins draws attention to his ability to assert multiple ideas simultaneously and structures her analysis around recurring themes in chapters titled "Laughter," "Hatred and Revenge," and "Healing" and "Change and Persistence." However, Tompkins admitted that her study was not a "formal assessment" of Kipling's overall trajectory, and she largely ignored the moral and political controversies that had long surrounded his work (Annan 327; Trane 223). Other critics from the same era (late 1950s and 1960s) assert that Kipling's lasting influence lies not just in his literary technique but in his unique analysis of society. Annan, for example, suggests that Kipling's understanding of social order and control reflects the early sociological analyses of thinkers like Durkheim and Weber. Like these sociologists, asserts Annan, Kipling was interested not in individual behaviour but in the social structures and realities that govern human actions (328) .From about the 1970s (or a bit later), there was a distinct move away from a focus on his craft towards a critical analysis of Kipling's imperial leanings, in line with a general shift in much literary scholarship at the time towards postcolonial concerns. Eric Stokes, in "Kipling's Imperialism" (1972) is an early example, and Edward Said's searing dismissal of Kipling in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is widely known. Readings of Kipling with a concertedly postcolonial emphasis include Jospeh Bristow's chapter on Kipling in *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (1991); Zoreh T. Sullivan's *Narratives of Empire: The Fictions of Rudyard Kipling* (1993); John McBratney's *Imperial Subjects, Imperial Space: Rudyard Kipling's Fiction* (2002); Andrew Hagiioannu's *The Man Who Would Be Kipling: The Colonial Fiction and the Frontiers of Exile* (2003); Jan Montefiore's *Rudyard Kipling* (2007); and John A. McClure's *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* (2013). Many of these books (and a host of articles and chapters in a similar vein) explore Kipling's views of empire and imperialism with more nuance that his earlier

critics. For a start, they acknowledge that Kipling's attitude towards fellow Anglo-Indians was far from positive, indeed it is often contemptuous (as it is in *Kim*).

Nonetheless, Kipling's belief that it was Britain's destiny to conquer and control India (and Asia more broadly) cannot be ignored. In "The White Man's Burden" (1899), for example, he openly advocates for the civilising mission of European imperialism, suggesting that it is the duty of Western powers, especially Britain, "civilise" non-Western nations. The poem captures the paternalistic mindset of imperialism, where the British see themselves as divinely appointed to take control of and bring order to "lesser" nations. Written as an encouragement for the US to annex and colonise the Philippines, it famously begins with an exhortation to "take up" the taxing duty of the civilising mission:

> Take up the White Man's burden –
> Send forth the best ye breed–
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need;
> To wait, in heavy harness,
> On fluttered folk and wild–
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child.

The poem has been extensively cited, satirised and critiqued.[6] Patrick Brantlinger states, dryly, "Unless one wears a white blindfold while reading it, Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' makes the question of the relationship between imperialism and racism inescapable" (172). He continues, "Kipling may or may not have believed in some version of biological essentialism, according to which the white race was innately superior to all others. But he clearly believed that the white race was charged with the responsibility of civilizing – or trying to civilize – all of the dark, supposedly backward races of the world" (178).

It would be remiss not to mention the significance of imperialist themes in Kipling's works. This aspect of his writing has been widely commented on and while I will draw on this scholarship it is not my key focus in this chapter and the next. Instead, I emphasise Kipling's representations of nature and the natural environment within the *Jungle Books* as a

[6] Parodies include: George E. McNeil's "The Poor Man's Burden"; the anonymous "the Old Maid's Burden"; E.A. Brinninstool's "The White Woman's Burden"; W.E.B. Du Bois "The Burden of Black Women"; M. P Labouchère's "The Brown Man's Burden."

supplement to critical postcolonial approaches. I offer an analysis that, while acknowledging the imperial context, prioritises the symbolic and even, at times, ecological portrayal of the Indian jungle.

In what follows I will limit my focus to the *Jungle Books* rather than attempt to discuss the vast body of his writings. I have chosen to do so because these stories were specifically written for children (albeit for English children "back home") and are clearly situated in India (with the exception of "The White Seal" and "Quiquern") – or, more pertinently, most often in the Indian jungle (and the occasional rural village), as the books' titles stress.[7] This accords with my research interest in the representations of nature in children's literature set in South Asia. Annan's comments on Kipling's portrayal of the India environment in his first volumes of short stories and early verse is of particular interest to me:

> Here [in these early works, set in India] Nature was inconceivably hostile. The pitiless sun spread famine and the rain floods, and cholera, fever, reptiles, and wild beasts brought death. Death was always at a man's elbow … . The very flowers, the hateful marigolds, were symbols of heat and death. Kipling did not personify Nature like Hardy: like a sociologist he took the environment as given and noted its effect upon men. (328)

In response to this hostile, deadly environment, claims Annan, Kipling promoted "religion, law, custom, convention, morality – the forces of social control – which imposed upon individuals' certain rules which they broke at their peril" (331). And of these correctives, it was the Law that was of utmost importance: "The Law, which appears in the form of a fable in the *Jungle Books*, consisted of those rules of conduct – the keeping of promises, loyalty to friends, bravery, generosity, respect for parents, and so on – which restrained men's egotism" (335).

This is certainly a conclusion that many critics have drawn in their analyses of the *Jungle Books*. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar, for example, states that, "In order to withstand this effect [of Indian Nature] and uphold civilization, a man had to display uncompromising integrity

[7] I chose to omit the *Just So Stories* (1902) because the anticipated child reader of these is very young, many are fantastical and the settings tend to be mythical. I am mindful, however, of critical responses that argue the stories create binary opposition between the 'civilised' narrator and the 'othered' animals, or that the stories offer a Darwinian take on the natural world in which 'British' characters tame or exploit or change the wild. (See Walsh, *Kipling's Children's Literature*.)

and work toward upholding law and order. This challenge was represented metaphorically by Mowgli's encounter with the jungle" (238). She continues,

> Mowgli's 'humanity' sets him apart from the rest of the animal kingdom by virtue of his birth, his possession of fire, and his ability to cry. The fable anthropomorphizes the animals and offers a human-centric view of the jungle world. It must and can only be tamed by human beings. This was consistent with Kipling's view of the civilizing and beneficent rule of Britain over the colonial countries. (238)

This may well be so. However, I contend that there is more to explore in these stories than their pro-colonial metaphors.

The first story in the *Jungle Book* (1894), "Mowgli's Brothers," depicts how an Indian infant is found by a wolf pack who name him Mowgli and raise him under the protection of Baloo, the bear, and Bagheera, the panther. Shere Khan, the tiger, demands he be given the child, to eat, but the wolves refuse. He becomes Mowgli's primary antagonist and is finally killed by him. Most of the Mowgli stories in this collection are accounts of his survival as a man-cub in the jungle, but one, "Tiger! Tiger!", relates Mowgli's journey back to the village (to live among humans for a brief time, when cast out by the wolf pack). "Kaa's Hunting" features a clash between Mowgli and the Bandar-log (monkey-people) in which he is victorious thanks to the help of the eponymous python. Four of the stories do not feature Mowgli – "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," "Toomai of the Elephants," "Her Majesty's Servant's" and "The White Seal" – but many critics suggest that these help deepen thematic concerns with that run through the Mowgli stories. Lisa Lewis, for example, notes that each of the *Jungle Books* "combines a set of Mowgli stories with tales in which other Indian animals of varying degrees of wildness or tameness interact in different ways with man" ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi and Indian History" 137), and she argues that these interactions are allegories for imperial engagements with Indian natives. I will return to this below. Overall, Mowgli's journey in these stories is one of growth and self-discovery, as he learns the "Law of the Jungle" and his place within it. His animal mentors – Father Wolf, Baloo and Bagheera – help guide him, yet his human instincts and growing awareness set him apart from his wolf brothers. This difference builds tension, especially as Mowgli begins to grapple with the fact that he is neither fully human nor animal.

There are five stories featuring Mowgli in *The Second Jungle Book*, and three unrelated stories, two of which are set in India. The last story in *The Second Jungle Book*, "The Spring

Running," is significant because it depicts the moment when Mowgli, almost seventeen, faces the pull of civilization and adult life, as he realises that he cannot remain in the jungle forever. He chooses to leave. According to Alan Underwood and John Radcliff it "was first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on September 25 1895, with the verse heading as collected, in *Cosmopolitan* in October 1895, with illustrations by W. H. Drake, and in the *Civil and Military Gazette* on September 27, 28, 30, and October 4, 5, 7 1895, with the title "Mowgli Leaves the Jungle Forever" ("The Spring Running").

When Mowgli eventually leaves the wild to rejoin human society, he reluctantly becomes a part of the British colonial system. While "The Spring Running" marks Mowgli's emotional and cultural transition from the jungle towards human society, Kipling's earlier story, "In the Rukh," portrays Mowgli as an adult integrated into human life. This is not technically a part of the *Jungle Books,* because written before the first collection, appearing in *Many Inventions* in 1893. In *Something of Myself*, Kipling offered this description of the "In the Rukh" and its relationship to the later Mowgli stories:

> It chanced that I had written a tale about Indian Forestry work which included a boy who had been brought up by wolves. In the stillness, and suspense, of the winter of '92 some memory of the Masonic Lions of my childhood's magazine [*King Lion* by James Greenwood], and a phrase in Haggard's *Nada the Lily* [an 1892 historical novel], combined with the echo of this tale. After blocking out the main idea in my head, the pen took charge, and I watched it begin to write stories about Mowgli and animals, which later grew into the Jungle Books. (113)

The story offers a glimpse into Mowgli's future, where his unique abilities, honed in the jungle, are respected in his role within a British forestry service, highlighting his lasting connection to both worlds. In this regards, Jessica Straley asserts that in the story, "Kipling's hero transforms his ferality into a weapon in the service of the British Empire" (101). In the young man, the envoy of the Woods and Forests Division sees "that ideal ranger and forest guard for who he and the department were always looking" (*The Second Jungle Book* 25*)* and he becomes an imperial agent. The story thus reflects Mowgli's transformation into a servant for the Raj, and he has often been read as an allegory of the colonised subject who, despite his strength and independence, must conform to the colonial order. The animals who once served as his family now represent the past, a more primitive stage in the process of civilising and controlling nature.

Postcolonial readings of the Jungle Books: the stories as imperial allegories

As the above suggests, the *Jungle Books* are now most often read in allegorical terms. However, the nature of the allegories at stake are disputed. One such allegorical interpretation sees life in the jungle representing the life of Indians under British rule. Mowgli, the Indian boy, 'masters' the Laws of the Jungle (viz. colonial laws, codes of conduct, moral imperatives), and eventually becomes a 'good native' in service of the British. Other 'good natives' are represented by Mother and Father Wolf, Baloo and Bagheera while 'bad natives' are represented by the cunning Shere Khan and the monkey troupe, the Bandar-log. Mowgli's eventual submission to the colonial order, in the second book, is thus interpreted as an allegory for the colonised subject, empowered by European knowledge and morals, who is nonetheless ultimately constrained by the structures of empire that he agrees to serve.

Others read Mowgli not as an allegory of the 'good native' but of the colonial master, and the animals as Indians. More than four decades ago, for example, John A. McClure asserted that the stories comprise "a fable of imperial education and rule, With Mowgli behaving towards the beasts as the British do to the Indians. … To be above yet belong, to be obeyed as a god and loved as a brother, this is Kipling's dream for the imperial ruler, a dream that Mowgli achieves" (*Kipling and Conrad* 58). More recently, Jan Montefiore agrees with McClure, in some measure, stating "one need not concur completely with McClure's judgement to agree that Mowgli's position in the Jungle does in some measure correspond to the European imperialists' daydream of lording it among the natives" ("Kipling as a Children's Writer" 96).

Sujit Mohapatra summarises these two dominant critical interpretations of Mowgli:

> Mowgli is thus, both white man and ideal native subject, both Enkidu and Romulus. It is this kind of a hybridized space that Mowgli occupies. He is Kipling's ideal native subject. He is also the ritual white man of the jungle for the colonial reading public because it is the white man, who protects the rest of the jungle from the predators, Shere Khan and the wild dogs. In the white man's imagination, the native could never be the protector of the forests. It is this ideology, which informed the institution of forestry and later the conservation movement in colonial India. (94)

This points to a contradiction in common critical analyses of the allegorical role of Mowgli in the *Jungle Books*. How might Mowgli represent *both* "white man and ideal native subject?" Sujit Mukherjee's analysis, in "Tigers in Fiction: An Aspect of the Colonial Encounter"

(1987), offers an interesting complement to the former interpretation by shifting attention to the character Shere Khan, and other animals. He elaborates on the significance of the tiger and the tiger-slayer in British imperial mythology: The tiger represents an archaic conqueror from the north, reminiscent of the fair-complexioned Indo-Aryan tribes, while the British tiger-slayer embodies modern imperial authority. Mowgli's defeat of Shere Khan, due to cunning and forward planning, symbolises the British conquest of India, positioning Mowgli as the imperial adventurer who restores order after the collapse of an old regime, akin to the British efforts following to defeat the Sepoys and Bahadur Shah in the 1857 Mutiny. However, Mukherjee notes that the tiger is never entirely vanquished, and he argues that this symbolises the enduring spirit of India that the British could never fully subdue (12). The recurring appearances of Shere Khan, in this reading, reflect the persistent fear and challenge the British faced in controlling India, requiring them to repeatedly confront the tiger (11).

Mukerjee further argues that the portrayal of animals in the *Jungle Books* illustrates the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' creatures, mirroring colonial ideologies of order and hierarchy. Loyal wolves and Baloo represent compliant colonial subjects, while Shere Khan, outlaw wolves and the monkeys epitomise rebellious, unruly natives. The Law of the Jungle, governing animal behaviour, serves as an allegory for colonial rule, positioning British-imposed laws as the structures maintaining order. Shere Khan's defiance of these laws, particularly through his man-eating and challenges to Mowgli's authority, reflects anti-colonial resistance and a rejection of colonial subjugation. His repeated attempts to undermine Mowgli – who is not entirely part of the animal world – symbolise a threat to British dominance, echoing native uprisings against imperial authority. Thus, the animal trope, in Mukherjee's perception, "destabilizes the hierarchy of race and class, reflecting both the fears and fantasies of the British colonial project" (3). The conflict between orderly colonialism and unruly nativism in the *Jungle Books* thus symbolises broader political struggles of empire, with Kipling's narrative both reinforcing and grappling with the precarious nature of British rule.

Several critics have suggested that via their portrayal of animals the *Jungle Books* offer a series of imperial and patriotic/national narratives. Jopi Nyman is one such critic. Despite Kipling's use of an "Indian space" asserts Nyman, "the resultant images and constructions of nation stem from an understanding of Englishness as a site of colonial authority" and the Jungle as a place in which "different threatening others," "racialized others" (monkeys and snakes), need to be tackled and overcome. Hence, "Kipling finally abandon[s] the colonial

animal in order to represent proper Englishness" (206). Nyman, like other readers of a postcolonial bent, pays particular attention to "The White Seal." In this story, Nyman contends, Kipling shifts away from the colonial landscape that characterises the *Jungle Books*, where animals such as Mowgli's companions embody the racialised native Other. Instead, Kipling constructs Kotick, the white seal, as a symbol of "pure Englishness" (Nyman 216). Nyman argues that Kotick's quest for a safe, untouched island for his 'tribe' mirrors the imperialist desire to explore and colonise. In contrast to the hybridised or native figures of the colonial space, Kotick's leadership aligns with a sense of English superiority and isolationism. His journey reflects the ideal of an "island race," evoking a long-standing aspiration of English separatism, where the threat of foreign invasion is absent. By racialising the seals and juxtaposing them with less advanced, native sea creatures, Kipling affirms a narrative of English superiority that resonates with broader imperial discourses (Nyman 216-218).

M. Daphne Kutzer also reads the *Jungle Books* stories as imperial allegories. She reads "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," for example, as portraying the conflict between the Empire and unruly natives. This well-known story tells how the titular mongoose was washed out of his family burrow during a flood and ends up in the garden of a house occupied by an unnamed British couple and their son, Teddy. Here he is taken into the family home and 'domesticated.' In return he protects the family from a pair of dangerous cobras, Nag and Nagina. He eventually kills both and destroys their "children" – a soon to hatch cluster of eggs. Kutzer argues that the cobras are "highly emblematic of India itself" and "are representative of that element of Orientalism that considers Orientals to be duplicitous and untruthful. The cobra couple in 'Rikki-tikki-tavi' plot, lie, scheme, hide, and otherwise behave in ways that link them with stereotypical portrayals of exotic Orientals in much Western writing" (26). She continues:

> Although this is an animal fable, the presence of the humans gives the story a peculiar British twist. Rikki-tikki is between domesticated and wild, both catlike and weasel-like, as the narrator tells us. He finds himself between the worlds of the domesticated and the wild in the family garden, which is only 'half-cultivated,' and contains hybrid roses as well as bamboo, a garden containing poisonous snakes that threaten the idyllic life of the colonizers. The 'half-wild' garden the British family has invaded and colonized is a metaphor for India itself, a garden-paradise harboring dangerous 'natives' in the form of the snakes who resent the intrusion of humans into their

> kingdom. The colonizers – the British family – are incapable of fully taming the garden of India without help from cooperative natives. Rikki-tikki, in fact, can be seen as one of these helpful natives. (26)

Kutzer argues that it is the goal of the cobras (dangerous natives) to oust the British family from the bungalow and gain dominance of the garden, which she sees as representing the Indian environment, so they can propagate their 'native' children: "This Darwinian struggle is framed not so much in animal terms, but in human ones: the cobras are fighting humans for habitat, not mongooses. Kipling emphasizes this for us by having the boy child threatened with death by the cobra, thus symbolically threatening the continued life of the British in India – just as Rikki-tikki, faithful native servant, destroys not only the parent snakes, but their eggs as well, effectively ridding colonial space of troublesome natives" (27).

In this way, Kutzer concurs with others, such as Don Randall, in reading many of the stories in the *Jungle Books* as post-Mutiny narratives. (Interestingly Kipling refrained from writing directly about the mutiny in his fiction, with one exception, "The Undertakers," discussed below.)[8] Randall asserts that "[p]ost-Mutiny allegories – that is, narrative sequences organized upon allusive evocations of Mutiny scenes, situations, and events – occur most notably in the Mowgli tales of the *Jungle Books*" (98), and "at the same time, the story of British India [is presented] as allegorised form, as imperial fable" (100). Lisa Lewis is another who argues in this manner. She notes that there are "no servants, and no visible tradesmen" at the British house in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," despite the fact that even modest British households would have had a cook, a bearer, a gardener and a sweeper, at least one *ayah* and a *dhobi*. "It is as though animals have taken the servants' place," she asserts. "Something strange is going on here, and it seems to me to refer to the Mutiny" (135). In these terms, "The cobras [represent] members of an old Indian or Mogul ruling family, plotting to kill the English and take over the land again as the Sepoys and their aristocratic leaders hoped to do in 1857" (134-135).

Another allegorical reading is suggested by Ronald Inden in *Imagining India* (2000). Inden claims that Kipling's portrayal of the jungle in the *Jungle Books*, reflects western Indological views of India. He argues that nineteenth-century Indology constructed Hinduism as embodying the 'Mind of India,' a representation contrasting with western notions of order

[8] One exception is his essay, "In the year '57" of which Alex Tickell writes that it has less to do with the Mutiny than with the "method in dealing with the mass" of past violence (11).

derived from Enlightenment rationality. Hinduism, described by Indologists like Vincent Smith, was often metaphorically likened to a jungle – chaotic and lacking uniformity. Kipling's jungle, according to Inden, serves not only as a natural setting but also as a symbol of India, a wild place capable of absorbing contradictions, as evidenced by its adoption of Mowgli. However, Kipling also introduces order through the "Law of the Jungle" which, although archaic, rationally governs jungle life. This juxtaposition of disorder and order aligns with Indology's notion that the chaotic 'Indian mind' could be understood and rationalised by Western expertise, much like the jungle is brought under control by British intervention through the service native woodsmen, like adult Mowgli. Inden further suggests that external forces, exemplified by Mowgli's presence, instigate the jungle's shift toward order, reflecting the imperial belief that India required guidance to achieve a structured society. Moreover, the jungle dominates the village, portrayed as lawless and insignificant compared to the structured life of the jungle, further reinforcing the idea of British control over an India perceived as inherently disorderly without imperial intervention (120 ff.).

Much attention has been given by postcolonial critics to the role of the Bandar-log or 'the Monkey Folk' in the *Jungle Books*. They are often read as semi-human – certainly semi-civilised – figures inhabiting a corrupt and debased space, which draws on Victorian colonial ideas of hybridity, racial purity, and degeneration. Nyman reads the Bandar-log as "the binary opposite of the colonial self […], a maddening, or already maddened, form of identity that threatens stable colonial rule" (*Postcolonial Animal Tale* 44). They represent "a fear that in colonial discourse has been articulated as the fear of the uncontrollability of the native" (45). It is argued that they represent disorder, superficiality, and the consequences of a lack of meaningful structure and leadership. They are described by Kipling's narrator as having "no leader" and they constantly lie and deceive, suggesting their inability to establish a cohesive order or obey authority (*The Jungle Book* 25). In "Kaa's Hunting" they are described as "evil, dirty [and] shameless" (59); they use "stolen words" appropriated from other animals and Baloo declares they are "outcaste" (59).[9] As noted above, in *Kipling and Conrad*, McClure claims that the Mowgli stories offer a political message: "The book functions, among other things, as a fable of imperial education and rule, with Mowgli behaving towards the beasts as the British do to the Indians" (58). His learning the "Law," then, equates with learning the regulations and expected behaviours of colonial rule. Charles Allen, in *Kipling*

[9] This may imply that, if the animals in the Jungle represent Indian (Hindu) natives, the Bandar-log are the lowest of the low in caste terms, like Dalits ("untouchables").

Sahib, offers much the same: the Law of the Jungle is a "metaphor for British rule in India" (333).

Some critics have emphasised the ways in which the monkeys mimic human behaviour – playing with old bricks or pretending to be men. As such they can be understood as ostensibly 'inferior' people (Indians) who copy or replicate the behaviour and identities of the dominant (British) culture. It is argued that they are thus positioned as inferior and half-civilised, echoing long-standing colonial discourses about native populations. However, Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, as elaborated in *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1984), can be drawn upon to complicate this depiction. Bhabha suggests that mimicry of the coloniser by the colonised can be subversive and disturb colonial hierarchies through irony, challenging the very authority that dismisses them. Moreover, mimicry can blur the stark divisions that underpin binary colonial discourse. The *Jungle Books* are full of such "blurrings": between animal and human, native and British, child and adult – as I will discuss below. "Amphibious" Mowgli (his name, given by Mother Wolf, means 'frog') embodies precisely this. As Bagheera tells Mowgli in "Kaa's Hunting," "Thou art of the jungle and not of the jungle" (*The Jungle Book* 202).

The Bandar-log consistently refuse to obey the laws of the jungle but cunningly twist them to suit their own ends. In an exemplary reading in *Colonial India in Children's Literature* (2012), Supriya Goswami makes the claim that "in the Bandar-logs' peculiar and trivializing relationship to jungle law, an allegory of [post-Mutiny, "suppressive"] colonial law in late nineteenth-century India is being enacted" (107). She declares that "in the *Jungle Books*, Kipling, a product of Anglo-Indian society and an advocate of British rule in India, propagates the idea that law, however oppressive, must be unquestioningly obeyed by the jungle animals at all times" (108). Simultaneously, however, there is also an acknowledgement "that this law can be subverted, mocked, and trivialized by the Bandar-log, which in turn make the monkeys potentially dangerous to the well-ordered world of the jungle" (108). For this reason, Goswami reads them as representing the products of Macaulay's educational policy in India, "the Indian intelligentsia who set in motion the Indian national movement in the late nineteenth century" (108). These "mimic men" "were able to use (and twist) their knowledge of British law and behaviour to propagate their own nationalistic agenda" (108).

Goswami, in part, follows other postcolonial critics, such as John Murray, by suggesting that "the stringent laws of the Raj are mirrored in the Mowgli stories" (110). Indeed, she argues that "it is in the Mowgli stories in the *Jungle Books* – written in the American state of Vermont a few years after Kipling leaves the country of his birth for good – that one fully witnesses his endorsement of undemocratic and suppressive colonial law" (110). Understanding the Bandar-log as representing British-educated Indian mimic men (and "Macaulay's minutemen") she claims;

> The unsettling potential of the mimic men has to be curbed and, in 'Kaa's Hunting,' the monkeys are hypnotized by Kaa (after they put up a strong and vocal resistance) into submission as the 'lines of the monkeys swayed forward helplessly' (76) towards him. It is hinted by Baloo and Bagheera that many of them will have 'walked down his [Kaa's] throat... before the moon rises again. . .. [and that] He will have good hunting – after his own fashion' (77). In other words, Kaa will get rid of a large number of them in the most cruel and cold-blooded manner by brutalizing and eating them up himself. Given the dominant outlook of prominent late nineteenth-century colonial administrations such as [Sir James] Stephen, it is hardly surprising that, in the Mowgli stories, Kipling endorses violence and punishment as a means of preserving order. (128)

Nyman similarly reads the Bandar-log as "the binary opposite of the colonial self […], a maddening, or already maddened, form of identity that threatens stable colonial rule" (*Postcolonial Animal Tale* 44). They represent "a fear that in colonial discourse has been articulated as the fear of the uncontrollability of the native" (45). Jasmin Sültemeyer argues along the same lines: "Such a crowd [the monkeys] would have reminded Kipling's readers of the thousands of mutinous sepoys who decided to march to Delhi without a leader. The Bandar-log's rowdy catch-phrases can therefore be seen to represent the threatening call for Indian self-rule" (44).

This reflects a broader allegory that emphasises the dangers of living without structure or direction. The monkeys' superficiality is further emphasized by their lack of meaningful contributions to the Jungle 'society,' as they spend their energy on pointless activities. The monkeys' chaotic behaviour and isolation from the rest of the jungle inhabitants, who "do not drink where the monkeys drink" or "go where the monkeys go," further symbolises their disconnection from societal values ("Kaa's Hunting" *The Jungle Book* 25). Kipling's allegory

here, according to Nyman, is a critique of those who live apart from meaningful structures, highlighting how isolation from civilisation and order leads to alienation and a lack of respect. Their tendency to make promises of leadership and laws that never materialise serves as an allegory for the futility of empty commitments, further reinforcing the dangers of chaotic leadership.

The confusion of fixed identities inherent in mimicry that is apparently evident in the Bandar-log might also extend to the portrayal of Mowgli. Some, as discussed, suggest he represents the colonial Self (in his adoption and enforcement of the "Law"). Others, however, find him representative of the colonised, brown-skinned Other who leaves the Jungle only to serve the coloniser and enforce their prescriptions on Indian nature. Raised by wolves but ultimately human, his identity oscillates between the Jungle and the village, leaving him belonging to neither. Although Mowgli's mastery of languages and cultures grants him power, it also reflects his marginalisation, representing colonial anxieties about mixed identities.

Applying an ecocritical lens to the *Jungle Books* as children's literature

While there is a certainly validity in readings of the *Jungle Books* as promoting imperial codes of behaviour via an allegorised Jungle Law, I believe a great deal is lost or overlooked when the Indian jungle and the animals within it are *simply* understood as "contributing to an imagining of Englishness as a site of power and racial superiority," as Nyman claims (205).[10] While it is not my aim to defend Kipling against charges of racism and pro-colonialism such as those made by the critics I have briefly discussed, I argue that another fruitful avenue of exploration exists: to consider the *Jungle Books* via an ecocritical lens. Doing so enables me to pose and investigate questions such as: What might the stories suggest about colonial attitudes towards nature and the natural environment in India? What attitudes towards India's fauna and flora might Kipling display, consciously or unconsciously, in the *Jungle Books*? I argue that the stories offer insights into the effects of colonial practices such as deforestation, intensive cropping, and the broader ecological disruption caused by the colonial expansion, such as the hunting and exploitation of wildlife, and the introduction of non-native species that transformed the local ecosystem. In the remainder of this chapter, and the next, I will

[10] Nyman continues, "Kipling's colonial animals map a racialized contrastive space where national identity is inseparable from racial identity, leading Kipling finally to abandon the colonial animal in order to be able to represent proper Englishness" (205).

highlight they ways in which the *Jungle Books* reveal anxiety about colonial attitudes towards nature that often consumed the local natural resources for economic gain, notwithstanding the delicate equilibrium that had existed for centuries between the indigenous people and their environment. In addition, I seek to explore how, in the *Jungle Books*, Kipling offers representations of Indian fauna and flora that have not yet received critical attention. This includes the ways in which plants were traditionally used for a variety of functions such as healing, protection, food, and even spiritual practices (even if Kipling's narrator discredits these). I consider the *Jungle Books*' references to the use of plants in rituals and ceremonies, highlighting their indigenous cultural and spiritual significance, without claiming that Kipling endorsed these in any way (indeed, the opposite). While there is validity in the argument that Kipling's stories promote imperial codes of behaviour, especially through the Laws of the Jungle, I contend that only focusing on the *Jungle Books* as allegories of colonial mastery overlooks the ecological and environmental dimensions present, if beneath the surface, in his work.

I argue that Kipling's "Jungle" is not simply a backdrop for allegories of empire; the complex landscape he paints is a vivid and dynamic environment with rich symbolism that reflects colonial attitudes toward nature while it also reveals a deep and conflicting respect for and love of natural India. An ecocritical analysis may offer insights into Kipling's depiction of the destruction of forests in the name of progress, the exploitation of natural resources, and the displacement of indigenous communities and native animals that came hand-in-hand with Britain's broader colonial activities in India. The stories in the *Jungle Books* are enriched with references to animal behaviour, plant life, indigenous hunting practices, and the significance of surviving in equilibrium with the natural world – ideas that run counter to the colonial mindset of exploitation and control. Moreover, the plants and animals described in the *Jungle Books* are not merely decorative elements; they play crucial roles in the lives of the characters, symbolising both danger and protection, life and death.

In my analyses of individual stories from the *Jungle Books*, I remain alert to these works as children's literature. As I have discussed in my first chapter, in the recent decades it has become widely accepted that children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping early worldviews, including environmental ones. The year 2004, for example, saw the publication of Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd's *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Eco-criticism,* a collection of essays exploring the interplay between children's texts and environmental experiences. Stephen Bigger and Jean Webb argue that fiction for children can

better motivate eco-consciousness by embedding dialogue and critical thinking about environmental issues (410). Children's literature, they argue, can subtly embed values of conservation, respect for life, and social responsibility, even if the text doesn't actively voice such values. In their foreword to a collection of essays collected under the title *Experiencing Environment and Place though Children's Literature*, Amy Cutter-Mackenzie, Philip G. Payne and Alan Reid argue that children's literature provides "what are arguably some of the first and possibly most formative engagements that some children have with 'nature'" (1). They further suggest that children's literature "can be deeply pleasurable as well as troubling, on aesthetic and ecopolitical as well as affective and connective levels" (2). Experiencing landscapes and places through their fictional representation may foster a "sense of wonder" in readers, blending narrative engagement with emotional connection to nature. Rachel Carson, in *The Sense of Wonder*, asserts that, "[i]f facts are the seeds that later promote knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow (3)." This highlights her belief that understanding nature is enriched not only by learning facts but through emotional engagement with the natural world or representations of it.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the *Jungle Books* are eco-fictions, if that is taken to mean fiction that consciously and deliberately draws attention to ecological and environmental issues. Rather, I suggest that we can read them attuned to portrayals of animals and plants, and environment attitudes, that both reinforce and unsettle the more overt imperial attitude and values evident in the stories. The *Jungle Books* offer more than a series of thrilling adventures set in an exotic landscape that needs to be tamed and contained by (British) "Law." Close attention to the representation of nature in the stories reveals contradictions and complexities that cut against unidirectional postcolonial readings. I argue that the *Jungle Books* might encourage children to consider the delicate ecological balance evident in India's jungles and the destructive incursion of European imperialists bent on 'improvement' and exploitation, without simply accepting this. As Christie Harner asserts, throughout the *Jungle Books*, "human actions fundamentally alter existing animal ecosystems … and [i]n each case, the rupture is imperial and ecological – meaning that [they] should be read in both ways, so that the altered environmental cadence comes to transform how the geopolitical is understood" (135).

Sue Walsh, in *Kipling's Children's Literature*, attempts to refocus discussion away from only postcolonial concerns in the author's work to ones about writing for children, as her title

suggests. She argues that considering "the construction of childhood in relation to broader questions of identity in the 'Mowgli' tales can be read as challenging or complicating current post-colonial readings of these stories as imperialist narratives" (29). Indeed, she argues that the *Jungle Books* stories work to "unsettle[e] binary oppositions" insofar as none of the characters, especially Mowgli, neatly "maps" onto the figure of human and animal, or coloniser or colonised: "I read the 'Mowgli' stories … as calling into question the borders between child and adult, human and animal, 'native' and 'white' (63). Much criticism, she avers "whilst it tries to destabilize notions of essential identity ends up precisely re-stabilizing identities in the face of its stated aims: persistently clinging to the very notions of difference that are under question" (70). She is referring here to Randall and McBratney's readings of Mowgli as "creole," as "the native or country-born hyphenated imperial boy [that] is, according to their readings of Kipling's work, privileged as having the 'potential capacity to negotiate cultural difference' (a potential, as they note, given only to the native-born, not to the native) and is thus figured as the ideal ruler-in-waiting of empire" (65). Her interest in Mowgli's "hybridity" ("neither man nor cub" (*The Second Jungle Book* 10) moves beyond this. Her argument turns on the claim that "the text no more produces the animal free of cultural contamination, than it constructs the human without recourse to the (repressed) animal that is nevertheless there." This, she asserts, "has significant implications if the text is to be read as an allegory of colonialism" (58).

Walsh's perspective highlights how the *Jungle Book*s resist simple binaries and speak to a deeper, more nuanced exploration of identity, one that transcends traditional colonial hierarchies. I argue that this complexity in Kipling's characters and his treatment of the jungle environment invites a layered reading of representations of nature itself in his work, of nature as not simply the binary opposite of the social or cultural. Just as Mowgli survives in a place that blurs human and animal worlds, so too does Kipling's portrayal of the jungle complicate any straightforward imperial interpretation, with nature serving as both setting and active participant, exploited and resistant, humanly mediated and autonomous.

In what follows, I take my cue from Jan Montefiore's article "Kipling as a children's writer and the *Jungle Books*." Montefiore notes that

> most recent critics of children's literature rarely accord Kipling more than a passing mention unless they choose to focus specifically on 'Empire' writing, like Joseph Bristow's *Empire Boys* (1991) or Daphne Kutzer's "Empire's Children" (2002),

> which respectively allot Kipling one chapter. The *Jungle Books* are unmentioned in Aidan Chambers's *Booktalk* (1982), Styles, Bearne and Watson's "After Alice" (1992) or Peter Hollindale's *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997); they get one sentence in Humphrey Carpenter's *Secret Gardens*, and one paragraph in Alison Lurie's *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups* (1990). And nothing in Perry Nodelman's magisterial *The Hidden Adult* (2008). (96)

A few pages later, Montefiore states, "[i]deological and/or imperialist readings of Kipling's *Jungle Books* are, then, not wrong; they just don't quite do the books justice" (102). And after a discussion of the many differences between Mowgli and the jungle animals, portrayed in the stories, she concludes the essay thus: "Kipling's writing for children was undoubtedly fired by the pieties of empire and by the imperialist fantasy of mastering otherness, but its lasting achievement was the creation of the Jungle which readers could enter in imagination to discover the meanings both of wildness and of humanity" (108). This invites a question: what might the (implied) child reader learn about the meaning of "wildness" when reading (or being read) the *Jungle Books*?

Kipling skilfully weaves a diverse group of characters (animals and humans) in the *Jungle Books* that extend far beyond their denotative roles in the narrative. These actors, each with distinct personalities and behaviours, serve as potent allegories for human traits, societal roles, and the complexities of colonial India. However, in Kipling's depiction of the jungle and its inhabitants, animals are not merely symbols but active stakeholders in a dynamic ecosystem shaped by both human intervention and natural forces. Simultaneously, the jungle itself emerges as an actor, a vibrant, interconnected ecosystem, where animals experience predation, suffer drought, run from fires, fear "man," and struggle to survive. This ecological landscape is further complicated by the approach of both the colonisers and the colonised towards the physical world around them – ranging from exploitation to respect. Attention to these portrayals might prompt a critical examination of human behaviour through the lens of the natural world.

Laura C. Stevenson is one critic who does not seek to simply 'box' Kipling into the category of pro-imperialist, acknowledging the tensions evident in his writing. "Kipling," she writes, "became one of the classic children's writers who found in the genre a way to plumb depths far beyond the grasp of children." She continues,

> Far from serving as an opportunity to address political themes, writing for children gave Kipling access to the "other side of his head" and that side saw deeply into the psychological impossibilities of imperialism, the sorrows of the past, and the dreadful choices that maturity thrust upon people whose souls still had access, at fleeting moments, to the Golden Age. (377)

Stevenson nonetheless resorts to a symbolic reading, describing Mowgli as a "universal pastoral figure" due to his innocence, his connection to nature and his painful transition from childhood to adulthood. She claims that it is this 'universality' that paves the way for Kipling to explore deep psychological and existential themes that resonate beyond the surface-level narrative.

Anthropomorphic readings of the *Jungle Books*

Traditionally, in readings such as Stevenson's, the animals in the *Jungle Books* have been read as proxies for human attributes and behaviours, positive and negative. Such an approach is summed up simply in Diana Budoyan's statement that "In the *Jungle Books* we see animals becoming human beings, even more, they are personified. They think, speak and feel as human beings" (28). This anthropomorphic approach is no doubt facilitated by the fact, stressed by Budoyan, that the animals in the books *speak* rather than merely grunt or howl or hiss. The capacity to use complex, symbolic speech and the verbal communication of abstract concepts has historically been used to distinguish humans from animals (and certainly from plants). Importantly, however, while the animals talk like humans in the books, it is emphasized that they speak a different language – or languages – ones that the narrator (or the fictional editor) 'translates' for readers into English. As the animals circle Buldeo, in *The Second Jungle Book*, for example, we are told they talk without worrying that he can hear, "for their speech began below the lowest end of the scale that untrained human beings can hear," ("Letting in the Jungle" 68). Mowgli is taught "jungle language" by Baloo and this is not human language and certainly not English. Baloo tells Bagheera, "I am now teaching him the Master Words of the Jungle that shall protect him with the birds and the Snake People, and all that hunt on four feet, except his own pack. He can now claim protection, if he will only remember the words, from all in the jungle" ("Kaa's Hunting" 23). Further, it is not the fact that the jungles animals behave like humans, but rather that Mowgli frequently behaves like an animal: "Mowgli would cling like a sloth, but afterward he would fling himself

through his branches, almost as bold as the gray ape" ("Mowgli's Brothers" 10). He is *taught* how to behave by Father Wolf and, according to Shubhneet Kaur Kharbanda, "[t]his process of training to 'become' [like a wolf] deconstructs the hierarchisation of species and attacks the idea that human nature – Anthropos, *bios* – is essentially and categorically distinct from that of animals, nonhumans, or *zoe*" (190). Kharbanda continues, "[t]he tensions addressed in *The Jungle Book* [as a result of Mowgli's 'hybrid' identity] arise because … the boundaries between the human and the animal are not fixed or inherent; rather, they are socially and historically constructed" (191).

Kaori Nagai notes that

> Kipling's two *Jungle Books* … have often been cited as the most flagrant examples of the anthropocentric misrepresentation of animals. Not only are his animals too 'human' in their speech and demeanour, but also they are made allegorically to represent Indian native subjects, presenting the process of colonization as domestication. ("The Beast in Chinese Boxes" 233)

Against this popular approach to the *Jungle Books*, Nagai claims "[s]uch allegorical figurations of animals in the *Jungle Books*, however, coexist with Kipling's awareness of, and adoration for, 'real' animals in the Empire (234). Ralph Pite argues similarly, asserting that Kipling does not attribute human passions to animals but expresses, in human terms, the "life of wild animals" (66). What the *Jungle Books* reveal about the "life of wild animals" *as animals* is precisely what I hope to outline in what follow.

The personal growth of Mowgli (the shift in his character from a vulnerable boy to a powerful figure among the jungle people) can be – and has been – read as a potent allegory for human maturation and the acquisition of power: Mowgli, in these terms, signifies a wider human experience of coming into one's own, comprehensive potential, and grappling with the responsibilities that come with it. In the final story, in which Mowgli is on the cusp of adulthood, we learn "[t]he Jungle People who used to fear him for his wits feared him now for his strength" and "the mere whisper of his coming cleared the wood-paths" ("The Spring Running" 303). Mowgli's upbringing among the wolves highlights his immersion in the natural world, but his eventual return to human society speaks to the inevitable pull of civilisation, mirroring the journey of (good) colonised subjects who, despite their deep connections to their indigenous culture, are drawn into the systems and structures of colonial powers. This is the thrust of the final story in the *Jungle Books*, "The Spring Running."

However, this story not only portrays Mowgli's decision to choose human civility over jungle life. It powerfully evokes the life of the jungle and its residents. Kipling's narrator refers to springtime as the "Time of new talk" – "The Jungle people are very busy in the spring, and Mowgli could hear them grunting and screaming and whistling according to their kind" (307) – reflecting on the vibrant and dynamic 'voices' of the jungle in which human speech is irrelevant. As readers have learned through the stories, the animals' grunts, screams and whistles are not empty and unintelligent vocalisations but rich and meaningful alternatives to human speech.

Mowgli's deep connection to the jungle is evident from his immense knowledge and awareness about its natural cycles, or what Christie Harner refers to as "the multiplicity of temporal rhythms in the texts' local animal ecologies: mating seasons, monsoon cycles, diurnal and nocturnal behaviours, and others" ("Geopolitical Temporalities" 137). He is an integral part of the jungle's ecosystem, participating in its rhythms and with "animal and ecological time scales: diurnal, seasonal, generational (in biological terms), supra-generational (in legends that surpass living memory), and … forms of evolutionary time that 'involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to'" (Harner 137; quoting Timothy Morton). Moreover, Mowgli's reliance on the teachings of the jungle animals – Baloo, Bagheera, and Akela – may also suggest the coloniser's need for indigenous environmental knowledge to survive in the colonial landscape. Arguably, Mowgli survives in the natural world not because he is human and possesses greater human intellect or skill, but because of what he learns about nature from the jungle inhabitants.[11] The Jungle "Law" learned by Mowgli is clearly one that is hierarchical, with some animals in possession of greater power or strength or ability. But this does not mean it is necessarily 'colonial' or human. It teaches far more than rules of dominance and submission. It teaches about ecological balance and co-existence.

Throughout the stories in the *Jungle Books,* Mowgli is instructed by Baloo*,* who embodies knowledge transmission, discipline, and the role of mentorship that is evident not only in human societies, but animal ones too. At first glance, Baloo seems simple and gentle, but he is responsible for instilling in Mowgli the foundational values necessary for survival and

[11] This is often referred to animal behaviouralists as "animal social learning" and differs from the assumption that animal species merely adapt, in Darwinian terms, to achieve greater survival success. It involves learning from social information and learning from social interaction. See, for example Simon Reader, "Animal Social Learning"; Carel P. van Schaik, "Social Learning and Culture in Animals."

success in the natural world. It is Baloo who teaches him the "Law of Jungle" which, as discussed, is often interpreted as colonial, civilising, British codes of conduct. What such an interpretation overlooks is that the source of these "laws' is a *bear* (and a brown one) and what the "Law" encodes are natural laws that ensure species co-dependence and interaction that is necessary to survive in a natural, not human, ecosystem. In "Kaa's Hunting," for instance, Baloo's lessons about how to distinguish between a rotten branch and a sound one, or how to speak politely to bees, exemplify the transmission of not only practical wisdom of ways of living successfully in a shared natural world. Similarly, Bagheera, the black panther, with his blend of ferocity and tenderness, highlights the balance between instinctual freedom and learned restraint which is not only necessary to successful human conduct but also animal survival. Bagheera is described as being "as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant," but also as having a "voice as soft as wild honey" and "skin softer than down" ((("Mowgli's Brothers" 8), a composite of natural images that portray his balance of compassion and restraint. He teaches Mowgli when to use force and when to hold back, and the idea that survival is not just about following rules but about knowing when to break or bend them: the need to adapt. Akela, the leader of the wolf pack passes on to his pack, and Mowgli, valuable generational knowledge. His loss of power as he ages, and ultimate death, also instils learning that is natural and cyclical – about aging and mortality.

The stories in the *Jungle Books* portray a symbiotic relationship between animals, plants and the natural environment showing them to be deeply dependent on each other in terms of food, shelter and more widely for survival. Kipling also emphasises the dual role of 'nature' – understood as the living jungle ecosystem – as both nurturing and as a necessarily destructive force in the cycle of life and death. Contrasting the *Jungle Books* with Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Mary Goodwin asserts, "Mowgli's jungle is neither picturesque nor quaint; it does not require cultivation or intervention by humans.…. The jungle is not changed or improved by men. … The jungle has a well-organized ecosystem and ancient social structure of its own, ordered on standards of survival that are as pitiless and inexorable as age and death" (108).

So while the *Jungle Books* are often read as imperialist allegories reinforcing Victorian hierarchies, they also reveal a complex, ambivalent engagement with the natural world. Through his vivid depictions of Indian flora and fauna, Kipling simultaneously celebrates colonial mastery over nature and betrays an underlying admiration – and even nascent

conservationist concern[12] – for India's ecosystems. I argue that the *Jungle Books* serve as a paradoxical lens into Victorian attitudes towards nature: they mirror the era's exploitative deforestation, water management, and hunting practices, yet also reveal tensions between imperial domination and ecological appreciation.

Animals as animals in the Jungle Books

It is my assertion that as a counter or complement to allegorical readings of the *Jungle Books*, Kipling's detailed, literal descriptions of India's flora and fauna demand close attention – not as mere Romantic exoticism or imperial metaphors, but as evidence of his knowledge of and admiration for the subcontinent's natural environment. Kipling's narratives oscillate between expressions of colonial authority and fascination: his precise depictions of trees, mangroves, and animal behaviour reveal both a naturalist's eye for detail and an imperial writer's ideological framing. Without anachronistically casting Kipling as an environmentalist or postcolonial ally, my analysis argues for the presence of an ambivalent tension in the *Jungle Books* – where the jungle is simultaneously a stage for colonial allegory and portrayed as a living ecosystem worthy of admiration.

Warning against reading the animals in Kipling's stories "only in terms of what the animals can be said to represent metaphorically," Sune Borkfelt, in "Colonial Animals and Literary Analysis," suggests that "especially in the case of children's literature … something needs to be said of the ways in which animals come across simply as representatives of nature and their species" (559). This is so, he argues, because children are "apt to take some of the descriptions of animals and their characteristics at face value, whether consciously or subconsciously. Thus, how animals are portrayed in such texts can be of importance to the [child] reader's perception of the animals as well as the natural environments and the countries they live in" (559). To be sure, Borkfelt is concerned with the *perception* of "exotic" Indian animals that may be drawn by (western) children from Kipling's stories. He notes that while the stories are "generally very animal friendly" they also contain "a wide range of animal stereotypes, many of which are negative" (559): camels are lazy and misbehaving ("Her Majesty's Servants"); elephants are useful to humans if domesticated, otherwise they are "wild monsters" ("Toomai of the Elephants"); Mongooses are "better off

[12] Although, as noted, imperial conservation was mainly about preserving natural resources for the colonisers' benefit.

in the service of humans" (562) and snakes are "wicked" (563). Even the rock-python Kaa, although he helps Baloo and Bagheera rescue Mowgli, in "Kaa's Hunting," is "treacherous" and "vindictive" (564). The monkeys are "half-mad outcasts" (565) and "lack all the marks of civilization" (565). And via the representation of Shere Khan, tigers are "portrayed as a ferocious, evil, cunning and vindictive" and "bloodthirsty" (564). Shere Khan, states Borkfelt,

> breaks the Law of the Jungle, which forbids both the killing of man and hunting for pleasure. As for big game hunters in real life, the tiger's supposed thirst for human blood helps justify the killing of tigers as a measure for the protection of others in the lands where they live. In addition, in the rather Genesis-like myth found in the second *Jungle Book* about how violence and fear first entered the jungle, the tiger is both the first to introduce death to the animals in the jungle and the one who turns the violence of humans on the jungle, which shows his inclination for unjust violence as something primeval and therefore inherent to his nature. (565)[13]

Borkfelt's argument is that child readers are likely to take from the books an understanding that some animals are 'better' than others; some are to be appreciated and valued more. After making these valid points, Borkfelt concludes rather weakly, returning to the notion of animals as metaphors for humans ostensibly dismissed at the start. He argues that the stereotypes of animals in the *Jungle Books* are transferred to Indian people: "attitudes towards humans and other animals are linked and we need to study the attitudes of imperial writers towards animals if we are to fully understand and analyse their texts in the light of metaphors of humans" (567). This seems to contradict his earlier assertion that for many child readers, the "animals come across simply as representatives of nature and their species." He follows this by stating that we need to regard animals as "other" and in the final sentence of the essay stresses the need to find "new ways of analysing literary depictions of animals" (567). No new ways are suggested, however. I suggest that one "new way" may be to attempt to read the animals *as* animals, not simply as figures for the human – while also remaining attuned to their possible metaphorical resonances. As Parama Roy reminds us,

[13]Parama Roy writes: "Even Rudyard Kipling, who in the *Jungle Books* was capable of extending his sympathy to the otherwise feared and despised wolf and snake, represented the tiger Shere Khan as a contemptible and barbarous outlaw, hungry for human flesh and responsible for the expulsion of animals and humans from Eden" ("Strange Ecologies" 80).

> [S]urely we miss the scope of nonhuman life in Kipling's work if we read it solely in terms of *human* animality, or in term of human biopower alone; the forms of life that inhabit his worlds encompass more orders of the animate than the human. Such a profusion of nonhuman existence, moreover, is not isolated within the *Jungle Books* and the *Just So Stories* but pervades the fiction and the journalistic prose. To enter Kipling's landscapes is to enter a teeming environment bursting with energy, perhaps even with agency; they are lively with animal, vegetal, and sometimes machinic life, not to mention the sheer unarguable power of hostile topographies and climates.

I begin my analyses of Kipling's "teeming environment" and its "profusion of nonhuman existence" with a discussion of one of the best-known *Jungle Books* stories, "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," suggesting that the story can be read in terms other than those of colonial allegory. Like Borkfelt, Sharon Murphy, in "Be careful. I am Death!," also challenges the common allegorical postcolonial reading of "Rikki-Tiki-Tavi" in which the mongoose represents the faithful, "good" native servant protecting families of the Raj by "effectively ridding colonial space of troublesome natives [the snakes]" (Kutzer; qtd. Murphy 99). She still reads it as an allegory, but of a different *kind* of allegory. She interprets the story as being about "late-nineteenth-century Britons' determination to eradicate a species of fauna [snakes] from the Indian subcontinent" (116) and contextualises it "in relation to a very particular aspect of Britain's ecological imperialism and … the 'great war' that Britons waged against India's snake population in the late 1800s" (99). Deemed more of a threat to humans than big game animals, snakes were subject to a bounty scheme in India, established in 1871, in an attempt to eradicate them.[14] Murphy notes that "the Britons' determination to control or eradicate India's snake population was intensifying during Kipling's childhood in India (1865–71), by the end of which period '*Naja naja*,' or the cobra, was being singled out as 'the largest killer' on the subcontinent" (99).[15]

Murphy asserts that "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" is "a curiously ambivalent narrative" (100) insofar as the unnamed white Sahib in the tale proves to be incapable of eradicating the snakes in his

[14] The eradication attempts failed, not least because Indians began breeding snakes, specifically to kill them, in order to claim the bounty that was offered for each dead cobra brought in to authorities. Authorities deemed the exercise too expensive and cancelled the bounty scheme, so thousands of cobras, bred to be killed in order to receive the bounty, were released, vastly increasing the cobra population. This is the source of the term "the cobra effect" to describe the unintended negative consequences of an attempt to fix a problem or when incentives go wrong. See Valayutham Saravanan, *Colonialism and Wildlife: An Environmental History of Modern India*, Routledge 2024.

[15] See Rahul Bhaumik, "Indian Snakes and Snakey India."

home without the help of the mongoose, despite much bravado with sticks and guns once Rikki-Tikki-Tavi has already incapacitated or killed them. Nonetheless, she claims, the story makes clear "the degree to which India's snakes haunted the Anglo-Indian consciousness" (100). Central to the essay is the assertion that Indians – specifically Hindu Indians – do not regard snakes with the same horror and hatred as the British and indeed regard them as sacred or even as deities in zoomorphic form. This claim appears to accord with many Hindu sources[16] and is certainly an attitude that the British believed Indians held about snakes. Kipling's father, John Lockwood Kipling, for instance, writes in his *Beast and Man in India*, "The Government pays large sums annually for the destruction of poisonous snakes but it will be many a year before a respectable Hindu will kill one. … They call him Raj-bansi, royal scion, an honourable name, and generally seek to propitiate as we seek to destroy the pest"; "everywhere the true Hindu reverences the fateful creatures that carries pure death in its fangs" (310; 308). This notion of reverence for snakes is also suggested in the *Jungle Book* stories. In "Tiger! Tiger! for example, are told "there was a hole under the platform where a cobra lived, and he had his little platter of milk every night [from local Indians] because he was sacred" (52).

Murphy's objections are like those of Borkfelt: Kipling portrays mongooses as *better* (morally and in terms of utility) than snakes and is thus guilty of speciesism. (Borkfelt 559; Murphy 102). The former deserves to live; the latter to die. (I will return to the moral hierarchy of animals in the *Jungle Books* below when I discuss tiger-hunting in the stories, and the killing of the Mugger crocodile in "The Undertakers.") Speciesism (the belief that some species are more valuable than others, with humans better than all) is a key target for many environmentalists and ecologists. The term was coined by Richard D. Ryder who wrote, in "Experiments on Animals" (1971):

> In as much as both 'race' and 'species' are vague terms used in the classification of living creatures according, largely, to physical appearance, an analogy can be made between them. Discrimination on grounds of race, although most universally condoned two centuries ago, is now widely condemned. Similarly, it may come to pass that enlightened minds may one day abhor 'speciesism' as much as they now detest 'racism.' The illogicality in both forms of prejudice is of an identical sort. If it

> is accepted as morally wrong to deliberately inflict suffering upon innocent human creatures, then it is only logical to also regard it as wrong to inflict suffering on innocent individuals of other species. ... The time has come to act upon this logic.

In his book *Animal Liberation*, published a few years later in 1975, Peter Singer proposed that speciesism was comparable to sexism and racism, in other words it was another form of objectionable discrimination on the part of human beings. The impact of speciesism on the natural and human world is now widely acknowledged. Brian Swartz and Brent D. Mishler, for example, in a recent essay collection titled *Speciesism and Culture* (2022), write, "[s]peciesism is to species as racism is to race. … Speciesism begins with how we view ourselves in relation to the natural world, and leads to behaviour that challenges the future of our planet" (3). They assert, further, "[h]uman actions indeed reveal deep seated speciesism. Grounding us in the natural world is probably the best first step toward dethroning our misguided exceptionalism" (11). Speciesism, however, doesn't only connote human exceptionalism, but also the way in which *all* living things are hierarchically ordered, by humans, in terms of value. This is directly counter to an ecological understanding of the independence of all living things within an ecosystem.

Murphy draws on Shefali Rajamannar to make a similar claim to that of Borkfelt with respect to Kipling's writing. Rajamannar argues that "ideologies of species, nation, and race" are intertwined in Kipling's animal stories for children:

> The potent cocktail of 'Indian Empire' and 'writing for children' seems to have resulted in Kipling's most ideologically driven animal tales. … The selective incorporation of actual details from nature, such as the fact that mongooses kill cobras and other snakes … legitimizes the narrative and implies that the [hierarchical] structure of human groups mirrors natural forms. (Rajamannar 131; qtd. Murphy 102)

Murphy claims that despite the inclusion of realist and "plausible" (101) details about snakes (and mongooses and tailorbirds, etc.) in the tale, they are nonetheless stereotyped and aligned with "with long-established negative Western views of … the animals themselves" (101). These 'facts' are presented to the anticipated (western) child reader who is less likely to read the stories metaphorically than adults and so, as a result of their reading (or of being read to) are likely to adopt a negative attitude towards snakes (102) and a positive one to mongooses. That late-Victorian Anglo-Indians and British child readers were likely to fear (and even hate) snakes more than mongooses seems a given and to vilify Kipling for reinforcing this

seems to me to be decidedly presentist. Snakes *did* pose a threat to human life in India, that of the colonised and the colonisers, and it is anachronistic to judge Kipling as deficient in contemporary post-humanist terms. However, the point Rajamannar appears to be making by drawing attention to Kipling's "discriminatory" portrayal of snakes is less about the animals than (again) about what they might say about his racist attitudes towards non-Europeans, presumably because it is widely accepted, to quote Swartz and Mishler, that "[s]peciesism is to species as racism is to race."

Murphy's argument, then, quickly slides into a discussion of Anglo-Indian racism for which attitudes towards snakes and mongooses are merely a metaphor. She asserts that the ideological intertwining commented on by Rajamannar is "curiously unstable" (102) in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi." On the one hand, the Anglo-Indian parents show "appropriate" fear of snakes and so it is implied they will work to eradicate snakes from India. But on the other hand, the story implies that they are inadequate to the task. The snakes threaten "the domestic space that they [the British couple] are trying to (re)create within the jungle environment" (106), "a place where Britons … live with a constant awareness that they may not be able to 'master" nature" (115). This is so: the jungle surrounds the property, and it appears to be quickly engulfing the once cultivated garden suggesting that the attempt to 'tame' the jungle is a futile task. Kuter argues likewise: "The 'half-wild' garden the British family has invaded and colonized is a metaphor for India itself, a garden-paradise harboring dangerous 'natives' in the form of the snakes" (26).

Murphy then draws attention to the one Indian who appears in the narrative but does not speak, the "sweeper" who is tasked with disposing of the body of Nag. That he remains silent, she asserts, ensures "that readers never learn what the sole Indian human in the story feels about either the cobra or the task on which he is engaged" (110). She goes on to posit that Darzee, the "feather-brained" (97) tailorbird, "could be pointed to as clearly taking the place of the tolerant – but foolish – Hindu in Kipling's narrative" (Murphy 110). This is because he (initially) challenges the idea of killing the cobra's "children" (their stash of unborn eggs): "because he knew that Nagaina's children were born in eggs like his own, he didn't think at first that it was fair to kill them" (97). The mistaken logic of the bird's thinking is stressed in the narrative, states Murphy (Darzee's wife reminds him that if the snake eggs hatch there will be even more snakes to threaten their own young). Murphy, following Rajamannar, thus suggests that Kipling works hard to present one species of non-human animal (snakes) as more deserving of death than others (birds): "'Rikki-Tikki-Tavi'

present[s] the human-snake interactions in the story in terms of a very simple equation: kill or be killed" (116). However, Murphy shows no real interest in the non-human actors in the story apart from what they might metaphorically reveal about colonial racism. Added to this is the implicit claim that Hindu reverence of snakes is fundamentally stupid. Her reading of speciesism in relation to non-human animals remains secondary to one about human racial discrimination. By offering this reading of the bird Darzee (as hapless Hindu) she does exactly what she accuses Kutzer of doing at the essay's start – she reads the animals metaphorically.

While there is much to praise in Murphy's essay, the argument is ultimately undermined by her failure to confront the role of the mongoose in the tale, no doubt because she dismissed the allegorical reading of him as 'good native' at the start (while still, oddly, reading Darzee as representative of Hindus). If Rikki-Tikki-Tavi is not to be read metaphorically or allegorically, what is his status in the tale? Even if he has been "domesticated" by the Englishman, he acts as mongooses do in nature: he fights snakes in a *natural* battle of "kill or be killed." He doesn't kill the snakes because his white 'master' or 'mistress' urges him to do so, or because he is mimicking the white man's fear of dangerous 'natives,' or because he discriminates against snakes as humans do, but because mongooses *naturally* kill snakes. This is a biological fact. Is it not possible to read "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" as (possibly) articulating the British fear of snakes in the colony, and their favouring of some other forms of non-human animals over snakes, *and also* to read it as a story that educates children about the ecological relationship between snakes and mongooses and the reality of predation in functioning ecosystems?

On first sighting Nag, we are told Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was "afraid for the minute, but it is impossible for a mongoose to stay frightened for any length of time, and though Rikki-Tikki had never met a live cobra before, his mother had fed him on dead ones, and he knew that all a grown mongoose's business in life was to fight and eat snakes" (90). Here we have an example of the way in which Kipling, in this story and others, conveys accurate details about Indian nature and animal behaviour and surely not simply to "legitimize" the accordance of greater value to one species over the other (and so one race over the other) as Rajamannar and Murphy claim. Kipling was very familiar with mongooses and stated of this story, "Mongooses are as bold and clever as I have tried to describe, and they often come into a house or even into an office with people going in and out all the time and make friends with men there. A perfectly wild mongoose used to come in and sit on my shoulder in my office in

India and burn his inquisitive nose on the end of my cigar, just as Rikki [does] in the tale" (qtd. Robson 358). Kipling's father, Lockwood Kipling, described mongooses this way in *Beast and Man in India*: "Few wild animals take so readily to domestic life as the Indian mongoose, who has been known to domesticate himself among friendly people" (314). (Which raises the question: do humans domesticate mongooses, or do mongooses domesticate themselves with humans?)

The later description of a krait,[17] accidentally disturbed by the boy Teddy, similarly offers accurate information about the species: "It was a Karait [sic], the dusty brown snakeling that lies for choice on the dusty earth; and his bite is as dangerous as the cobra's. But he is so small that nobody thinks of him, and so he does the more harm to people" (92). We are provided with many more facts about Indian fauna in the story. We learn about the gait and attack-pose of mongooses from the narrator's description of how Rikki-Tikki-Tavi attacks the snake: "he danced up to Karait with the peculiar rocking, swaying motion that he had *inherited from his family*. It looks very funny, but it is so perfectly balanced a gait that you can fly off from it at any angle you please, and in dealing with snakes this is an advantage" (92; my emphasis). What is described are naturally *inherited* mongoose traits, not humanly-inspired or taught behaviours adopted by domesticated ones. The way in which mongooses kill snakes is also accurately described.[18] We are told that when attacking Nag, Rikki-Tikki Tavi bites the snake at the back of his head, a position out of reach of the snake's fangs, if a mongoose can hold its grip: "'It must be the head"' [Rikki-Tikki-Tavi] said at last; "the head above the hood. And, when I am once there, I must not let go."

> Then he was battered to and fro as a rat is shaken by a dog. … [H]e held on as the body cart-whipped over the floor. … As he held he closed his jaws tighter and tighter, for he was sure he would be banged to death, and, *for the honour of his family*, he preferred to be found with his teeth locked. He was dizzy, aching, and felt shaken to pieces … . (96; my emphasis)

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi does this "for the honour of *his* family" – not the safety of the British family.

[17] Kraits are highly venomous snakes of the genus *Bungarus* in the *elapidae* family, native to Asia.
[18] See H.E. Hinton and A.M.S Dunne, *Mongooses*.

We also learn that snakes hatch from eggs, something a Victorian British child may not have known, and what those eggs look like: "about the size of a bantam's eggs, but with whitish skin instead of shell" (98). We are told how tailorbirds make their nests ("They had made a beautiful nest by pulling two big leaves together and stitching them up the edges with fibres and had filled the hollow with cotton and downy fluff" (89)[19] and how the female tailorbird pretends to have a broken wing in order to distract the Nagaina (97). Referred to as a distraction display, or "broken-wing act," this form of behaviour is widely recorded as a means by which birds lure predators away from their eggs or young (Cherry 55).

Factual, natural information about animals and birds can be found throughout the *Jungle Books*. "Kaa's Hunting," for example, provides further information about snakes. The narrator informs us that when Mowgli, Bagheera and Baloo call for the titular python, "Like all snakes of his breed Kaa was rather deaf, and did not hear the call at first" (31). According to Harvey B. Lillywhite, "it was thought for many years during the history of herpetology that snakes cannot hear. … Since the 1970s it has been learned that ... the popular notion that snakes are deaf is not true although hearing is restricted to a limited range of sound frequencies" (*How Snakes Work* 168). When they find Kaa, Baloo sees he has recently shed his skin and warns the panther, "Be careful, Bagheera! He is always a little blind after he has changed his skin, and very quick to strike" (31). Simon Watharow notes that in the process of shedding skin, and for a time after, a snake's eyesight is often "temporarily impaired" (*Living with Snakes* 125).

Baloo describes the features of Kaa, the rock python, to Bagheera, saying,

> "The whisper of his name makes their [the monkeys who are often his prey] wicked tails cold. Let us go to Kaa … . He sleeps for a full month after he has once eaten."… They found him stretched out on a warm ledge in the afternoon sun, admiring his beautiful new coat, for he had been in retirement for the last ten days, changing his skin, and now he was very splendid. … Kaa was not a poison-snake – in fact he rather despised the poison-snakes as cowards – but his strength lay in his hug, and when he had once lapped his huge coils round anybody there was no more to be said. ("Kaa's Hunting" 31)

[19] "The Common Tailorbird stitches with silk to construct its nest in the cone formed between the two drawn-together sides of a leaf or between two or more leaves – one of the most remarkable constructions of the bird world" (Goodfellow 107).

From this description, we also come to know that pythons take around ten days to shed their old skin and after shedding they become more active and responsive. Kipling also reveals that pythons go into hibernation (a passive or sleeping phase of organisms) after eating and with a full meal this phase extends up to a month. These facts about pythons are widely agreed among herpetologists. Readers also learn that pythons are not venomous but asphyxiate their prey by crushing them in a "hug." Kaa is one of many species of predator in the jungle and while he assists Mowgli, Bagheera and Baloo in some stories, he is always to be feared. As Baloo says, "He is very old and very cunning. Above all, he is always hungry" (31). His insatiable hunger reflects nature's relentless, cyclical power – always consuming, always transforming, as suggested by the shedding of his skin. His vulnerability when shedding, and in the days after, underscores the balance between regeneration and danger: nature is constantly evolving, but this process of renewal brings moments of risk and unpredictability.

We also learn about the behaviours of jackals who are described as often cunning, and about the courageousness of wild buffalo, along with the recklessness of a wounded elephant, in a single line from "Mowgli's Brothers" where Bagheera, the panther, is described: "he was as cunning as Tabaqui [the jackal], as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant" (8). In the same story, the social behaviour of wolves is outlined. The pack that adopts Mowgli has a compact social structure with a leader (Akela) who guides and protects the whole pack due to their superior strength and experience. They live cooperatively, hunt together and share food. ("The law of the Jungle" states, "If ye plunder his kill from a weaker, devour not all in thy pride,/ Pack-right is the right of the meanest; so leave him the head and the hide.// The kill of the pack is the meat of the pack.") Wolves, like many other species, exhibit strong nurturing instincts toward their offspring. They transport their young in their mouths, showing great care: Kipling's narrator informs us that "[a] Wolf accustomed to moving his own cubs can, if necessary, mouth an egg without breaking it, and though Father Wolf's jaws closed right on the child's [Mowgli's] back not a tooth even scratched the skin as he laid it down among the cubs" ("Mowgli's Brothers" 4). Although parental care is very common among animals, the wolves' instinctual ability to carry their young gently in their mouths is likely to have been new information for British child readers. Readers are also told about aspects of pack life that are far less positive, for example, how the position of the pack leader is always under threat from younger wolves. Akela ages and weakens as the time-line jumps ahead "ten or eleven whole years" (9) since the adoption of Mowgli. As the pack hunts one night in the ploughed fields near the village, the younger wolves start

"wicked, bitter howls," demanding that Akela take the kill of a buck – and he misses. The narrator tells us, "When a leader of the Pack has missed his kill, he is called the Dead Wolf as long as he lives, which is not long, as a rule" (16). Akela's dominance is now under threat, and he is challenged by younger, stronger members of the pack. Akela faces a time "that comes to every leader of every pack when his strength goes from him and he gets feebler and feebler, till at last he is killed by the wolves and a new leader comes up – to be killed in his turn" (9).[20]

Akela's strategic thinking, particularly in the story "Tiger! Tiger!" suggests the importance of experience and foresight in successful pack leadership. However, as Akela grows older, he faces challenges to his authority, not only from younger and rebel wolves but from the tiger Shere Khan, who "had come to be great friends with the younger wolves" (11). This is not a realistic alliance, of course. Wolves and tigers are not "friends" in nature. However, what might be alluded to here is the erosion of traditional leadership in the face of newer, disruptive forces (referred to by ecologists as "biological regime shifts,") highlighting the difficulties that come with maintaining normal behaviour and processes when ecosystems are reorganised (as the ecosystems in the Indian jungles were as a result of British colonial deforestation, hunting, and so on). The threat posed to animals (and plants) as a result of changing environments is evident in many of the stories in the *Jungle Books*. While this is often linked by scholars to questions of colonial authority during the Raj, and colonial/ 'native' interactions, I argue that Kipling's portrayals in the *Jungle Books* should not be limited to this human focus. Again, Parama Roy is instructive insofar as she encourages a more complex and ambivalent response to the stories. "It is undoubtedly fitting," she writes, "that we should have to turn to the writer who is widely understood to be the bard of the British empire in the nineteenth century to get a sense of the sheer amplitude of the empire's actors and stakeholders and of its status as a multi-species arena" ("Kipling's Bestiary" 833). She argues that postcolonial theory has, "for the most part undertaken a sustained engagement with the category of the human" but has done "without sufficient consideration of other orders of life in the colony" (833). Kipling reminds us, she insists, "of the degree to which the nonhuman is key to a comprehensive grasp of the imperial world, whether in terms of its imaginative circuits, its political formations, or its bodily registers" (833). Kipling

[20] The wolf behaviour described by Kipling has been widely dismissed in the past few decades but was held to be true at the time he wrote. See, for example, Thomas Hunt Morgan's description of wolves' behaviour in *Evolution and Adaptation* (1903).

recognised, she argues, that in the colonial contact zone "humans were not necessarily exempt from the vulnerabilities of creatureliness" (833). The imperial project required not only cultivation and domestication of animal life but also "the exercise of sovereign violence against them" (834). She continues, stressing the ambivalence towards the non-human in Kipling's writing:

> It is characteristic of the tonal complexity of Kipling's short fiction that it should endeavour to encompass within a single frame the fetishisation of sovereign violence against nonhuman (or animalised human) entities with a sardonic awareness of the imbecility at the heart of human claims to exceptionalism. Neither of these elements on its own – the deployment of sovereign violence against animality or the undermining of human supremacism – is adequate as a gloss on his thinking of the relations between humans and nonhumans. (833-834)

The "deployment of [human] sovereign violence against animality" and "the imbecility at the heart of human claims to exceptionalism" are evident in stories such as "The White Seal," "Toomai of the Elephants," "Her Majesty's Servants" and "The Undertakers." It is also evident in "Tiger! Tiger!" and "Red Dog" in which Mowgli is the violent *human* agent (his "man"-hood is stressed in both stories).

The predatory nature of tigers, embodied in the figure of Shere Khan who threatens not only other animals in the jungle but humans too, is stressed throughout the *Jungle Books*. The flesh-consumption of these apex predators is not described as inevitable and natural in the ecosystem (as the predatory behaviour of the wolves or the panther or python is) but is demonised, in this way justifying the execution of tigers by hunters. I will return to this in my next chapter when I also discuss the similarly negative portrayal of another species in the stories, the mugger crocodile in "The Undertakers," and the ways in which the killing of this animal is normalised and naturalised. What the tiger and crocodile have in common in the *Jungle Books*, unlike the other animals who also hunt and kill to survive, is a penchant for *human* flesh. They join snakes, then, as a threat to humans and so their extermination is, apparently, warranted. This point is made in the articles I discuss above, by Murphy and Rajamannar, in which the charge of speciesism is laid against Kipling. However, I join Roy in claiming that the stories do not *simply* advocate speciesism by favouring some animals over others. At times they also work to "undermin[e] human supremacism" often via a sly form of humour, like that at work in "The Undertakers." The mass slaughter of dholes in

"Red Dog," masterminded by the "man" Mowgli (again this is emphasised) is particularly disturbing because they kill other animals, not humans, unlike tigers, some snakes and crocodiles. The motivation given for the killing of the dholes in the story is because the pack-hunting dholes have killed a wolf's partner and cubs. However, the narrative appears to confirm colonial attitudes towards the animals as "vermin," deserving of extermination.[21] I will closely consider these stories in my next chapter.

What Roy calls "sovereign violence" directed towards non-human life is evident in the stories not only in the treatment of "dangerous" animals such as tigers, crocodiles and snakes, or animals who are forced into servitude or are considered pests, but also in the plunder of jungle timber, the destruction of forests to make way for cultivated crops, the diversion and pollution of waterways, and climactic changes due to human interventions. These are all alluded to in the stories, with animals voicing concern or dismay about them, resulting in ambiguity that cuts against the claim that the stories display singular allegiance to colonial actions and policies impacting the Indian natural environment. I turn to this in my next chapter.

[21] Arjun Srivathsa writes, "A prevailing belief was that dholes would eat up all the animals in a forest, leaving nothing in store for the leisurely hunts of Englishmen and other Indian royalty. For a significant part of the last 200 years, dholes were thus vilified, labelled "vermin", and bounty hunted indiscriminately, as it evident from the following quote: "*Except for his handsome appearance, the wild dog has not a single redeeming feature, and no effort, fair or foul, should be spared to destroy these pests of the jungle*". – G. Phythian-Adams, Nilgiri Game Association, 1949" ("Going to the Dogs?").

Chapter 3: Green Tales: Plants, Animals and Environments in the *Jungle Books*

Introduction

Most readings of the *Jungle Books* limit their focus to Mowgli and the various animals portrayed, often in allegorical or symbolic terms. Very little attention has been paid to the jungle as more than a backdrop for animal (and sometimes human) interactions. This chapter begins to address this gap in *Jungle Books* scholarship. As my analyses show, the stories contain plenty of information about various plant species and their ethno-botanical behaviours and forcefully articulate the vegetative jungle's rejection of "man." I follow my discussion of the portrayal of plants and trees in the *Jungle Books* with an analysis of the ways in which human/animal boundaries are blurred in the stories and offer some comments on the depiction of animal inter-species killing and human intra-species killing. I then move on to discuss the embedded critique, in some of the stories, of negative colonial impacts on Indian environments and ecologies and conclude with a discussion of Kipling's complex, and decidedly selective, portrayal of the hunting, and even the attempted extermination of, specific species of animals.

Phytocentric reading of the *Jungle Books*

The stories are set in a recognisable Indian jungle where animals come in direct contact with the floral distribution of the environment, and this plays a significant role in the overall plots of the stories. At a more fundamental level, plants feature frequently in the figurative language used by Kipling's narrator. In "Kaa's Hunting" when Mowgli gets fed up with the teachings of Baloo, he gets frustrated and says, "My head is ringing like a bee-tree" (24). Bees commonly make their hives in hollow tree trunks where the colony hums or buzzes audibly. Kipling also reveals the thickness and height of the Indian forests, when Mowgli is kidnapped by the Bandar-log, and dragged by the monkeys up to the tops of the trees: "Two of the strongest monkeys caught Mowgli under the arms and swung off with him through the tree-tops, twenty feet at a bound" (28). Kipling's narrator talks about "pig-nuts" ("Mowgli's Brothers" 11), which are edible tubers or roots found in Indian jungles and are commonly foraged by both humans and animals. In the same story, the narrator mentions the "palm-

trees" (11) which are found abundantly in the tropical and sub-tropical regions including India. Kipling does not explicitly mention the specific type of palm tree but in the Indian jungles, coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) are found abundantly. Many descriptions employ evocative natural imagery that shows a keen eye for details about the Indian environment. In "The King's Ankus," for example, Mowgli says, after eating a large meal, "[m]y stomach is heavy in me, and yet it heaves up and down like an oriole's nest at the end of a branch" (167). Mang the bat says, "[t]he village of the Man-Pack, where they cast out the Man-cub, hums like a hornet's nest" ("Letting in the Jungle" 63). The imagery grows darker and more urgent in "Red Dog," where the air carries "a sweetish-sourish smell… like a big ant-hill on a hot day" (225) – an olfactory warning that is both familiar and unnerving, grounding the approaching danger in something tangible. When Mowgli's hand darts out "like the head of a tree-snake" (235), the simile does double work: it captures the speed of his movement while reminding us that survival in the jungle can mean emulating one's predators. Even emaciation becomes a landscape in "How Fear Came," where a character's ribs protrude "like the ribs of a [woven] basket" (13) and his limbs knot like "grass-stems," (13) reducing the human form to something woven and brittle, as if the jungle itself is reclaiming him.

Then there is the unexpected beauty Kipling grafts onto danger, like the description of Kaa's scales, patterned "like the mottling in the mouth of a lily" ("The King's Ankus" 144). Here, the python's lethal elegance is juxtaposed with the delicate throat of a flower, a reminder that the jungle's allure is inseparable from its peril. Nagina's tail, dragging on the veranda is likened to "dry leaves blown along by the wind" ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" 100), and when Nag raises a third of his body off the ground we are told he is "balancing to and fro exactly as a dandelion tuft balances in the wind" ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" 90). Big Toomai tells Little Toomai that he is "as wild as a buffalo-calf" (107), and the animals describe fire metaphorically, as the "Red Flower." ("Mowgli's Brothers" 13). Even 'hybrid' Mowgli is referred to as a "frog." These aren't just decorative flourishes; they are threads in a larger tapestry where every element – whether a cracking riverbed "snapping like the teeth of wolves" ("Quiquern" 202) or the "sun-bleached hair" of a creature reduced by thirst to crawling on all fours ("How Fear Came" 13) – feels interconnected. The jungle pulses through Kipling's prose because his metaphors aren't imposed on the setting; they are extracted from it, as though the earth itself is whispering the comparisons. Even the silence before a storm is given teeth, the wind holding its breath like a wolf mid-leap.

Flora in the *Jungle Books* is not vaguely described as merely "trees" or "bushes" or "flowers" or "fruit." Nor is the flora exoticised, but rather, it is described in practical, descriptive terms that enable identification and provide botanical information. A wide variety of indigenous flora is named individually and carefully described. It is well-known that Kipling did not actually visit the jungles he evokes in his stories. Rather, he read about them. According to Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, some of the settings and characters in the *Jungle Books* are based on details in Robert Armitage Sterndale's illustrated books, *Seonee, or, Camp Life on the Satpura Range: A Tale of Indian Adventure* (1877), *Natural History of Mammalia of India and Ceylon* (1884), and *Denizens of the Jungles* (1886) ("Picturing the Indian Tiger" 381). Others are drawn from traditional Indian narratives. Nonetheless, his descriptions are not only rich and evocative but make use of recorded facts about the plants of India that were available at the time of his writing.[22]

The natural world described by Kipling is neither idyllic nor pastoral. This has been noted by David Whitley who states, "Kipling's jungle tales may have allowed animals to speak and borrowed from the conventions of traditional oral storytelling, but they were also tough-edged, realistic in many ways, and, in their depiction of animal life, owed more to observations of natural history than many earlier sentimental nature stories" (*The Idea of Nature* 99). This "tough-edged" realism is evident in many stories, and not only in relation to the portrayal of animals but plants, too. From the very start, non-animal nature is a destructive force as well as a vital source of salvation. In "Rikki -Tikki-Tavi" the flood that displaces the young mongoose is a violent, uncontrollable aspect of nature, but at the same time, it becomes the agent that introduces Rikki-Tikki-Tavi to his new home and ensures the necessary movement of young away from immediate family (to combat the dangers of in-

[22] Plants that are mentioned and locatable in Indian forests, include: "the *dhâk*-tree [or flame tree (*Butea monosperma)*], which was all covered with golden-red flowers" ("Tiger! Tiger!" 60); "the *mohwa* tree [with] greeny, cream-coloured, waxy blossoms [or butter tree (*Madhuca longifolia*)]" ("How Fear Came" 150); "Bamboo thickets [*Bambusa vulgaris*]" ("Mowgli's Brothers" 3; "Tiger! Tiger!" 65)]; Palm-tree (*Borassus flabellifer* and *Cocos nucifera*)" (Mowgli's Brothers" 12; Kaa's Hunting 33); "Rose plants [*Rosa indica*]" ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" 103; "Kaa's Hunting" 37); "Castor oil plant [*Ricinus communis*]" (Rikki-Tikki-Tavi 93); "Bee-tree [*Eucalyptus*]" ("Kaa's Hunting" 24); "Tulsi [*Ocimum Sanctum*]" ("Tiger! Tiger!" 62)]; "Fig-tree [*Ficus carica*]" (Tiger! Tiger! 520; "Pine trees [*Pinus strobus*]" ("The Song of the Little Hunter" 173); "Moss [*Sphagnum palustre*]" ("The Spring Running" 257]; "Cucumbers [*Cucumis sativus*]" ("The Undertakers" 119); "Melon [*Cucumis melo*]" ("The Undertakers" 119)]; "Onion [*Allium cepa*]" ("The Undertakers" 119); "Carrot [Daucus carota]" ("The Undertakers" 119)); "Sugar cane [*Saccharum officinarum*]" ("The Undertakers" 119)]; Peepul-tree [("Letting in the Jungle")' "thorn-apple [*Dhatura metel*]" ("The King's Ankus"); "Bitter Karela [*Mormordica charantia*]" ("Mowgli's Song Against People").

breeding and resource competition). The description of him clinging to "a little wisp of grass" (87) in the floodwaters highlights how even the smallest element of nature can become a lifeline. Here, as in the rest of the story, Kipling conveys the delicate equilibrium between life and death, in which nature's elements, however insignificant they might seem, may hold the key to survival, or extermination.

In many of the other stories, the jungle flora is shown as a source of protection and nourishment, which often represents the fine line between security and peril. The reeds that fringe the riverbends in Kipling's jungle perfectly embody this duality of shelter and peril – their tall stalks create protective screens where Mowgli sits "humming songs without words," yet their tangled depths conceal the very "neglected thorns" he anxiously checks for in his feet ("The Spring Running" 264). The Adjutant recalls "wigeons" (dabbling ducks) hiding in the reeds, only to become targets to predators ("The Undertakers" 129); the swaying grasses offer temporary sanctuary while masking approaching dangers. The narrator reflects on how "the marsh was awake all round him" highlighting how the reeds' whispers both conceal Mowgli and isolate him, amplifying his returning unhappiness "ten times worse than before" as "the moon was setting" ("The Spring Running" 264) – a moment when refuge transforms into vulnerability. This mirrors the jungle's broader paradox: the reeds that stabilize the riverbank also hide venomous threats in their "tangled jungle" ("The Undertakers" 107) just as their roots anchor the earth while snaring the unwary in their muddy grasp. The stories are also replete with powerful, and lyrical, descriptions of the living jungle and its plant life, often personified as if sentient and agential, as here, from "Spring Running":

> In an Indian Jungle the seasons slide one into the other almost without division. There seem to be only two – the wet and the dry; but if you look closely below the torrents of rain and the clouds of char and dust you will find all four going round in their regular ring. Spring is the most wonderful, because she has not to cover a clean, bare field with new leaves and flowers, but to drive before her and to put away the hanging-on, over-surviving raffle of half-green things which the gentle winter has suffered to live, and to make the partly dressed stale earth feel new and young once more. And this she does so well that there is no spring in the world like the Jungle Spring.
>
> […] Then, perhaps, a little rain falls, and all the trees and the bushes and the bamboos and the mosses and the juicy-leaved plants wake with a noise of growing that you can

> almost hear, and under this noise runs, day and night, a deep hum. *That* is the noise of the spring – a vibrating boom which is neither bees, nor falling water, nor the wind in tree-tops, but the purring of the warm, happy world. (306)

Nature's nurturing aspect becomes evident in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" when the storm-swept young mongoose finds himself basking in "the hot sun on the middle of a garden path" and "revive[s]" (87) and the restorative role of nature is highlighted through the warmth and brightness of the sun.[23] The garden, with its rich variety reveals the vitality of vegetative growth that refuses to remain cultivated and controlled: "bushes as big as summer houses of Marshall Niel roses, lime and orange trees, clumps of bamboos, and thickets of high grass" (89). [24] The grass is a spectator to the battle between the snakes and mongoose, observing this battle silently, indicating danger through subtle movements. The reader's attention is drawn to "the least little movement in the grass behind Rikki-Tikki" (90). Kipling's grass, part of the physical environment the mongoose inhabits, plays a role in both concealing the predators (snake *and* mongoose) and signalling their presence, highlighting nature's ambivalent role in the life-and-death struggles between the animals.

The portrayal of this rich and diverse setting represents the complex and broader ecosystem where all the existing elements both flora and fauna interact. Apart from its broader perspective, it also serves as a protective habitat for Rikki-Tikki-Tavi from his adversaries, Nag the black cobra and his wife Nagaina who threaten death. But then, so does Rikki-Tikki Tavi, to the snakes: "[Riki-Tiki-Tavi] knew that all a grown mongoose's business in life was to fight and eat snakes. Nag knew that too and, at the bottom of his cold heart, he was afraid" (90). Indeed, the song/poem that prefaces the tale describes a mongoose and a cobra engaged in "a dance of death" (87). One of the two combatants is likely to die from the encounter, as Nathan McGovern asserts: in "real life" snakes and mongooses "engage in a form of combat that is somewhat rare in its symmetrical hostility – not of predator and prey but of two predators who each have a real chance of killing the other when they fight" (2). The mongoose wins in this story, as seems necessary given his superior placement in the tale

[23] In Indian culture, the sun is a symbol of divinity and life-giving energy, representing the source of all creation, truth, and the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth.

[24] In colonial India, "gardens" were an imported construct symbolising control over nature and the imposition of European order and the attempt to recreate familiar landscapes in an unfamiliar land. The Marshall (Marechal) Niel was an iconic rose in the Victorian and Edwardian eras in Europe and introduced to India in 1864.

(which may suggest his greater value in speciesists' terms). But the reader is reminded that the outcome of this "dance of death," in the reality of the Indian ecosystem, is by no means certain.

A theatre of "life-and-death fun"

Along with the abundant, life-providing environment, death is ever-present in the *Jungle Book* stories, and so is the killing by one animal species of others in the name of survival (for food or to prevent themselves from becoming another animal's food), not due to moral judgements by one about the other (with the exception of "Red Dog"), or greed. Kipling is light-handed in his descriptions of animals (and the boy-cub Mowgli) eating prey, no doubt mindful of his child audience. There are no explicit details of blood and gore, but the fact that animals kill for food is constantly stated. The narrator even refers to it as "life-and-death fun" in "When the Fear Came" (152). Mowgli's beloved panther friend is portrayed as a predator who kills for food, as is Mowgli himself: "Bagheera killed right and left as he felt hungry, and so did Mowgli" ("Mowgli's Brothers" 10). In "Kaa's Hunting," Mowgli is kidnapped by the Bandar-log and Baloo and Bagheera try to convince Kaa and other animals to help them free Mowgli. Bagheera promises to set aside food for the python and the kite when he next takes down prey: "I will remember thee in my next kill, and put aside the head for thee alone, O best of kites!" (34). The morality of killing is directly addressed in "The King's Ankus." Here, the necessary killing of animals by animals (for food or to escape predation) is starkly juxtaposed with the killing by humans of other humans, due to greed. Mowgli discovers a jewelled ankus (elephant goad) in a hidden treasure chamber guarded by a white cobra, Thuu. He takes it against Thuu's wishes and despite Thuu's warning that the ankus signifies "Death": "Not long wilt thou hold [the ankus], Jungle Man, nor he who takes it from thee. They will kill, and kill, and kill for its sake!" (158). "They" specifically refers to humans. Some time later, having left the underground treasure trove with the ankus, Mowgli disposes of it as it is heavy and, to him, worthless. When found, the ankus incites greed, violence and multiple deaths among men who subsequently kill each other to possess it. The narrator overtly contrasts this human violence, fuelled by avarice, with that of the panther and other animals who kill for food (or self-protection). Mowgli refuses to kill the guardian of the ankus, although he is threatened by him (159). It is an empty threat, as Mowgli finds: Thuu's fangs are withered, his poison gone: "The White Cobra had outlived his poison, as a snake

will" (159).[25] Confronting Thuu, Mowgli says, "I will never kill again save for food" and "There has been too much talk of killing" (159). He makes an even more pointed comment soon after, in discussion with Bagheera: "Men kill because they are not hunting; – for idleness and pleasure" (161). Bagheera explains to Mowgli that men make tools like the ankus to subordinate and control elephants, "'To teach them Man's Law. Having neither claws nor teeth, men make these things – and worse" (161), one of many pointed comments that draw attention to human cruelty. Some of the "worse" "things" men make are spears and poison to kill other humans. Six men die at the hands of other men in the story, using these "things" in the struggle over the possession of the ankus.

Bagheera kills other animals and often shares his catch with Mowgli. In "The King's Ankus," Mowgli finds the panther in "that part of the Jungle Bagheera chiefly used and found him drinking after a heavy kill leading to several deaths" (160). Sometime later Bagheera and Mowgli hunt together for food: "They killed as soon as they could, but it was nearly three hours before they finished their meat and drink" (163). In "How Fear Came," when many animals die due to drought, we learn that "Chil, the Kite, stayed and grew fat, for there was a great deal of carrion" (151). Killing and the consumption of other animals, necessary for survival, is part of the "Law of the Jungle" which is not imposed by Europeans; it is far, far older than humanity. As the narrator says at the start of "How Fear Came": "The Law of the Jungle … is by far the oldest law in the world" (149). It is fair to say that this is an ecological "law" – predation is vital to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems. It not only provides energy to apex predators (who generally have much smaller populations than their prey), but controls population sizes which in turn preserves overgrazing of vegetation, and aids the distribution and diversity of species. In the poem, "The Law of the Jungle," which prefaces "Tiger! Tiger!," we find the following lines: "Ye may kill for yourselves, and your mates, and your cubs as they need, and ye can;/ But kill not for the pleasure of killing and *seven times never kill Man*" (lines 5-6). The reasons given in the *Jungle Books* for not killing "Man" (at least "[t]he reason the beasts give among themselves," says the narrator) are not because humans are sacrosanct. It is to prevent retaliation ("Man-killing means, sooner or later, the

[25] Contrary to Victorian beliefs, a snake is extremely unlikely to run out of venom permanently. The Victorian belief may result from the phenomenon of "dry bites" which is when a snake strikes multiple times in a short period and uses up the venom stored in its venom glands. It can take from a few hours to up to two months to replenish the venom. Snakes also sometimes deliver bites without venom to conserve their supply, for example when biting in defence rather than when hunting. See B. Sadananda Naik, "'Dry Bite' in Venomous Snakes" in list of Works Cited.

arrival of men on elephants with guns and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the jungle suffers"); because Man is weak and defenceless (when without elephants, guns rockets and torches); and because "Man-eaters become mangy and lose their teeth" ("Mowgli's Brothers" (3).

It is important to note that there *are* animals in the stories that kill humans, and I will return to these below: tigers, crocodiles, snakes and even elephants are portrayed as posing a threat to human beings. In breaking the "Law" that places humans out of reach as prey, these animals are vilified in the stories and the retributive killing of them by humans is justified by the narrator and even other animals. However, when these animals kill it is not out of greed for possessions or due to boredom. In contrast, the humans who kill other humans in "The King's Ankus" are Gonds (called "Poison People" by Mowgli and Bagheera) and (presumably Hindu) villagers who do not act in response to a "Law" that ensures multi-species survival in the jungle ecosystem. This might suggest a moral judgement levelled against all 'natives' (aboriginal and Hindu) by Kipling. However, as I will discuss when I turn to "The Undertakers," Europeans kill other humans in the stories, too. Moreover, overwhelmingly, when humans exhibit cruelty towards animals in the stories, they are European. Either way, it is the humans, not the animals, in the stories who repeatedly behave in what might be deemed immoral and murderous ways.

This raises an interesting question. How does Kipling portray "indigenous"[26] Indians and their relationship to nature – animals, plants, and inanimate environmental features like water, wind and soil – in the stories? Is their relationship with nature characterised as different to that of the Europeans? In many respects, the answer to this is yes. Kipling gestures towards the indigenous use of plants as medicines, remedies and poison several stories. The narrator of "Rikki Tikki Tavi" tells readers, "if you read the old books of natural history, you will find they say that when the mongoose fights the snake and happens to get bitten, he runs off and eats some herb that cures him" (91). "That is not true," continues the

[26] The aboriginal, tribal groups in India are the Gonds and Bhils. These are mentioned, and distinguished from Hindus, in several of the stories (like "The King's Ankus"). However, the non-European inhabitants that appear most frequently in the stories are Hindu. Hindu settlement stretches back approximately 4000 years (in some accounts 8,000). When I use the term 'indigenous' I refer to non-European Indians, who have occupied the subcontinent for thousands of years, more broadly – and in the stories these are most often Hindu members of the population. This is not intended to ignore or dismiss the original aboriginal inhabitants, or to ignore the fact that Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains also make up the pre-colonial inhabitants in India, but rather to accentuate differences between members of the Raj and people who lived in the subcontinent thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans.

narrator. “The victory is only a matter of quickness of eye and quickness of foot, – snake’s blow against mongoose’s jump” (91). Although apparently untrue, the myth of mongooses recovering from snakebites after eating certain plants (especially snakeroot and Mungo root) can be found in the lore of many cultures – Sri Lankan, Ceylonese, Cherokee, and certainly Indian.[27] While the narrator is dismissive, it is not clear whether he dismisses plant remedies, per se, or rather the idea that mongooses seek out *specific* plants to assuage the effects of a snakebite. Although scornful, he nonetheless draws attention to an aspect of Indian ethnobotany that is widespread: the traditional use of plants for medicinal purposes. There are numerous traditional sources that list the healing properties and health benefits of Indian plants. For example, “tulsi” (*Ocimum Sanctum*) which is also known as “holy basil,” is revered in Ayurveda for its healing properties. “Neem” (*Azadirachta Indica*) is effective as an antibacterial, antifungal and antiviral. “Turmeric” (*Curcuma Longa*) is a staple in Indian households and contains curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant properties. Similarly, ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), which is often referred to as “Indian ginseng,” is known for its adaptogenic properties, helping to reduce stress and enhance energy levels. Recent empirical and clinical trials have also confirmed the antivenom properties of some plants. (Y.K. Guta and S.S. Peshin).

Indigenous beliefs about plants are evident in “Tiger! Tiger!” where the village priest waves “a sprig of the sacred Tulsi plant” (63). [28] to chase Mowgli away, believing he is a sorcerer after defeating Shere Khan. Kipling’s narrator portrays the villagers in the story as superstitious, stupid and weak and he is clearly not endorsing the use of “sacred” plants as a means of defence against ostensible evil spirits but is using this detail to further characterise the villagers (and Buldeo) as backward idiots. However, this detail might encourage readers to consider the spiritual reverence for plants in (Hindu) Indian life and even explore this further by looking up the plants mentioned, as I have done. Tulsi, a plant sacred in Hindu culture, bridges the gap between the human and natural worlds, symbolising the sanctity of life and the environment. According to Nanditha Krishna and M. Amirthalingam, “[t]o

[27] In fact, mongooses are largely resistant to snake venom. They have evolved a specific mutation in their nicotinic acetylcholine receptor, which makes them less sensitive to the neurotoxic effects of snake venom. See: See Dora Batchan et al. “How the Mongoose can Fight the Snake.”

[28] The word “tulsi” originates from the Sanskrit word "तुलसी" (tulasi), which means “the incomparable one.” The tulsi plant, also known as holy basil, is deeply revered in Hindu culture and is associated with the goddess Tulsi, who is considered an incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The plant’s name reflects its sacred and unparalleled status in Indian religious and cultural traditions.

protects and revere [tulsi] it was designated as sacred, a fitting tribute to its role in providing invaluable health care" (*Sacred Plants of India* 2).

Plants are also shown to offer more pragmatic forms of protection in several stories. Mowgli, transitioning from the jungle to the village, encounters "the big thorn-bush that was drawn up before the gate at twilight" (51). The thorn bush signals a line between untamed/wild and the human domains. It represents a symbolic boundary which reenforces the themes of alienation and desire for belonging that Mowgli experiences throughout his journey. In "The King's Ankus," the narrator comments, "A Jungle-dweller gets to learn by experience as much as many doctors know of poisonous plants and berries" (169). The thieves who steal the ankus from the Gond, who first found it after Mowgli discards it, are killed by poison and we learn that this comes from the "'Apple of Death' [which] is what the jungle call thorn-apple or dhatura, the readiest poison in all India" (169). The genus *Datura* has 15 different species; in the Indian subcontinent it is best known as *Sada Dhatura* in Hindi (*Datura stramonium*). Leaves and seeds are used for healing purposes in lower concentrations and for "suicidal and homicidal purposes" in stronger concentrations (Chopra et al. 135). This is by no means an exhaustive list of the many instances in the *Jungle Books* in which Indians are shown to use and revere various indigenous plants. And, as noted, the narrator is dismissive of this. However, these instances alert readers to the indigenous relationship with, and reliance on, plant-life.

It is a famous saying that "Nature always finds a way," and a repeated motif in *The Jungle Books* emphasises the reclamation of nature, specifically the jungle, of human-created spaces. For both British imperialist characters bent on 'taming' India's wilderness and indigenous Indian characters who struggle to keep the jungle at bay to cultivate crops and graze cattle and buffalo, this is a negative quality. However, the resurgence of the jungle flora is often celebrated in the stories as a positive thing, despite the antagonism of human characters towards the 'wilderness.' In "Kaa's Hunting," the image of "trees grown into and out of the walls" and "wild creepers" overtaking the "Lost City" (72), a ruined metropolis in the jungle, serves as a stark reminder of nature's unstoppable force. The juxtaposition of human ruins with thriving plant life reinforces the idea that, regardless of human intervention, nature has the capacity to endure and reclaim its place. The plants and the creepers which have enveloped the lost city are suggestive of the wild's potential to triumph over civilisation, something also suggested in the encroachment of the jungle into the cultivated garden in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi." Importantly, as I will discuss below, it is not only the British who are

portrayed as ‘at war’ with the jungle. The combat is between human beings more generally – “people” – and the jungle and its inhabitants. This point is made in “How Fear Came” which tells of an Edenic time before humans arrived: “In those days there was no corn or melons or pepper or sugar-cane, nor were there any little huts such as ye have all seen; and the Jungle People [animals] knew nothing of Man, but lived in the Jungle together, making one people” (158).

Kipling highlights the fleeting nature of human achievements through the depiction of the Lost City which is described as “almost a heap of ruins” (“Kaa’s Hunting” 35). The city's collapse – evident in the “stone causeways,” “ruined gates,” and “rusted hinges” – is juxtaposed with the burgeoning wild growth reclaiming the space, such as “bushy hanging clumps” (36) of creepers thriving in the absence of human interference. The resilience of nature is obvious here and reinforced by lush, vigorous, vibrant imagery; it reclaims what humans have created. The Lost City ruins are inhibited by the Bandar-log whose hilarious actions offer a biting parody of human behaviour. The Bandar-log, “pretending to be men,” mindlessly collect bricks and “shake the rose trees and the oranges in sport” (36), damaging these and spoiling their fruit. Some critics, as mentioned in my previous chapter, read the monkeys as an allegory of Indian ‘mimic men,’ copying the behaviour of the European sahibs or as a “maddening, or already maddened, form of [Indian] identity that threatens the stability of colonial rule” (Nyman, *Postcolonial Animal Tales* 44). However, it is also possible to read in their actions a critique of the frivolous and careless approach of the colonisers towards India’s natural resources. The reckless ruining of the fruits of the garden by the Bandar-log can be read as a mockery of the coloniser’s thoughtless exploitation of the land and natural resources for short-term gains with no concern for sustainability or long-term consequences. Village inhabitants in the stories are shown to be far more interested in nurturing and protecting plants that offer sustenance. Here the *Jungle Books*’s depiction of the sharp contrast between the jungle (animal and human) people’s ethical use of natural resources – guided by respect and necessity – and the reckless, unsustainable practices of the colonial powers seems clear: “Their way is not our way” (26) says Baloo to Mowgli of the monkeys.

The Jungle’s deep distaste for humans is also suggested in the following song, attributed to Mowgli, which prefaces “The Undertakers”:

Mowgli's Song Against People

I will let loose against you the fleet-footed vines—
I will call in the Jungle to stamp out your lines!
The roofs shall fade before it,
The house-beams shall fall,
And the Karela, the bitter Karela,
Shall cover it all!

In the gates of these your councils my people shall sing,
In the doors of these your garners the Bat-folk shall cling;
And the snake shall be your watchman,
By a hearthstone unswept;
For the Karela, the bitter Karela,
Shall fruit where ye slept!

Ye shall not see my strikers; ye shall hear them and guess;
By night, before the moon-rise, I will send for my cess,
And the wolf shall be your herdsman
By a landmark removed,
For the Karela, the bitter Karela,
Shall seed where ye loved!

I will reap your fields before you at the hands of a host;
Ye shall glean behind my reapers, for the bread that is lost,
And the deer shall be your oxen
By a headland untilled,
For the Karela, the bitter Karela,
Shall leaf where ye build!

I have untied against you the club-footed vines,
I have sent in the Jungle to swamp out your lines.
The trees—the trees are on you!
The house-beams shall fall,
And the Karela, the bitter Karela,
Shall cover you all!

"Mowgli's Song Against People" is a prophetic anthem of vegetative nature's anticipated vengeance towards and reclamation of human spaces. The irony that it is spoken by the "man-cub" reflects the ambiguous tension I argue is evident throughout the *Jungle Books* between advocacy of human domination of the environment and its opposite, respect for nature devoid of human intervention or even devoid of humans entirely. Karela (*Momordica charantia*) is described in *The Second Jungle Book* as "the vine that bears the bitter wild gourd" (100). In "Mowgli's Song" it symbolises the wild plants that he says will ultimately engulf ordered human settlements and wholly eradicate them: "swamp out your lines." The strong verbs in the poem create a sense of urgency and anger: "Let loose," "stamp out,"

"swamp out," "fall," etc. It is hard to reconcile the strong sentiments in this poem with claims that Kipling simply supported the destruction of India's jungles. This linguistic ferocity highlights Mowgli's own conflicted identity as both avenger and conduit of the jungle's will. The imagery of inverted domestication is particularly striking: wolves become herdsmen, snakes stand as watchmen, and deer replace oxen, suggesting not just destruction but a complete overturning of human systems. What emerges is less a celebration of wilderness than a warning about the impermanence of human imposition – the "house-beams shall fall" not through decay but through the jungle's deliberate assault. The poem's relentless rhythm, with its insistent repetitions and mounting intensity, creates an almost ritualistic quality in the verse, as if the words themselves are spells summoning the jungle's retribution. This stands in stark contrast to any colonial narrative of conquest, instead presenting a vision where human claims to the land are ultimately provisional, and where the bitter Karela's creeping growth serves as nature's final answer to human arrogance. The emotional force here transcends mere environmentalist statement, becoming a primal scream of displacement and belonging – Mowgli's personal fury amplified through the collective voice of the jungle itself. Far from endorsing environmental domination, the poem exposes the fragility of human attempts to tame or erase the wild, with the Karela's bitter fruit standing as both judgment and epitaph for such hubris.

Blurring the boundaries

There is no question that while indigenous Indians made forays into the jungle, and sometimes killed the animals who lived within it, prior to colonisation, they also relied on it for food, shelter and resources, just as indigenous animals did. Because of this reliance, the relationship between indigenous "people" (aboriginal and largely Hindu villagers)[29] and the environment was generally one of balance and care. They co-existed with the jungle and its inhabitants, sometimes felling small parts of the forests to clear land for cultivation but not engaging in wholesale destruction. Likewise, they killed wild animals for food, for protection in the case of persistently aggressive large carnivores, and in communal, ritual hunting festivals or ceremonies, but did not engage in wholesale killing for sport, or with the goal of species eradication. However, the British attitude towards the jungle was very different.

[29] This is not to ignore other religious groups and ethnicities that also populated India before and during the colonial era. However, Kipling overwhelmingly portrays villagers as Hindu.

Parama Roy notes that the imperial endeavour in their colonies was not only about the 'civilising' of indigenous human populations, but about controlling, managing – and sometimes wholly eradicating – indigenous flora and fauna. She continues:

> imperial landscapes never were purely human ones but were, instead, a complex mesh of transversal and co-constitutive human and extra-human ecologies. … In all this, nonhuman forms of life were not solely resources to be used, whether brutally or gently, and human identity was constitutively exposed and insecure even as it functioned as a categorical touchstone. ("Strange Ecologies" 74)

The insecurity of "human identity" was a key aspect of Victorian thought, especially after Darwin. On the one hand, Darwinism bolstered European belief in their evolutionary superiority over both non-European humans and non-human animals, and this was played out in discourses that saw some races of people as 'closer to animals' than Europeans. But it also resulted in anxieties about the 'animality' of human beings in general. In short, the previously firm line between human and non-human became more porous, and so did the line between Europeans and non-Europeans. One consequence of this was a troubling of binaries more generally and a conflation of concerns about human/non-human and European/non-European distinctions. This is evident, suggest some critics, in the "amphibian" (human-animal or wolf cub/human child) nature of *brown* Mowgli. These concerns were, inevitably, imposed onto colonised peoples and colonised landscapes but, as Roy suggests, the binaries were not straightforwardly rigid and "and human identity was constitutively exposed and insecure." These 'insecurities,' I argue, are revealed in the blurring of boundaries between binaries categories in the *Jungle Books* – and in those moments when the stories draw attention to ecological disruptions.

Traditionally, the stories in the *Jungle Books* are read as being about the painful choice Mowgli needs to make between the animal and human 'worlds' with his decision to leave the Jungle seen as a relinquishment of his childhood and nature (nature being associated with childhood in Romantic terms) as he steps into the role of a mature (and sexually aware) adult man – and native servant of Empire, employed in the task of deforestation. W.W. Robson's account is typical: "a time comes when [Mowgli] must move beyond is animal 'brothers' and realise the truth about himself, and accept *the responsibility of being a man*, and the recognition that it sets him apart" (xviii; my emphasis). Before the final story in the *Jungle Books*, Mowgli's stated enemies are *all* humans (except for his putative birth mother) as his

"Song against People" makes clear. And yet, of course, he *is* human (albeit perhaps closer to animals in colonial imagining because non-European). This, and his final decision to join the human community, causes Mowgli great pain. Even though Mowgli ultimately leaves the jungle to join the ranks of colonial "Forest Men" there is little that is celebratory about his decision. Indeed, the opposite. Even earlier, when Mowgli first prepares to leave the jungle to return to the village of his birth, in "Mowgli's Brothers," we are told that "something began to hurt Mowgli inside him, as he had never been hurt in his life before, and he caught his breath and sobbed, and the tears ran down his face" (19). Ironically, the thought of leaving the jungle induces tears in Mowgli but tears are one of the things that distinguish him from the animals and mark him as human. In "Letting in the Jungle" he returns to the village of his birth and when he sees the huts we are told he is "[a]ngry … at the whole breed and community of Man" (75). Moreover, the song that prefaces the final story in the *Jungle Books* emphasises the pain of his choice to accept the binary distinction between humans and animals: "Man goes to Man! He is weeping in the jungle:/He that was our Brother sorrows sore!" ("The Spring Running" 303)

More recently, as I discussed in my previous chapter, some postcolonial critics have read the stories as being about the affirmation of the human/animal binary and interpret this distinction allegorically as reflective of racialised concerns. So, the stories are deemed to be "an allegory for the position of the white colonial boy-child born and raised in India, where in broad terms the different animals of the Jungle and their hierarchies are read as representing the different peoples of India, whilst Mowgli the Indian boy who becomes 'Master' of the Jungle is understood to be 'behaving toward the beasts as the British do to the Indians'" (Walsh *Kipling's Children's Literature* 51, quoting McLure). Sue Walsh suggests that this kind of reading "relies on fixed and essentialized identities: human and animal ones, and, by extension … 'white' and Indian ones" (51). She argues that these "essentialized identities" can be challenged by thinking about "Mowgli's positioning as a 'child' within the framework of the stories, and how the relationship of 'child' to animal might further complicate such readings" (51-51). Mowgli's "amphibious" identity and final choice in favour of the human has led some recent critics, like Walsh, to read the stories as both confirming the distinction between human and animal *and/or* as complicating that distinction.

Walsh traces the distinctions between Mowgli and the animals that are portrayed in the stories – his capacity to cry, his (controlling and obfuscating) gaze, and his use of fire – as she seeks to deconstruct (she relies on Derrida and Robert C. Young) the animal/human

binary and so the adult/child one. In part she does so by considering the common critical move of contrasting the "speech" of the jungle inhabitants (questioning whether this is coded as Indian, Hindustani, Persian, etc.) with the English of the "translating" narrator /editor (60). Walsh follows Tess Cosslett, in part, to argue that the meaning of the animals' speech is not transparent, but open to ironic or duplicitous readings that "upset fixed animal/human boundaries" (62). One of Walsh's major claims is to refute the common reading of the stories as finally confirming that "the 'animal' and the 'child' are brought onto the same plane, and are subordinated to the adult (male) human" (61): "To give such an account of the tales would be to give a spurious coherence and stability to the 'adult' Mowgli which the different texts making up the 'Mowgli' story do not support" (62-63). Hence, she asserts, "I do not take 'growing up' in these texts to mean the consolidating and cohering of an identity into something singular and fixed. I read the 'Mowgli' stories rather as calling into question the borders between child and adult, human and animal, 'native' and 'white'" (63).

In what ways might the blurring of boundaries between "child and adult, human and animal" also destabilise the binary of "'native' and 'white'" – or vice versa? According to Jo-Ann Wallace, this is because "'an idea of 'the child' is a necessary precondition of imperialism" (176) – an idea also promoted by Randall in *Kipling's Imperial Boy* and McBratney in *Imperial Subjects, Imperial Space*. If this is so, it is necessary, I think, to also consider with more care the ways in which Kipling portrays different kinds – or, specifically, different races – of humans in his stories and consider what this does to destabilise the human/animal binary and the child/adult one.

Although *brown* humans are often portrayed as inept and superstitious at best and greedy and murderous at worst, *white* humans sit in the wings as a largely silent, threatening background force in the Mowgli stories. The villagers fear them or are bemused by them and their actions. The presence of the British is most evident in the proleptic first Mowgli story, "In the Rukh," about his departure from the jungle, engagement with Gisborne the British Forest Officer, and turn to human company. However, this is not properly part of the *Jungle Books*, although it is sometimes published in editions of them and routinely used to provide a chronological and teleological structure to the series. White men do not feature at all in the final story of the original *Jungle Books*, "The Spring Running," although "the English Law" is mentioned (316). British men appear more often as characters in the non-Mowgli stories, some of which are not set in (colonial) India. Others clearly are. One such is Petersen Sahib, in "Toomai of the Elephants," who works for "the Government" (108) hunting, driving and

domesticating wild elephants for use by colonisers in hauling logs, agriculture – and war. Petersen is described as a "madman" by an Indian bearer (108) and is shown to be far less able to manage – and understand – the elephants than Indians, even the titular Indian child whose connection with natural, wild elephants the story celebrates (although this is then instrumentalised in the service of the British capture and domestication of wild elephants, something the story doesn't appear to question). White men are far more prominent in "Her Majesty's Servants," which is about a visit to the British Viceroy of India by the Amir of Afghanistan at a military camp in northern India (now Pakistan). Tens of thousands of animals working for the army are present and much of the story is made up of conversations between them, on the night before a military parade in honour of the Amir. They talk about the nature and conditions of their "service" to the British army. Via the animal's talk, readers learn about their abuse and suffering in their service in human wars, although a native officer at the end affirms that they should do so willingly, and with courage, respecting a clear hierarchy of value and authority:

> '[The animals] obey, as the men do. Mule, horse, elephant, or bullock, he obeys his driver, and the driver his sergeant, and the sergeant his lieutenant, and the lieutenant his captain, and the captain his major, and the major his colonel, and the colonel his brigadier commanding three regiments, and the brigadier his general, who obeys the Viceroy, who is the servant of the Empress. Thus it is done.' (139)

Despite this clear hierarchy from animal to human and finally Queen, because so much of the story is 'voiced' by the animals, it is the animals' narratives of suffering at the hands of men, in the service of white officers bent on colonial expansion, that remain in the reader's mind after the story ends.

The *Jungle Books*: reflections on deforestation practices, bridge building and water diversion in colonial India

From the engineered waterways in "The Undertakers" to the vengeful jungle reclaiming human spaces in "Letting in the Jungle," Kipling's stories reveal tensions between imperial "progress" and environmental destruction that invalidate, I argue, any straightforward assessment of him as an advocate for the colonial destruction of India's natural environment. Indeed, some of Kipling's stories in the *Jungle Books* portray the negative ecological consequences of colonial expansion and imperial behaviour which involve deforestation,

infrastructure projects like the building of bridges and dams, and the systematic killing of animals perceived as threats or just for sport.

In what follows I will consider the ways in which, deliberately or not, Kipling's stories portray evidence of colonial encroachment on what Roy calls the "extra-human dramatis personae" of the jungle and do so in ways that are not always supportive of colonial endeavour. It is not my claim here that he is a proto-environmentalist, or that he resisted imperial practices in India. Kipling certainly appears to have endorsed these in many of his writings as a variety of critics have shown. Rather, I suggest that Kipling's stories enable us to better understand how Victorians understood and treated the natural world, especially in their colonies. He is clearly a supporter of empire and imperialism but, paradoxically and ambivalently, in his *Jungle Stories* we can detect not only his love and admiration for Indian nature but also some elements of concern about conservation (although, as I discuss below/ have discussed in my introductory chapter, the imperial motives for conservation were complex, and often for the benefit of empire, not the colony). His depiction of the Seoni forests in central India, while largely based on second-hand accounts, clearly evokes and conveys the region's natural beauty and reveals admiration for plant and non-human animal life therein.

Information in the Mowgli stories makes clear that they are set in the later Victorian era, after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and before the death of Queen Victoria. Changes to the jungle, because of colonial encroachment, are mentioned in several stories. In "Kaa's Hunting," for example, the python comments on recent changes in the jungle (where he has lived for a very long time), saying, "[t]he branches are not what they were when I was young. Rotten twigs and dry boughs are they all" (32). This alludes to the fact, discussed in my first chapter, that during the colonial era many of India's native hardwood trees were cut down for use by the British and replaced by softer quick growing species which had some short-term financial benefits for the colonial government in India. The narrator doesn't dwell on this observation from Kaa, but it is one of many seemingly insignificant comments that gesture towards the destructive effects of colonial forestry practices.

In a recent book chapter, "Reading Kipling in Kipling's Own Country" (2020), Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar concurs with the claims of many critics who read the *Jungle Books* as evidencing Kipling's support for the colonial deforestation of the Indian jungle. Frequently, such critics make much of the story "In the Rukh" (as noted, not formally part of *The Jungle*

Books) to substantiate their claims. Bhatnagar, for example, writes, "'In the Rukh' presents Mowgli as the new Adam, ready to join governmental service in the most ambitious endeavour of reforesting the world, starting from India" (242). She continues:

> Initially, the East India Company followed a policy of mass-scale destruction of forests so that fields could be cultivated … . However, in 1802 the British crown began to put pressure on the Company to provide teak for the navy. … Teak was also required to build the railways and to fuel the steamships. As [Peter] Linebaugh informs us, the steamships and iron railways of the British Raj were useless without the Indian timbers and fuel for their construction which carried away the wealth of India. (240)

She refers here to Linebaugh's book *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2008) a chapter of which is titled "The Law of the Jungle." In this Linebaugh draws a clear connection between colonial deforestation practices and increased drought, and so famine for rural Indians:

> They [droughts/famines in India] became less localized owing to the extension of the railways; many millions perished by starvation, cholera, smallpox, and fever; and a new cause exacerbated the scarcities directly proceeding from lack of rain to wit, lack of purchasing power. Agricultural wage labourers suffered the most. … One million five hundred thousand people died in Madras presidency during the Great Famine of 1876–78. … Jotirau Phule (1881) said, 'The cunning European employees of our motherly government have used their foreign brains to erect a great superstructure called the forest department. With all the hills and undulating lands as also the fallow lands and grazing grounds brought under the control of the forest department, the livestock of the poor farmers does not even have place to breathe anywhere on the surface of the earth.' (147-8)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the nationalist Dadabhai Naoroji wrote: "How strange it is that the British rulers do not see that after all they themselves are the main cause of the destruction that ensues from droughts; that it is the drain of India's wealth by them that lays at their own door the dreadful results of misery, starvation, and deaths of millions" (qtd. in Linebaugh 148). Ironically, the British blamed local people, "Indian commoners" subsisting on common land, for denuding and misusing the land and introduced regulations aimed at enclosing and "protecting" tracts of forest as I have discussed in my first chapter.

The Indian Forest Department was formed in 1864 and the first Forest Act was brought into law in 1865 with provisions for the "definition, regulation, commutation, and extinction of customary rights." The second Indian Forest Act of 1878 extended British powers of confiscation of land and banishment of people living thereon; commoners were prevented from subsistence cultivation and hunting and gathering. According to Ramachandra Guha, in 1890, "one stroke of the executive pen attempted to obliterate centuries of customary use by rural populations all over India" (qtd. in Linebaugh 152). Coffee (and other non-indigenous) plantations replaced forests, and wind and sun damage scorched the earth. It is interesting to consider how Kipling portrays the "customary use" of environmental resources by Indian "rural populations" or "Indian commoners" in the *Jungle Books* and sets this against his the known facts of British activities. Importantly, too, it was not just Indians who suffered because of environmental damage. Plant and animal life did too. While the impact of drought on rural farmers is mentioned in Kipling's stories, it is often in passing. In contrast, the impact on jungle animals and plants is given far more attention. One story in which this is especially evident is in "When Fear Came."

Linebaugh argues that "When Fear Came" "is a version of the fall where Satan is replaced by 'Man,' or the people of the plains and the empire" (159). The story takes place during a drought that causes famine and suggests that traditional, environmentally-respectful "law" is especially needed in times of scarcity: "Kipling's description is remarkable for its ecological signs – a tree (*mahua*) does not bloom, wild yams dry up – and it is remarkable for the water truce, during which predatory animals stop hunting and the water hole is a peaceful gathering place for all" (160). Animals in nature do not behave in the manner of Kipling's truce. It is first-come first-served in the struggle for survival. But Kipling's truce may point to a more environmentally attuned non-human animal and aboriginal human capacity for co-existence and mutual survival in complex ecosystems, even in times of resource scarcity. Of particular interest in Linebaugh's chapter is his observation that the word "jungle" derives from a Hindi word *jangli*, meaning waste or forest. Further, "Among the forest people of western India the *jangli* is associated with a discourse of wildness as well as with a particular ecosystem" (162). The aboriginal indigenous forest people, the Dang,

> periodized history as two epochs, the time of tax collectors, land demarcation, and forest guards, and the time before, when freedom prevailed, along with hunting, fishing, gathering, shifting cultivation, and collecting mahua flowers and seeds. This time was called *moglai*. Thus Kipling in his Mowgli stories summons up not a golden

> age nor a garden of Eden but a specifically Indian characterization of a recently lost commons. … The boy named Mowgli brought up in a wolfpack personified the epoch of historical freedom known as *moglai* that was passing before their eyes. (162-63)

Interestingly, Bhatnagar draws on Linebaugh to make a quite different point. She argues that Kipling "silences" the indigenous human inhabitants of the forest – the pre-Hindu Gond and Dang tribes with whom he was familiar (Bhatnagar 239) – and replaces them with anthropomorphised animals who talk English (sometimes using Hindi words, too): "As bard of the empire, and as someone who saw the white race as standing at the helm of progress, Kipling was committed to the colonial engagement with and exploitation of forest resources with the goal of maximizing profit. … So he creates the forests of Seoni as fantasy lands rather than as real places inhabited by real people" (Bhatnagar 240).[30]

She reads Mowgli not as a figure for ecologically attuned indigenous knowledge associated with pre-colonial India as Linebaugh does, but as a representative of colonial law that is bent on "taming" the jungle:

> In order to withstand this effect and uphold civilization, a [British] man [in India] had to display uncompromising integrity and work toward upholding law and order. This challenge was represented metaphorically by Mowgli's encounter with the jungle. The Seoni forests are imagined as wild, dark spaces inhabited by talking animals. The [European] reader was to interpellate himself into the narrative through identification with Mowgli, the only human being in the jungle. Mowgli's 'humanity' sets him apart from the rest of the animal kingdom by virtue of his birth, his possession of fire, and his ability to cry. The fable anthropomorphizes the animals and offers a human-centric view of the jungle world. It must and can only be tamed by human beings. This was consistent with Kipling's view of the civilizing and beneficent rule of Britain over the colonial countries. (238)

In short: "To acknowledge that the jungles were inhabited [by indigenous peoples] would have been to question the moral basis of the government's appropriation of the forest resources" (240). The r*eal* "Jungle People," then, the Gond and Dang, are replaced in Kipling's stories by animals who are subordinated to Mowgli and espouse what equates to a

[30] The indigenous inhabitants of the Seoni forests were the Gonds and Dang. Kaori Nagai notes that "Kipling Did not totally write out the presence of forest tribes" and notes that "three of the five Mowgli stories in *The Second Jungle Book* make reference to the Gonds" (*Imperial Beast Fable* 94).

colonial "Law." There are several problems with this reading. Why would European readers "identify" with brown, Indian Mowgli and, furthermore, read him as a figure for the British just because he is *human*? The more common Darwinian-influenced British response would be to see Mowgli as less than human because closer to animals and thus *not* identify with him. Furthermore, this argument ignores the Indian villagers who appear in the stories. It is hard to see how (Hindu) village-born Mowgli, whose decision to leave the jungle is spurred because he sees a brown young woman, is a representative of white men or British Law, even if he becomes a servant of empire in "In the Rukh." Furthermore, the "Law" of the Jungle is quite explicitly described as ancient and prehuman, discrediting claims that it equates with colonial "Law": "The Law of the Jungle … is by far the oldest law in the world" ("When Fear Came" 149). The animals in Kipling's Jungle see *all* humans (Hindu and British, and presumably Gonds and Dang) as a threat. So does Mowgli, in most of the stories, until he matures and leaves the jungle to find a "mate" which is the tricky conclusion to the tales.

In many stories, Kipling portrays the jungle and its inhabitants as a living entity under siege, and the transformative actions and impacts of the intervention of humans – Indian and British – in the natural world are portrayed in negative terms. In "Tiger! Tiger!" we are given a (largely unflattering) portrait of a traditional Hindu Indian farming village. One of the animal characters in the story, Gray Brother, who has a very deep connection to the untamed jungle, comments on the transformation in Mowgli after he returns to the village of his birth, saying he now smells "altogether like a man," of "wood-smoke and cattle" (50), thus associating Mowgli with the utilitarian activities of human beings: the burning of felled trees for warmth and cooking, and the domestication of cattle for use in land cultivation, the provision of fuel (from dried dung) and provision of milk (Hindus do not eat beef).When Mowgli enters the village, he encounters a set of values that are different to the "Laws of the Jungle." Among the things Mowgli must learn in the village are "about money, which he did not in the least understand, and about ploughing, of which he did not see the use" (51). He must also learn about human social edicts: "Mowgli had not the faintest idea of the difference that caste makes between man and man" (51). This is one of the narrator's many digs at Hindu custom and belief, even though the colonial valuation of some people as more valuable than others, based on race, is not dissimilar to the way the Hindu caste system values people based on Varna. Despite learning these things, or because he does, Mowgli chooses the jungle over the village at the end of the story, siding with the jungle animals not the villagers.

Importantly, the villagers' agricultural activities are described in terms that associate them with ones that have been carried out by rural Indians for many centuries, not with British colonial practices. It is widely accepted that rural Indians preserved an ecological balance in their use of environmental resources, not least because they were dependent on nature for food and shelter. Dhwani Sodha affirms this:

> The Vedic knowledge system, deeply rooted in ancient Indian wisdom, emphasizes ecological balance through reverence for nature and sustainable practices. It regards natural elements like earth, water, air, fire, and ether as sacred, advocating their preservation as essential for life's harmony. Hymns from the Vedas, such as the Prithivi Sukta [Hymn to the Earth], celebrate the interconnectedness of all beings and the environment, urging respect and protection for plants, animals, and natural resources. Similarly, the Upanishads stress simplicity, mindful use of resources, and the balance between humans and nature, aligning with the ethos of 'live and let live.' These teachings, rooted in indigenous traditions, reflect a profound understanding of environmental sustainability and inspire practices that foster coexistence and ecological equilibrium. ("Timeless Guidance" 32; see also Clutton-Brock 115)[31]

The ancient Vedic knowledge system (which is thought to be 3500 years old), along with other Hindu traditions, advocates harmony between humans and nature, ecological balance, sustainable practices, and reverence for natural elements as essential for coexistence and survival. John J. Kineman and Deepak Anand also make this point:

> Most ancient cultures have grown in the lap of Nature with reverence for nature in which all of its elements, mountains, rivers, forests, animals, etc., may be considered sacred. The Hindu scriptures like the Upanishads, Srimad Bhagavatam, Puranas, Vedas, and Bhagavad Geeta have also expressed the sacredness of various aspects of the environment and its conservation. Ancient texts like Kautilya's Arthasastra have an immense amount of information on environment, natural resource management and prevention of pollution. The realization of this fundamental and ultimate Truth is that there is unity of all life and existence and the goal of human life is to merge one's little self in the Divine to experience this unity. ("Roots of Sustainability" 30)

[31] The Vedas, on which Vedic knowledge is based are religious texts originating in ancient India. The Upanishads are late- and post-Vedic philosophical treatises that document the transition from the archaic Vedas to more centralised religious concepts that inform Hinduism.

However, this was distorted and changed by colonial attitudes towards nature in India in the nineteenth century. David Arnold highlights how colonial land use – driven by economic gain – led to the replacement of native forests, and Indian substance crops (like rice and cotton for making cloth for trading), with cash crops like coffee and tobacco ("Narrativising India" 35). Velayutham Saravanan gives the example of coffee plantations developed in south India. He notes that, "in the mid-1800s, British planters sought to acquire tribal land in Pattapadi and Kurdyoor, villages in India, using various tactics to intimidate and displace the native tribal inhabitants – and flora. Coffee – a cash crop that provided significant revenue for the British empire – was planted on these occupied lands" ("Colonialism and Coffee Plantation" 465). Cinnamon, too, was planted for commercial purposes (Mogren 145). Growth of both crops was first trialled, with great success, in the Ceylon Botanical Garden. Other mass-produced crops included a mix of indigenous and imported plants: jute in Bengal, tea in Assam, sugarcane in Uttar Pradesh, wheat in Punjab, cotton in Maharashtra and Punjab, rice in Madras (see Washbrook, "The Commercialization of Agriculture in Colonial India").

The felling of trees and diversion of rivers, to facilitate cash-crop cultivation, was extremely destructive during the colonial era in which "scientific" forest policies aimed to replace mixed forests with commercially valuable monocultures. This restricted community land ownership and undermined the careful ecological balance between the natural environment and indigenous people who had an intimate, even reverential (if also at times fearful), attitude towards the forests and their inhabitants. David L. Gosling asserts that deforestation in south Asia was "not just a matter of tree loss leading to the destruction of a range of botanical species and a reduction in the extent to which carbon dioxide can be removed from the atmosphere." It also raised a host of social issues: "loss of food supplies, drinking water and other essential commodities to people and animals living in a symbiotic relationship with the forests, an increase in malaria, and additional hardships for women [who worked to cultivate crops as well as being responsible for domestic duties]" (Gosling 5).

In "Tiger! Tiger!" the landscape of the village and surrounding jungle is described this way: "The valley opened out into a great plain dotted over with rocks and cut up by ravines. At one end stood a little village, and at the other the thick Jungle came down in a sweep to the grazing-grounds, and stopped there as though it had been cut off with a hoe. All over the plain, cattle and buffaloes were grazing" (48). The image of the jungle as "cut off by a hoe" signals that *part* of the Jungle has been cut down for the purposes of cultivation by the villagers. However, the narrator informs readers that "[a]n Indian grazing-ground is all rocks

and scrub and tussocks and little ravines, among which the herds scatter and disappear" (54), emphasising the harsh conditions under which Indians farmed. Moreover, the agricultural activity portrayed in this story is nothing like the growing of lush monoculture cash-crops irrigated by water from human dams, canals and the like. The villagers subsist, with difficulty. Droughts, and associated famines, were always a threat for Indian famers and this is highlighted in several stories.

The Hindu villagers in "Tiger! Tiger!" are portrayed as intimately aware of the jungle and the animals within it, although fearful of the danger it contains: "the jungle was always at their door. The deer and the wild pig grubbed up their crops, and now and again the tiger carried off a man at twilight, within sight of the village gates" (52). While the village is described as a traditional Hindu subsistence-farming one, the story is clearly set in the colonial era. There are a few references to British colonisers ("white men") in the "Tiger! Tiger!" and the other of the stories that is set in the village, "Letting in the Jungle," although they feature in a limited way. In the former, for example, Buldeo, the village hunter, mentions that there is a substantial (colonial administrator) bounty on the tiger Shere Khan's head, and he uses a gun in the attempt to chase Mowgli from the village. In the latter, Mowgli's 'mother,' Messua, says of "the English," "it is said that they govern all the land" (80). Because of their use of the local environment for food and other resources, the villagers are shown to be more in tune with nature and animals than the colonisers. The narrator comments that "the very cattle that would trample a white man to death allow themselves to be banged and bullied and shouted at by [village] children" (53). The same affinity of Indians with animals is shown in "Toomai of the Elephants." Little Toomai is far more adept at managing wild elephants than the white overseers who hunt and domesticate them.

As numerous studies reveal, the large-scale felling of the jungle trees by the British in India was not only undertaken to facilitate the growth of (often foreign) cash crops. It was also done to harvest timber for use in the railways, the building of which also required the construction of bridges and diversion of waterways, as I have discussed in my first chapter. According to Ritika Prasad, the consumption of forest hardwood was extensive:

> In colonial India, railways required large quantities of timber for fuel and sleepers (Less so initially for carriages since locomotives and rolling stock were imported from England). Contemporary estimates indicated that in the 1870s over a million wooden sleepers were required for railway construction (each mile of railway construction was

> estimated as requiring more than 860 sleepers, with each lasting between 12 and 14 years). Further while the use of coal fuel increased in the late nineteenth century, wood fuel continued to be consumed, with over 300,000 tons being used each year even in the last decade of the century. The Himalayan forests were affected, as were Burma's teak (*Tectona grandis)* forests; the prohibitive cost of transporting Burmese teak down to northern India led to an increased focus on *sal* forests (*Shorea robusta),* stretching from the western *terai,* down to Bengal – and on the *deodar* forests (*Cedrus deodara*) of the upper Ganges and Indus basins. (*Tracks of Change* 102)

Railway construction didn't only impact the jungle trees directly. Culverts were blocked by railway sleepers causing flooding in many areas (Prasad 127) and damage to natural ecosystems and farmer's crops. When alternative or new waterways were constructed, including, canals, diversions and dams, they negatively impacted the natural flow of rivers and streams and the ecosystems they sustained (I. Iqbal 183; P. V. Das; G. Nayak). Embankments constructed to breach (natural) annual monsoons and prevent them from disrupting the railways, "stopped the annual monsoon *borsha* floods from depositing their fertile silt on the flood plains" (Dewan 306; this natural annual process is mentioned in "The Undertakers"), thus soil was not replenished and renewed as it had been for thousands of years. Channels, which were previously fed by water from the great rivers, silted up and in many disappeared entirely. Railway bridges built to span waterways further contributed to erosion and environmental damage while the steam trains themselves polluted rivers and landscapes.

Ravi Baghel, in *River Control in India*, argues that the transformation and fragmentation of the Indian rivers by the colonisers was deeply influenced by ideological frameworks and even justified theologically. The river management and the large-scale engineering projects like railway and bridge construction were framed as an Edenic ideal of water for use in the cultivation of crops (69). Baghel gives the example of Robert Buckley, former Chief Engineer of irrigation in British India, who began his 1905 book on irrigation in India with a biblical quote: "Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert" (Isaiah 43:19; Baghel 70). According to Arnab Dey, "[t]he Northern India Canal and Drainage Act came into effect in 1873, and the North-Western Provinces government promptly declared its authority to "use and control for public purposes the water of all rivers and streams flowing in natural channels, and of all lakes and other natural collections of still water'" (272). While the pros

and cons of these interventions for increasing productivity have been argued widely, there is little doubt about their negative environmental impacts. Dey continues, "Issues of waterlogging, salinisation, silt accumulation, disruption of groundwater flow because of embankments, uneven development, flood inundation, and restrictions on grazing cropped up in almost all areas under canalisation schemes" (273).

It is interesting to note that very few scholars have considered the ways in which these interventions feature in stories in the *Jungle Books*. Although rarely explicit until the later stories, the *Jungle Books* contain information about the harsh reality of man-made ecological destruction. Contra Bhatnagar's claims, these practices are not celebrated but revealed to be a cause of great damage and distress for the jungle dwellers (and to rural farmers).

Infested waters: bridges, pollution and killer crocs

To be sure, there are two types of "man" in the Mowgli stories (setting aside the few mentions of Dangs): Indian villagers and Europeans. The former are treated with distain by Mowgli, apart from his mother, because they are human, and by the narrator, because they are Indian. For the most part, Europeans are peripheral figures. Unusually, in "The Undertakers," a non-Mowgli story that appears in *The Second Jungle Book*, the presence of "the white faces" (137) and their destruction of and changes to the landscape, are directly addressed. Much of the story involves a dialogue between three predators: a jackal, an adjutant (an Indian stork) and a crocodile ("the Mugger").[32] Their conversation involves discussion of white people and the changes wrought by the building of a railway bridge in their habitat, and is brought to an abrupt end when a (British) bridge engineer kills the crocodile with a shot from an elephant gun. He is avenging the deaths of 15 bridge-building "coolies" (138) taken by the crocodile and, we learn, narrowly missed being eaten by the same crocodile when he was a child, escaping the 1857 Mutiny by boat, with his mother. (The Mugger laments having never eaten a white child). The Mugger tells the Adjutant and

[32] Mugger crocodiles (*Crocodylys palustris*) inhabit freshwater environments in south-eastern Iran, India, West Pakistan, East Pakistan, and Assam. Once found widely in these regions, their population has been decimated and it is on the brink of extinction, with only about 1000 individual remaining by the 1970s. This number is now greater due to concerted conservation efforts but is still very low. Reasons for this significant decline in population are habitat destruction, hunting and drainage of wetlands (Whitaker and Whitaker 278). Mugger crocodiles are categorized as "Vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List criteria for threatened species (Steeves).

jackal about his feasting on the floating bodies of, first, British soldiers and later, of Indians killed by the British in revenge after the Mutiny (also known as the Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Indian independence). As is well known, the Mutiny created huge chaos in the colonial empire, when Sepoys rose against their British officers and villages were burned in retaliation and multiple men, women and children were killed on both sides – but vastly more Indians – in scenes of great cruelty and violence over the next couple of years.[33] The uprising, sparked by multiple factors including protest against land taxes, British social reforms (e.g. outlawing child marriages), lack of promotion and poor pay for Indian soldiers in the British Army, and cultural insensitivities (including the introduction of gun cartridges in which the end papers were apparently greased with animal fat rumoured to be from cows, sacred to Hindus, and pigs, unclean to Muslims), plunged the land into bloodshed, leaving rivers choked with the dead. In an early reading of the story, in 1954, Elizabeth Gordon ignores this aspect of "The Undertakers" and frames it as one that highlights the triumph of humanity (i.e. the British) over animals:

> Kipling crafts a tale through the conversation of three animals: a scavenging Jackal, an Adjutant Crane, and Mugger, a cannibalistic alligator who rules the river. These creatures, living off human misfortune, form a macabre trio. Mugger, long an adversary of mankind, paradoxically earns the villagers' respect, with offerings laid on the river to honour him. Despite his dominance under the Law of the Animals, Mugger eventually meets his match in humanity. A boy who once narrowly escaped Mugger's jaws grows up to construct a bridge over the river. During its construction, Mugger claims many lives, but in a twist of fate, he is ultimately killed by the same boy he had once failed to devour. (23)

In the years since Gordon made this assertion, the most common critical reading of the crocodile in "The Undertakers" is as a symbol for the Sepoy mutineers who is then 'justly' dispatched at the hands of a Briton in retribution at the end: "the crocodile's defeat allegorises India's colonial subjection" (Leighton and Surridge "The Empire Bites Back" 258). I suggest there are other ways in which we might interpret the story.

[33] Numbers vary according to source, but it is estimated that 6,000 British were killed and well in excess of 100,000 Indians (some say as many as 600,000). Historian Amaresh Mishra claims that as many as 10 million died in reprisals by the British in the ten years after the mutiny, declaring this an "untold holocaust."

The narrative voice in "The Undertakers" is secondary to a three-way dialogue between the "macabre trio." The initial description of the Mugger, by the narrator, emphasises his predatory nature, he is a "… murderer, man-eater, and local fetish in one" (110). The description of the crocodile as a "murderer" and "man-eater" is particularly loaded. The narrator tells readers that "if the Jackal had been deceived by the likeness [of the Mugger to a drifting log] he would not have lived to philosophize over it" (112). This highlights crocodiles' mastery of disguise, often blending seamlessly with their environment, which makes them deadly predators – but not murderers. The same description also reveals his historical and cultural significance when the narrator adds that the Mugger was, "older than any man in the village, who had given his name to the village; the demon of the ford" (111), suggesting the crocodile's distinction as long-living reptile, who is part of local folklore in the community dwelling near the river. They regard the crocodile as "the godling of the village" and "throw many flowers at [him]" (116).[34]

Gordon's description of the Mugger as "cannibalistic" is curious but aligns with the narrator's description. The Mugger eats human beings (if he can catch them or find bodies of those drowned or burned on a funeral pyre), but humans are not of his own species. He is not a cannibal, then, but a flesh-eater; nowhere in the story do we hear of him eating other crocodiles (although he may have, and crocodiles do this in the wild if sufficiently hungy). The adjective appears intended to vilify what is, after all, natural behaviour for a large carnivore. Finding a dead body in the water – human or animal – a crocodile will eat it. As Arup K. Chatterjee argues, the "demonising" of "cannibalistic" crocodiles is widespread in colonial writing, fictional and non-fictional writing: "Contemporary accounts located the Indian crocodile in Gangetic and southern rivers, attributing to it feats such as overpowering tigers, while its 'plated coat of mail' made it seem 'invulnerable to bullets,' though a grooved-rifle ball or explosive could penetrate or obliterate it … a fact exploited dramatically in Kipling's 'The Undertakers'" (236). Chatterjee continues:

> Across [colonial] fiction, natural history, memoirs, and visual ephemera, the reptile was often exaggerated beside human figures so that broad riverine or lacustrine panoramas could provide romantic or sublime backdrops while close encounters offered ocular spectacles. Such representations steered a colonial production of

[34] On "crocodile veneration in India" (205), see Arup K. Chatterjee, "The 19thc Colonial Archetype of the Indian Crocodile."

> knowledge and mastery over landlocked lacustrine spaces, whose waters were exoticised for metropolitan consumption even as narratives naturalised imperial technocratic competence, ranging from taxonomy to violent intervention. The crocodile archetype thereby functioned as an instrument of epistemic authority, legitimating both conservationist and exploitative practices while celebrating technological domination – explosives, batteries, guns and bullets – as performances of imperial virility. Even seemingly benign deployments that framed crocodiles in sacred registers instrumentalised ritual relations, reframing local meanings as curiosities or eradication targets. Collectively, Victorian crocodile imagery fused natural history, sensational journalism, and literary illustrations into an iconography in which crocodiles signified spectacle, danger, sacredness, and a ruse to stage colonial supremacy in feral aquatic terrains. (236)

The thrust of Chatterjee's argument is that Indian colonial "[c]rocodile stories thus offered a nonhuman proxy for such anxieties [about British victimhood in the Mutiny], allowing the dramatisation of vulnerability and the performance of retributive virility without the immediately destabilising burden of intercommunal human culpability" (242). In this reading (which is offered in the context of a discussion of "The Undertakers"), crocodiles, who feasted on the bodies of Anglo-Indian soldiers during the Mutiny, became proxies for the Mutiny rebels against whom the colonisers could engage in retribution. Thus, he claims, via his allegorical demonising and killing of the Mugger, Kipling exorcises his "anxieties" about the Mutiny.

Kutzer also discusses "The Undertakers" in relation to the Mutiny, first noting that "[t]here is a wonderful, sly irony at work in "The Undertakers," whose central trope has to do with eating and being eaten – ostensibly the issue behind the beginning of the Mutiny" (28-29). However, she notes, "[t]he crocodile – a dangerous indigenous Indian crocodile – is killed by the grown-up white child he once tried to eat. Just as the British put down the Mutiny, they successfully put down another emblem of dark and dangerous India, the crocodile" (29). She continues, "'The Undertakers' is a story of cultural obliteration …" (30). This is true, to some extent, and accords with the reading of Chatterjee and others such as Randall.[35] The

[35] Chatterjee writes, "[b]y spectacularly avenging 'Mutiny' massacres, the narrative seeks to resolve the trauma through a fantasy of technological prowess" and "displac[es] internecine conflict onto an environmental or interspecies plane" (238).

latter describes the story as a "post-mutiny allegory" arguing that it "attempts to bring the Mutiny narrative definitively to a close" (*Kipling's Imperial Boy* 84). The crocodile, he argues, embodies "the forces of colonial disorder" (84-85). The young British boy who narrowly missed being bitten by the Mugger (or worse), is "spared to become a bridge-builder" (85). Hence Kipling's "answer to the problems of the Eastern Empire is technical … – the engineering (physical and social) of modernization": "It is the successful building of the bridge that announces the end of [the] uncanny Indian monster, the mugger that gorges himself upon Mutiny horrors. The mugger's death seems almost a necessary effect of the triumphant manifestation of British technological and administrative know-how" (85). Randall complicates this reading, however by asserting that in his allegorical return to the Mutiny in the story, Kipling reveals that for the colonial imagination "[o]ne cannot put an end to the Mutiny story, one can only return to it – again and again" via the "repeated inscription of violence" (87). I find particularly interesting Randall's assertion that, "[a]lthough the Mutiny history is a constitutive element in the empire's story of itself, its evocation also invariable interrupts that story by inscribing the agency of intransigent opposition, by speaking, albeit partially and indirectly, the story of the rebel" (86).

In my reading, "the story of the rebel" is not partial and indirect in "The Undertakers." It is central. The British engineer may have the final 'say' by blowing up the Mugger, but it is a mute act of unnecessarily extreme violence and, for most of the story, it is the Mugger (and his companions) who speak. And the story they tell not only offers intricate, informative observations about the three animals who are central to the story but also highlights the disruptions to the natural ecosystems caused by the introduction of railways in colonial India. This was an initially bewildering experience for Indians, who often responded with a blend of curiosity and humour. This humour is transferred in the story to the Mugger who believes the trains crossing on the railway bridge are "a new breed of bullock": "Someday it will not be able to keep its foothold up yonder and will fall as the men did. The old Mugger will then be ready [to eat it]" ("The Undertakers" 124). My analysis builds on the insights of Kaori Nagai who comments on the ways in which the *Jungle Books* highlight the expansion of the British Empire and their advancements in science and technology, especially in terms of the infrastructure and railways they built. She is one of only a handful of critics who consider "The Undertakers" in such terms. Nagai argues that in this story "Kipling portrays the British Empire's colonial expansion as a global network that intertwines humans, animals, and modern technologies like trains and steamships, highlighting how local animals adapt to these

changes while bearing witness to the transformative effects of colonization and globalization" ("The Beast in Chinese Boxes" 240).

The setting for "The Undertakers" is described this way by the narrator: "Nothing could be seen on the broad reach of the river except a little fleet of square-sailed, wooden-pinned barges, loaded with building-stone, that had just come under the railway bridge, and were driving down-stream. They put their clumsy helms over to avoid the sand-bar made by the scour of the bridge-piers" (106). Ater a line of unattributed dialogue (later it becomes clear it is the Mugger that speaks), the narrator continues, describing a river that has been tamed and fragmented: "The broad Indian river, that looked more like a chain of little lakes than a stream, was as smooth as glass, reflecting the sandy-red sky in mid-channel, but splashed with patches of yellow and dusky purple near and under the low banks. Little creeks ran into the river in the wet season, but now their dry mouths hung clear above water-line" (106). This depiction reflects how the intervention of the colonisers reshaped the currents of the Indian rivers, creating artificial sandbars and disrupting the seamless flow of water.

The impact of the bridge piers and water diversion on animals dependent on the river ecosystem for survival is highlighted through the speech of the three protagonists and, given the prominence of their voices in the story and the vibrancy of their characterisation, it is difficult to read it as a straightforward celebration of these modern changes. The Mugger, the Jackal and the Adjutant have been forced to adapt to these changes which have reshaped their habitat. The once mighty river, flowing freely through the land, now bears the scars of colonial engineering, its essence transformed into a series of regulated pools. The Jackal, a scavenging creature attuned to the rhythms of nature, mourns the encroachment of industrialisation. "Ahai! The world is iron in these days. … Life, is hard for us all … . [S]ince the bridge has been built good food is more scarce" (109) he wails, acknowledging the pervasive dominance of metal and machinery over the organic world, highlighting the dual legacy of the British rule in India – advancement in science and technology and ecological disruption.[36] This is slyly suggested by the narrator, who not only describes the

[36] "The Undertakers" is fruitfully read in conjunction with Kipling's 1893 story, "The Bridge-Builders." An Indian worker tells the engineer-sahib, Findlayson, of the bridge they are building across the Ganges, "Look you, we have put the river into a dock, and run her between stone sills. … We have bitted and bridled her. She is not like the sea, that can beat against a soft beach. She is Mother Gunga – in irons." In the story, during a flood, the gods take the form of animals and speak. A Mugger says, "They have made [the bridge] too strong for me. In all this night I have only torn away a handful of planks. The walls stand. The towers stand. They have chained my flood, and the river is not free any more. Heavenly Ones, take this yoke away! Give me clear water between bank and bank! It is I, Mother Gunga, that speak. The Justice of the Gods! Deal me the Justice of the

steam train using animalistic images, but uses mechanical images to describe the animals. Of Mugger, for example, the narrator says, "the Jackal knew that one stroke of [the crocodile's] tail in the water would carry the Mugger up the bank with the rush of a steam-engine" ("The Undertakers" 111). We are told that "his eyes burned like coals" (coal, of course, fuelled the railway engines) and his body has the "barrel" shape of a train (111). According to Janine Wilhelm, "the near absence of research in India's colonial river pollution is one of the biggest lacunae in the historiography on south Asia's environmental history" (*Environment and Pollution in Colonial India* 11).[37] It is significant, then, that images of industrial pollution appear throughout the story. The degradation of water and rivers into mere conduits for colonial infrastructure is suggested in the description of the river carrying "a little fleet of square-sailed, wooden-pinned barges loaded with building-stone" (106). The Jackal's comment that "[f]lattery is worse than an empty tin can in the belly" (112) introduces a metaphor associating nature with modern refuse and offers insights into the human, industrial pollution and the choking of the rivers in an era that prioritised exploitation over preservation. In response to a comment by the Mugger about a marigold wreath floating on the river (a traditional Indian tribute to the dead), he asks a poignant question: "What good are marigold wreaths when one is on the rubbish-heap?" (113). This era of iron, driven by the colonial agenda of progress, brought pollution and decay to ecosystems that once thrived (and led to the near extinction of some species, like the Mugger crocodiles and the Adjutant, as I mention below. The Jackal's question reflects the futility of symbolic acts of respect for nature and natural cycles of life and death in the face of widespread environmental neglect.

According to Rohan D'Souza, the "mega-industrial and infrastructure projects of the British colonial government in India,"

> gave rise to four kinds of social cost. First, they degraded land. When the dykes protected cultivated land on the flood plains of a river, they prevented alluvial deposit

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Gods!" The Mugger continues, "Ye were still when they polluted my waters. … Ye made no sign when my river was trapped between the walls." A variety of animals then speak. A Tigress announces that "they have defiled the Gunga," and a Bucklaments "this evil." The Mugger proclaims, "They [white faces] have changed the face of the land – which is my land. They have killed and made new towns on my banks"." An Elephant replies, "And all for the sake of a little iron bar with the fire-carriage atop." It is difficult to read this story only as "Kipling's tribute to the engineering genius of the Victorian English" (Adas, "Machines as the Measure of Men" 235). The animal-gods mock the endeavours of the British. Ganesh says to the Mugger and Mother Gunga, "It is but the shifting of a little dirt" and the Buck concurs by asking, "Can any say that this their bridge endures till to-morrow?"

[37] See also, Velayutham Saravanan, *Water and the Environmental History of Modern India*.

> formation and the natural cycle of soil enrichment in the flood plains. Second, embankments in the long run made floods more likely rather than less likely, by hastening deposit formation on the riverbed. Third, embankments, by causing waterlogging, helped malaria spread in western Bengal. Fourth, the railway embankments, which usually followed the course of rivers, often acted as an obstacle to the natural drainage of flood water. (*Drowned and Damned* 58)

The Mugger alludes to the ways in which diversion of natural water flow has disrupted the village on the banks of the river: "Five times have I seen the river draw back from the village and make new land at the foot of the street. Five times have I seen the village rebuilt on the banks" ("The Undertakers" 114). He also refers to the cycles of drought and plenty he has experienced in his lifetime, and how things have changed since he "was young" (presumably before the environmental changes on which all reflect): "by the Right and Left of Gunga, how full used the streams to be in those days!" (116). This offers a layered critique of the ecological and socio-economic consequences of colonial intervention in India. The River Ganges (referred to in the story as "Gunga") was a main source of sustenance for the surrounding environments and communities prior to industrial pollution and diversion of water that changed its path. The reflection of the Mugger emphasises the irony of natural calamities/events such as flooding, which in an unaltered ecosystem might have been a source of renewal and abundance, by depositing rich alluvia silt that is ideal for agriculture, rather than being simply destructive. The careful equilibrium maintained for thousands of years between cycles of flooding and drought was thrown completely out of balance by colonial intervention and paved the way for food insecurity for animals and humans alike. At one point the narrator interjects with information confirming the balance that has been affected by natural flooding: "Indian rivers … will shift, sometimes … in a season, drowning the fields on one bank, and spreading good silt on the other" ("The Undertakers" 119).

The Mugger tells the Jackal and Adjutant about "two shoals [shallow bodies of water] … an upper and a lower shoal" which he says used to be on the river but which they "would not remember." The Adjutant replies, "Ay, I forgot. A channel divided them and later dried up again" (117). The narrator writes of the "Waingunga River," in the narrative present, that "the main channel … was the only stream that carried a trickle of water between its dead banks" (115). This points to the altered hydrology caused by intensive river engineering projects. This drying up of natural channels, linked to damming and irrigation for colonial agriculture, exacerbated drought conditions and disrupted natural water cycles. The Mugger's rhetorical

question, “Has the river changed its channel, and made new land where there was only sand before?” (119), further emphasizes the drastic shifts in the river’s flow, reflecting the instability introduced by these human interventions. The Jackal’s cynical response, “Now, of what use is that knowledge? The river has shifted even in my little life” (119), further highlights the futility of attempting to understand natural patterns when colonial forces fundamentally alter them, rendering indigenous knowledge of natural cycles increasingly irrelevant. The imperial interest was the core concern for the colonisers, even if what they did came at the cost of the starvation of many indigenous Indians, the destruction of the environment and the near-extinction of species (as noted above, colonial environmental interventions exacerbated droughts and famine, leading to vastly increased numbers of people, and animals, starving to death).[38]

The “white faces” are discussed at some length by the talking trio in “The Undertakers,” especially in the second half of the story after the Mugger tells of his experiences during the Mutiny. The direct reference to the Mutiny is highly unusual for Kipling who, according to Sandra Kemp and Lisa Lewis, stated in a letter of December 189: “‘57 is the year we don’t talk about’” (“Introduction” xxi); Mark Paffard says of “The Undertakers” that it is “the only work in which Kipling comments directly on the ‘Indian Mutiny’ of 1857” (91). The Mugger tells the Jackal and Adjutant that (in what we realise is 1857) after hearing word about “rich waters above Benares” he made a lengthy land journey to these waters.[39] (Banares is another name for the city of Varanasi on the Ganges River and was a significant centre of sepoy rebellion.) Here, he tells his listeners, he found the river choked with the bodies of British soldiers: “the dead English came down, touching each other” (129). The narrator confirms the cause, telling us that the Adjutant “could not remember the terrible year of the Mutiny they were talking about” (129). The Mugger continues:

> [O]ne [himself] lay still in the slackwater and let twenty [bodies] go by to pick one; and, above all, the English were not cumbered with jewellery and nose-rings and anklets as my [Indian] women are nowadays. … The news was that the English were being hunted into the rivers, and by the Right and Left of Gunga! we believed it was true. … [A] little above Monghyr there came down a boatful of white-faces – alive! They were, as I remember, women, lying under a cloth spread over sticks, and crying

[38] See also: Sanjay Sharma, “Elusive Rains and Parched lands: Situating Drought in Colonial India.
[39] Mugger crocodiles are very well-adapted to land travel compared to other crocodile species (Steeves).

> aloud. There was never a gun fired at us, the watchers of the fords in those days. All the guns were busy, elsewhere. We could hear them day and night inland, coming and going as the wind shifted. I rose up full before the boat, because I had never seen white-faces alive, though I knew them well – otherwise. (129).

He describes how he tried to take a child whose hand was trailing in the water, but the child's hands slipped through his jaws. He was then shot, not fatally, by a woman on the boat and claims to still carry the bullet under the folds of his skin. After this, he says he went upstream:

> [W]hen I had reached Arrah and the back-waters behind it, there were no more dead English. The river was empty for a while. Then came one or two dead, in red coats, not English, but of one kind all – Hindus and Purbeeahs [native infantry] – then five and six abreast, and at last, from Arrah to the North beyond Agra, it was as though whole villages had walked into the water. They came out of little creeks one after another, as the logs come down in the Rains. When the river rose, they rose also in companies from the shoals they had rested upon; and the falling flood dragged them with it across the fields and through the Jungle by the long hair. (133)[40]

This is a chilling description of the dead sepoys killed in retribution by the British, dumped into the Ganges and other waterways. The Mugger continues with his tale, recalling how he returned to his usual waters, admitting "even I was … a little frightened of this constant coming down of the silent ones" (134). He says the villagers were afraid, too: "my people said that it was best to say, nothing at all, but to pay the tax and plough the land" (134). He acknowledges one regret, however, "That little white child which I did not get. … I have not forgotten. … Before I die it is my desire to try one new thing" (135).

The Mugger's recollections, and the conversation between him, the Jackal and the Adjutant, are interrupted by the arrival of some white men who spot the crocodile and decide to shoot it. One says, "Golly! what a brute! The villagers will be wild if he's shot, though. He's the *deota* [godling] of these parts" (138). Another replies, "'Don't care a rap … he took about fifteen of my best coolies while the bridge was building, and it's time he was put a stop to.

[40] Leighton and Surridge mistakenly read the reference to "long hair" as suggesting "the bodies represent massacred Englishwomen" ("The Empire Bites Back" 25). The narrative clearly states the bodies were "not English" but wore "red coats" – what is referred to then are the bodies of Sepoys who wore red coats in the British Indian Army. Many Sepoys, especially Sikhs, had long hair.

Stand by with the Martini as soon as I've given him both barrels of this" (138). "This" is "a small cannon (the biggest sort of elephant rifle …)" and the Mugger is "literally broken into three pieces" by the engineer's blast, before "a native with an axe cut off the big head" (139). In the final paragraphs of the story, we learn the man who shot the Mugger was the child, trailing his hand in the water all those years ago.

At the end of the story, then, colonial law (and force) triumphs. The man-eating crocodile is dead, the white man avenged, the villagers compliant, the bridge built. The Jackal and Adjutant respond indifferently to the Mugger's killing: "This was worth sitting up all night for" they say of the story they have just heard the crocodile tell (140). How are we to interpret this, the final lines in the story?

Supriya Goswami, like so many, reads the story as an allegory of imperial triumph: "the English boy has the potential to thwart the crafty crocodile's greatest wish, bring modernity and progress to India, and save the unprotected natives of an Indian village from being devoured by a ravenous beast. Thus, this young child becomes a location of tremendous agency and the instrument by which destructive of harmful elements are wiped out in colonial India" (*Colonial India in Children's Literature* 2). Goswami continues,

> The Mutiny – embodied in the prodigious, man-eating *mugger* – is unable to demolish the young English child. Instead, the 'Mutiny-baby' is able to save himself from being swallowed up and grows to violently destroy a symbol of insurrection and insurgency. … The English child, embedded in a moment of historical trauma, successfully survives it to become a bridge-builder, a protector, and triumphant agent of British modernization and technical advancement in the colonies. (2)

Is the Mugger a "symbol of insurrection and insurgency" that figures the 1857 Mutiny? Is he a proxy for the sepoy rebels? Surely not. The Mugger is (just) a crocodile, feasting on a fortuitous glut of bodies regardless of whether they are white or brown, as crocodiles in nature would do. He makes no distinction between the races of the bodies. Todd S. Garth makes a different point to Randall and Goswami, albeit only in passing, to draw a comparison between Kipling and Horacio Quiroga. Commenting on the ending of the story, Garth asserts, "The surviving animal interlocutors [the Jackal and the Adjutant] remain as phlegmatic about the crocodile's violent death as do the human shooters, and as indifferent to his demise as to the fate of the unlucky humans he ate. This same sort of paradoxical galvanization of indifference and respect for life, directed equally at the human and the animal, the civilized

and the savage, is a hallmark of Quiroga's writing" (25). While Garth's comment on the story is in the service of his reading of Quiroga's writing, it seems an apt comment on Kipling's portrayal of events in "The Undertakers."

I suggest that while postcolonial readings such as those of Randall and Goswami are not wrong, they miss a great deal in "The Undertakers." Animal voices dominate, throughout, articulating a "paradoxical galvanization of indifference and respect for life and animals." Moreover, in the story the Jackal and the Adjutant get the last word, speaking, as Garth notes, phlegmatically about the white-faces' "over-kill" of the crocodile, their old co-habitant of the riverbank, and with whom they have spent the night conversing. Their conversation is often very funny, as are the narrator's asides, which are also telling. At one point, the Jackal makes a snide remark about the food that the crocodile ate on his "land-match" to the Ganges River:

> what the Jackal hinted at was that the Mugger must have eaten his food … fresh and fresh every day, instead of keeping it by him till it was in a fit and proper condition, as every self-respecting mugger and most wild beasts do when they can: Indeed, one of the worst terms of contempt along the River-bed is 'eater of fresh meat.' It is nearly as bad as calling a man a cannibal. "The Undertakers" 128

The comment is deeply ironic, especially if we set it against Gordon's claim, quoted above, that the crocodile is "cannibalistic" because he eats humans.

The narrative is full of dialogue in which each of the three carnivorous animals to better the other in wordplay and taletelling. After the crocodile is "beaten in his second attempt to get the better of his friend [the Jackal]" the narrator tells us, "[n]either bore malice, however. Eat and be eaten was fair law along the river, and the Jackal came in for his fair share of plunder when the Mugger had finished a meal" (133). In contrast, the speech of the "white faces" is static, stereotypically 'British,' and dismissive of both local villagers and the surrounding wildlife. The Mugger's body is deemed "too knocked about to keep" as a trophy or for its valuable skin (140). The narrator portrays the engineer and his colleagues as both ignorant and callous, and their speech is diminished in contrast with the lively, funny, engaging talk of the animals who have spoken most of the story and for whom, "[e]at and be eaten was fair law." This is a "law" of nature that Kipling appears to respect, not vilify, in this and other stories. The animals eat other animals to survive, regardless of race or creed, unlike the 'cannibal' English men who are metaphorically devouring India(ns).

As something of an aside, it is noteworthy that the Greater Adjutant (*Leptoptilos dubius*), which is very likely the species Kipling portrays in this story, is now "critically endangered, with most of the world's population now located in Assam" (Kaur et. al. 483).[41] "Estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands in the late 1800s, by the early 1990s, only 400 remained" (Borde, et. al.). According to *Birdlife.org*, "[t]he chief cause of this species' catastrophic … [has been] habitat loss and modification caused by the drainage, degradation and pollution of wetlands used for foraging, as well as the clearance of breeding colonies for urban development and agricultural expansion" ("Greater Adjutant" n.p.). The once prolific mugger crocodile species has also been decimated. That the Adjutant and crocodile in Kipling's story lament river pollution and water diversion is deeply ironic, in retrospect. Of course, Kipling would not have known of the future demise of these species which were abundant at the time he wrote the story. Nonetheless, there is something prescient in his portrayal of a river/wetland ecology under threat because of the destructive infrastructure projects instigated by the British.

Shefali Rajamannar argues that "[ma]inly telling the story from the Mugger's perspective allows Kipling to do several interesting things, including the reversing and blurring of conventional constructs of hunter and hunted" (135). The crocodile's remark – "You do not know the English as I do … All the English hunt in that fashion, except when they are hunted" ("The Undertakers" 126) – highlights the instability of colonial power while positioning the natural world as an active participant in this struggle, rather than a passive backdrop. As an ancient predator, the Mugger embodies the resilience of the non-human world, outlasting human empires and exposing their hubris. His predatory gaze reverses the colonial narrative of control, suggesting that ecosystems ultimately dictate the terms of survival.

[41] The Adjutant in Kipling's story is described as a "ruffianly brute": "His back view was immensely respectable, for he stood nearly six feet high, and looked rather like a very proper bald-headed parson. In front it was different, for his Ally Sloper-like head and neck had not a feather to them, and there was a horrible raw-skin pouch on his neck under his chin—a hold-all for the things his pick-axe beak might steal. His legs were long and thin and skinny, but he moved them delicately, and looked, at them with pride as he preened down his ashy-gray tail-feathers, glanced over the smooth of his shoulder, and stiffened into 'Stand at attention'" (108). This description, notably of the bald head, height and neck pouch, accord with descriptions of the Greater Adjutant as do descriptions of its food sources (mainly carrion). The narrator also informs us that "[t]here is one very unpleasant peculiarity about the Adjutant. At uncertain times he suffers from acute attacks of the fidgets or cramp in his legs, and though he is more virtuous to behold than any of the cranes, who are all immensely respectable, he flies off into wild, cripple-stilt war-dances, half opening his wings and bobbing his bald head up and down" (115). This too conforms with descriptions of the bird's natural movements (see Barman and Sharma).

In what is one of very few extended ecocritical readings of the *Jungle Books*, Christie Harner discusses four stories, one of them "The Undertakers." One of her fundamental premises is that "imperialism was concurrently sociopolitical and ecological, that its effects on the natural world were as immense as those on indigenous peoples" ("Geopolitical Temporalities" 136). She comments on the dominant critical interpretation of the Mowgli stories, "how animal-human relationships might be read as imperial allegories," noting the value of this work "within theorizations of post-colonial hybridity and late-Victorian imperial ideologies." Nonetheless she argues that this approach focusses "less on the impacted jungle ecosystem and more on Mowgli's fraught identity" and "neglects the animal characteristics of the non-human characters, heightening the existing anthropomorphism and conscripting them into 'different human cultural groups'" (Harner 135, quoting MacDuffie 28). To "reassess the animality of the non-human species in the *Jungle Books*" (135), she draws on theories of regime shifts, when the characteristic behaviour of an ecosystem is abruptly changed. This, as I have suggested is precisely what Kipling portrays across the *Jungle Books*. The human disruption of existing ecosystems is a persistent theme in many of the stories, not least "The Undertakers," although the representation of the effects is complex and even contradictory.[42] Both humans and animals feel the consequences of the regime shifts portrayed; and the impacts are felt by both European and non-European humans. A particularly interesting aspect of her argument pays attention to "the multiplicity of temporal rhythms in the texts' temporalities" (137) and the tension and overlap between sociocultural time spans (historical and linear) and ecological ones (seasonal, generational, circular). Harner urges focus not on "geopolitical change but on ecological shifts, both natural and human-made" (140). The human-made (linear) bridge in the story defies and disrupts natural (cyclical) environmental changes to the river's flow and is often read as signifying imperial "progress." However, Harner argues that

> The startling conflation of a specific event [the Sepoy Uprising] with a longer evolutionary course, including with the deep time of animal instinct [such as that of predators to kill for food], also works to unsettle projections of the British conquest of

[42] Who or what are the titular undertakers mourning? And are the undertakers the three animals in dialogue, mourning the loss of their ecosystem, or the British who undertake the crocodile's killing and disposal?

> the natural world and native people, to challenge ideologies of progressive, future-focused improvement. (142)

The crocodile eats not only British soldiers but Indian mutineers and villagers and does so indiscriminately: "humans, regardless of their race, are just one of the food sources in the ecosystem" (142). She claims, then that, "[d]ominance, whether that of the crocodile, the rebels, or the English colonizers, is temporary and susceptible to potential natural flux. The so-called ending is less a resolution or the declaration of a 'winner' than it is a suggestion of ongoing instability – the ceaseless ebb and flow of flood and drought" (142).

Drought, "Fear," fear and hunting

Drought and its effects on the animals and landscape is a main theme in "How Fear Came" which recounts a council of jungle animals during a drought, where Hathi the elephant narrates the origins of fear in the jungle. The short poem that prefaces the story opens with, "The Stream is shrunk – the pool is dry" (1), and this is echoed, in a parallelism, ten lines later: "The pools are shrunk – the streams are dry" (11). It explains how the jungle animals became "comrades" (2), "by one droughty fear made still / Forgoing thought of quest or kill" (5-6). In the story that follows, the narrator gives an evocative description of the effects of the drought on the jungle flora: "That Spring the *mohwa* tree, that Baloo was so fond of, never flowered. The greenly, cream-coloured, waxy blossoms were heat-killed before they were born, and only a few bad-smelling petals came down when he stood on his hind legs and shook the tree" (150). The narrator continues,

> Then, inch by inch, the untampered heat crept into the heart of the Jungle, turning it yellow, brown, and at last black. The green growths in the sides of the ravines burned up to broken wires and curled films of dead stuff; the hidden pools sank down and caked over, keeping the last least footmark on their edges as if it had been cast in iron; the juicy-stemmed creepers fell away from the trees they clung to and died at their feet; the bamboos withered, clanking when the hot winds blew, and the moss peeled off the rocks deep in the jungle, till they were as bare and as hot as the quivering blue boulders in the bed of the stream.

> And the heat went on and on, and sucked up all the moisture, till at last the main channel of the Waingunga was the only stream that carried trickle of water between its dead banks… . (151)

In the face of this, Hathi the elephant "proclaimed the Water Truce" – an edict that disallows "animals to kill at the drinking place" ("How Fear Came" 11). The narratorial descriptions of the devastated landscape continue: "On the level plain of the farther bank the stiff jungle-grass had died standing, and, dying, had mummied. … You could hear the does and fawns coughing in the snuff-like dust" (153). On the banks of the remaining stream, during the Truce, a place is set aside for "the Eaters of Flesh – the tiger, the wolves, the panther, the bear, and the others" (14). Presumably Mowgli is one of these "others."

It is not directly suggested in this story that the drought is 'unnatural,' the result of human intervention. And it is not only the jungle animals that suffer and die in the drought. A young sambhur [sambar deer] tells gathered animals that "'[t]he men-folk, too, they die beside their ploughs … . 'I passed three between sunset and night. They lay still, and their Bullocks with them'" (16). Nonetheless, the significance of the drought, the starvation it induces and the linkage with fear and killing, punches home to the reader the very real impacts of drought in India, which is widely agreed to have increased as the result of colonial environmental degradation, as I have discussed. The drought is what instigates Hathi's telling of the primal story about the arrival of "Fear," and this is linked with both the killing of humans and the instigation of "Law" in the Jungle. In the narrative present tense, the nefarious tiger, Shere Khan, comes to the Peace Rock at the river one morning during the Water Truce and tells the other animals that he has just killed and eaten a man and, worse, he didn't do it out of necessity: "I killed for choice – not for food" (19). He insists it was his "right" to do so (19). The other animals are horrified and Mowgli whispers to Bagheera, "To kill Man is always shameful. The Law says so" (20). He then asks Hathi to explain why Shere Khan has this "right." Hathi responds by telling the story of "the beginning of the Jungle" (21) an idyllic time when animals did not fear each other and all the animals were vegetarian, even the tigers: "we ate nothing at all except leaves and flowers and grass and fruit and bark" (21). Crucially, it was a time before the arrival of Man, "there was no corn or melons or pepper or sugar-cane [non-indigenous crops], nor were there any little huts such as ye have all seen" (22). In the story Hathi tells, Tha, the First of the Elephants, was Lord of the Jungle, and he made the First of the Tigers "the master and the judge of the Jungle, to whom the Jungle People should bring their disputes" without fear (22). One night the Tiger accidentally killed

a buck and ran away, leaving the Jungle animals without a master and judge until the Gray Ape took on the role, bringing only "foolish talk and senseless words" (24). The Tiger brought Death, recounts Hathi, and as a result, "Fear" came.

Hathi's description of "Fear" – a "Thing" in a cave – makes clear it is human: "he had no hair, and went upon his hind legs" (24). Terrified, the animals scattered into species groups for the first time. The First of the Tigers returned, and as he ran through the jungle his hide was striped by hanging creepers (hence the origin of his markings), but, afraid of "the Hairless One" (25), he ran away again. When he returned a second time, he begged to be reinstated as Master of the Jungle, but the Elephant told him this could not happen. However, he offered the Tiger a compromise, and a moral:

> "Thou hast killed the buck, and thou hast let Death loose in the Jungle, and with Death has come Fear, so that the people of the Jungle are afraid one of the other, as thou art afraid of the Hairless One. … For one night in each year it shall be as it was before the buck was killed – for thee and for thy children. In that one night, if ye meet the Hairless One – and his name is Man – ye shall not be afraid of him, but he shall be afraid of you, as though ye were judges of the Jungle and masters of all things. Show him mercy in that night of his fear, for thou hast known what Fear is." (27)

When the appointed night comes, the Tiger shows no mercy. He kills a man, claiming to have "killed Fear" (28). The next day "another Hairless One" (identified by the narrator as a Gond) takes revenge on the Tiger with "a pointed stick." The Tiger doesn't die, but the jungle animals realise that Man can "strike from far off." Man's many ways of killing animals are elaborated: "through the noose, and the pitfall, and the hidden trap, and the flying stick [spear], and the stinging fly that comes out of white smoke [rifle], and the Red Flower [fire] that drives us into the open" (30). The Elephant chastised the Tiger, "O blind and foolish! Thou hast untied the feet of Death, and he will follow thy trail till thou diest. Thou hast taught Man to kill! … Thou hast shown him no mercy, and none will he show thee" (29). In the narrative present, Mowgli points out that Shere Khan doesn't kill people on only one night a year, but "twice and thrice in a moon" (31). Hathi tells him he does so shamefully, from behind. He concludes that "only when there is one great Fear all over, as there is now, can we of the jungle lay aside out little fears and meet together in one place as we do now" (30). This great "Fear" is drought.

In the poem "The Law of the Jungle," the narrator states, "As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk / The Law runneth forward and back" (33) – suggesting nature's laws are circular and inescapable. This cyclical justice manifests when Shere Khan's man-killing violates the Water Truce, echoing the First Tiger's original sin. The drought becomes nature's judgment, enforcing the Law's reciprocity. Agriculture's vulnerability to drought appears in "The Spring Running," when Mowgli observes the villagers' immense worry during crop failures, highlighting the sambhur's account of dead farmers. This reciprocal suffering reflects Kipling's ecological vision: human and animal fates intertwine through shared dependence on water. The "Red Flower" (fire) (314) that villagers use to protect crops becomes, during drought, a threat to all – demonstrating how human tools meant to dominate nature often backfire. This collective trauma (drought) prompts cross-species cooperation, which is obvious in the *Jungle Books* and serves as a narrative fulcrum, testing Kipling's major motto: survival depends on respecting the laws of nature rather than asserting dominance. The drought's lesson – that all life forms, human, and non-human share vulnerability to nature's wrath – makes Shere Khan's human-like hubris in claiming "rights" over life and death particularly damning.

This story is interesting for the two subjects it broaches: the killing of humans by tigers and the devastating impacts of droughts. I will return to the former below. Here I remain focused on the portrayal of drought by Kipling in "How Fear Came" as a supplement to my comments on "The Undertakers." Droughts have been a perennial feature in South Asia for millennia, as have been monsoons (see Amrith). With drought comes famine (see Davis). Droughts in historical India were devastating, recurring crises that wreaked havoc on both human populations and ecosystems. In the terms established by Harner, these are natural cyclical, recurrent aspects of the Indian environment. However, the severity and occurrence of droughts (and famine) increased during the colonial era. As P. R. Dubhashi documents:

> During the British period droughts led to famine and mass starvation. The colonial period began with drought and famine in Bengal in 1770 during which one-third of the population of the province perished. The colonial era ended with the great Bengal famine of 1943, not entirely due to drought, in which 3 million people perished. Between 1770 and 1880 as many as 27 scarcities and famines were recorded. During the 50 years 1850 to 1900 20 million lives were lost in about 20 famines. (A27)

Kipling could not have been oblivious to these later droughts, some of which occurred during the years he lived in India, and which not only impacted people but Indian fauna and flora.

Brahma Nand considers famines and their causes under British rule in India and writes that, it is "worthy of note that famines in India tended to coincide not so much with good or bad weathers, but with good or bad governments" ("Nature and Causes" 26). Here we have an instance of the intersection of what Harner describes as cyclical environmental time (the time seasonal monsoons and patterns of periodic drought) and sociopolitical linear time (the period of British governmental intervention). Nand asserts "there is a near unanimity of opinion on the issue that poverty was the root cause of famines, and the British rule in India was the root cause of poverty" (29). Poverty resulted from forced changes to farming practices and crops grown, deforestation, land annexation, expulsion from forests, taxation, and so on. This meant that less food was produced by local farmers for local consumption and less was available to store for the inevitable lean times that were anticipated and endured as part of Indian agrarian life for centuries. As Romesh Chunder Dutt argues:

> The land revenue burden under British rule was excessive, fluctuating and uncertain. It paralysed agriculture, prevented saving [of money and food] and kept the cultivator in a state of abject poverty and indebtedness. It was also the main reason behind the increased frequency and intensity of famines during the nineteenth century. ("The Economic" 34)

This was exacerbated, as I have discussed above, by the diversion of water, the building of new channels, canals, railways and bridges and various other interventions by the British in their attempt to "manage" water for the growth of exportable crops. Not only people suffered in these historical conditions, indigenous animals and plants did too. This scarcity of water, which is a shared suffering for humans, wildlife and plants, resonates throughout the Mowgli narratives of the *Jungle Books* which, as established, are set in the late colonial era.

In "How Fear Came" it is the killing of first an animal and then a man by a tiger that brings "Fear" to the Jungle, in the mythical backstory related by Hathi, as discussed. Fear obviously has two meanings in the story. It is the name the first animals give to Man (the "Hairless One"), who arrives to disturb the prelapsarian, vegetarian paradise; it also refers to the emotion or affect which is what comes to the Jungle is a consequence of the First Tiger's murderous actions. The tiger is marked – branded – in the story. In the present days stories

Shere Khan is similarly branded as a villain, not only by the stripes on his skin, but by his cowardice and breaking of the Law. Nyman sums up a common critical claim in his assertion that Shere Khan represents "anarchic nativism" in conflict with "orderly colonialism" (*Postcolonial Animal Tale* 42). The tiger is an opportunistic killer of men and farmers' cattle. He demands that he is given the "man-cub" (baby Mowgli) because he was his "meat from the first" (16) and it is his killing of a man, against his "right," that encourages Hathi to tell the tale of the First Tiger's killing of a man, in "How Fear Came."

Mowgli gains the respect of the animals in the jungle by taking on Shere Khan whom he terrifies and singes with the "Red Flower" (fire) and then later tracks, tricks and kills, as detailed in "Tiger! Tiger!", by cornering the tiger with the wolves' assistance and then encouraging village buffaloes to trample him to death. This has been read allegorically by many critics as figuring colonial aggression against 'native' Indians. Randall argues that Shere Khan is a symbol of the Mughal dynasty or Muslim rulers from the North,[43] and the dissenting members of the wolf pack, who support the tiger, represent those who supported the last Mughal emperor. In this reading, just as the British triumphed over "the symbolic kingdom of Bahadur Shah [the last Mughal emperor], so Mowgli puts an end to the lame tiger's pretensions of power" (*Kipling's Imperial Boy* 78). In this way, Randall claims, key aspects of the Mutiny are replayed and the killing of the tiger by Mowgli represents "British 'triumph' in the midst of [Indian] treachery and adversity" (78). This is a stretched interpretation, but typical of attempts by postcolonial critics to impose allegorical meanings onto various animals in the stories. Nyman, for example, also claims that the scene in which Mowgli kills Shere Khan is one of many in *The Jungle Books* that contribute to "the colonialist project's attempt to subordinate the native to imported law" (42).

But Mowgli *is* a "native." Perhaps what is suggested here is that Mowgli is a 'good native,' a lackey for the colonisers and here does their bidding to support the (British) Law. Naithani notes that "Kipling's representation of the tiger in *The Jungle Book*" – as cowardly, nefarious and a killer of cattle and humans – "stands in sharp contrast to the Indian narrative tradition" (*The Inhuman Empire* 138). Naithani further suggests that this portrayal may be due to "the relationship between the Indian tiger and British men" (138), a point worth further consideration. She stresses the "symbolic value" of tigers in the British Raj where the killing

[43] Shere Khan is clearly named after Sher Khan (1486 –1545), an Afghan ruler in Northern India also known as Sher Shah Sri and Sher Afghan Khan, the founder of the Suri Dynasty.

of tigers was encouraged "by offering financial rewards to hunters" (138). She notes that the Indian king who opposed British rule, Tipu Sultan (the "Tiger of Mysore"), had a tiger as his symbol.[44] They were embellished on his guns, his infantry wore stripes, his bedroom was guarded by four tigers and he "possessed a prototype of a mechanical tiger killing a white man" (138). After victory over Tipu Sultan in 1799 and then the crushing of the Sepoy rebels in 1857-58, claims Naithani, "[h]unting the tiger was no more sport, but symbolic of the subjugation of India" (138; see also Shresth 115-117 and 243).

The neat metaphorical mapping of tigers as representing insurrectionist Indians and thus justifying their slaughter by the British (whose "Law" is ostensibly upheld by Mowgli), misses a great deal. Arguably, it was not tigers as symbols for dangerous, "unruly natives," but tigers as dangerous *animals* (or ones perceived to be dangerous) and highly prized hunting trophies, that led to a systematic attempt to exterminate the species in British India. As Swati Shresth argues, "[t]he ability of the tiger to confer prestige and nobility on the hunter was one of the main factors that destabilized the neat categories of game and vermin, noble and ignoble prey" (247).

The distinction is important, I argue, because what is at stake is less about racism than speciesism, about the valuation of some animals as more noble than others (and so, in the case of the tiger, ironically, more worthy of being killed). Mahesh Rangarajan's lengthy, detailed and meticulously researched essay, "The Raj and the Natural World: The War against 'Dangerous Beasts' in Colonial India" warrants consideration here. Interestingly, while much of the essay considers tigers, it also discusses wolves as predators, along with briefer mention of lions and leopards (black ones named panthers), and the odd comment about snakes and crocodiles.

One of Rangarajan's major contributions is his account of "the relationship between large mammals and people in the pre-colonial era [in India]" (266). He acknowledges this is complex and muti-faceted, as are the customs, beliefs and values of the many different people who inhabit the large landmass of South Asia. He argues that despite this, "there is sufficient reason to assert that the dynamics of people-nature relations in the pre-colonial period were

[44] Tipu Sultan [Sultan Fateh Ali Sahab Tipu, aka "Tiger of Mysore"] ruled the wealthy Kingdom of Mysore in South India. He was an early pioneer of rocket artillery, and he deployed these against the British in the Anglo-Mysore Wars which were fought with the help of the French, in the last decades of the eighteenth century. He was killed in battle in 1799. His death was celebrated in Britain, and the defeat was portrayed in fiction, art and drama.

very different from what was to follow the consolidation of British power, especially after 1857" (266). Pre-colonial inhabitants had a "long history of contact with large predators" and had developed a variety of "strategies," including "avoidance" and "self-defence," to deal with them that did not simply involve killing them (266) The thorny branches and burning fires at the gates to the village in "Tiger! Tiger!" offer examples. Furthermore, tigers and lions, especially, had religious and magical attributes, according to many Indians, and were often revered as symbols of power and strength, if also feared (267). Human relationships with them were not singular or static across time or region: "The long exposure to carnivores made it inevitable that various cultures and rulers in the subcontinent would perceive the animals in a host of ways. There were mutually contradictory strands, with the same animal being revered and feared, hunted and worshipped at the same time" (269). Rangarajan also asserts that as agrarian practices spread in India, many tigers learned to avoid human settlements or retreated from areas cleared of forests: "What is important is the extent to which tigers and people lived in very close proximity to each other in grazing grounds and forested lands. The 'village' and the 'forest' were both fluid entities and the dividing line was not very sharp" (268).

Rangarajan contrasts this with British and European attitudes towards large wild mammals. Large animals in Europe were hunted extensively for purposes of extermination for centuries in Europe, and as economic conditions changed with the advent of industrialisation, enabling more free time for the rising classes, "game became an object of leisure" (270). He claims that the "broadly negative attitude to carnivores [in Britain] was to acquire a new significance in the subcontinental context" (270). As the Raj took hold in India, large carnivores, especially tigers, were seen as posing a dual threat – to human life and as a barrier to land cultivation. This was the justification for an extensive and systematic programme of extermination, particularly after 1857-58 when colonial authority was imposed at every opportunity. Large bounties were paid to local hunters for killing a variety of "dangerous beasts" (271-2). Ironically, this upset the ecological balance that assisted crop farmers in many areas: the extermination of tigers meant populations of crop-raiding deer increased.[45] In other areas, the clearing of the jungle was promoted as a sure way to drive tigers to extinction; and in others sport-hunting was promoted (and modern weapons used) by British

[45] Rangarajan quotes one official, G.P. Chatterton: "Tigers lifted cattle but the advocates of 'a war of extermination' ignored a simple fact: the tiger was entitled to 'present his little account for services rendered in keeping down wild animals which destroy crops'" and so "[t]he tolerance for the tiger was within the logic of agrarian expansion and consolidation" (276-77).

hunters and their local "helpers." Tigers remained the chief objective in the battle to clear India of dangerous "vermin" (279), but

> [t]he forest was also sought to be made an ordered landscape that could yield trophies and game meat to sportsmen. The destruction of tigers and leopards was only the most visible part of a much larger effort to reduce and even eliminate carnivores in government forests. Active steps to eliminate birds and beasts of prey were a logical corollary to secure such lands for sport hunters. (279)

Rangarajan's section titled "Tigers vs people" (in India) is particularly interesting. He details the sharp decline in tiger populations in many parts of South Asia by the end of the nineteenth century (when Kipling wrote the *Jungle Books*). The predation of humans by tigers similarly diminished (not surprisingly), although he notes that 'man-eating' tigers were, in fact, uncommon, apart from certain areas in Bengal (284), despite popular mythology: fueled by the likes of Jim Corbett. "There was a strong cultural bias against an animal like the tiger with its alleged liking for human flesh. But there is little evidence that tigers in all areas habitually devoured people" (298) and when they did it was likely due to "[t]he scarcity of wild prey" (282). This scarcity was often the result of colonial intensive agricultural practices, extensive habitat destruction and increased pollution.

Most often, Indians killed tigers only "when necessary" (287) states Rangarajan; "True, the bulk of killing for rewards was done by Indians but the impulse to exterminate the striped cat was not shared by all. Many dragged their feet. Others were indifferent. For some, strategies of avoidance seemed a better bet" (288):

> The strategies of avoidance and self-defence at the local level meant that people often stopped short of a desire to wipe out the tiger. Religious and cultural objections reduced vermin-killing but were perhaps specific to certain regions and cultures. What was more widespread was a willingness to coexist with the animal. In many areas people shared their living space with the tiger. Tending cattle, gathering forest produce and cultivation-all involved a degree of contact with the great cat. (298-99)

Fascinating in Rangarajan's account is his section on wolves: "An excessive reliance on shikar literature and our own cultural disposition to the big cats has obscured the significance of the wolf as a co-predator and victim of human intervention over the last century" (288). Wolves, he claims, were very common in areas of open terrain populated by various deer, but

very rarely existed in forests (288-89). Further, in "1875 more people were killed by wolves than by tigers"; "In 1876 [in the North-West Provinces], as many as 721 lives were lost to wolves and in turn 2,825 wolves were slain for bounties" (289). Fatalities from wolf attacks were highest in summer when villagers and rural dwellers tended to sleep in the open air, and "while the leopards lifted cattle, the wolves carried away children" (290). A concerted programme of wolf extermination meant that "[o]ver 100,000 were killed for rewards in British India between 1871 and 1916. The records for as many as nineteen years (1877-79, 1889-95 and 1905-15) are incomplete" (292). "The 'vigorous campaign' against the wolf was stepped up at precisely the same time that the tiger began winning a reprieve [once the extent of its declining numbers became apparent]. For instance, in the United Provinces, the general tiger bounty was abolished by 1903. Over 1,000 wolves were slaughtered in a special campaign [in that same year]" (194).

I have given some length to this summary of Rangarajan's argument because it refutes, in many ways, the simple (yet very common) allegorical readings of "dangerous beasts" in the *Jungle Books*, such as Shere Khan the tiger, Mugger the crocodile, or Nag the cobra (but not wolves or Kaa the python), as functioning simply as metaphors for insurrectionist natives. I have already suggested that such a reading of Mugger, the crocodile, is problematic, and to read Nag the cobra as only a 'bad' native that deserves death while the 'good native' Rikki Tikki Tavi survives, is likewise so. The representation of Shere Khan, however, seems to suggest a moral valuation of species that is not readily, or only, tied to European racism but European attitudes towards the animal itself. Hathi's tale recounts how the First Tiger destroys the jungle paradise by killing "Fear" (man) and so brings fear to all animals. Shere Khan is also an opportunistic killer of humans; he steals the infant Mowgli from his sleeping parents and later vows to avenge the wolves for rescuing the baby, by killing him. Mowgli, his antagonist and eventual killer, has been interpreted as a representative of colonial Law bent on containing the wilderness and savage natives, or as a 'good native' *shikarie* doing the British government's bidding. Randall's reading is typical of that of many critics:

> Mowgli, by overcoming Shere Khan, stands in the place of the British imperial adventurer and restages the British consolidation of empire in India. This jungle-child (youthful and energetic, yet duly schooled in the codes of the Law) is the alien liberator whose final victory signals the establishment of just rule in the place of an ostensibly corrupt and decrepit Mogul dynasty. As the rebel Sepoys of 1857 looked to Bahadur Shah for leadership, so, during a troubled period of interregnum within the

> Seeonee pack, restless young wolves rally around Shere Khan and turn against Mowgli. Just as the British, in 1858, put an end to the symbolic kingship of Bahadur Shah, so Mowgli puts an end to the lame tiger's pretensions to power. (78)

However, Mowgli does not seek a colonial governmental bounty for killing Shere Khan, unlike Buldeo the hunter in "Tiger! Tiger!" who tells Mowgli to relinquish the tiger's body to him:

> 'It is the Lame Tiger, too, and there is a hundred rupees on his head. Well, well, … perhaps I will give thee one of the rupees of the reward when I have taken the skin to Khanhiwara.' …
>
> 'Hum!' said Mowgli, half to himself as he ripped back the skin of a fore-paw. 'So thou wilt take the hide to Khanhiwara for the reward, and perhaps give me one rupee? Now it is in my mind that I need the skin for my own use.
>
> … There is an old war between this lame tiger and myself – a very old war, and – I have won.'

Mowgli is not interested in the financial reward offered by Raj officials; his motivation is to settle a personal score with the tiger who stole him from his parents and has since relentlessly hunted him. Nonetheless the scene draws attention to hunting, the killing of tigers and colonial bounties on tigers. As Kyle Jackson writes, "[s]ustained cash incentives [for Indians] made possible and authorized a new relationship with tigers. Dealing culturally illicit death made one rich" (84); "suddenly a hunter could garner enough money with a single bullet to pay his family's house tax for more than twelve years" (78-79).

As Rangarajan and others detail, the study of hunting practices offers an interesting example of the multifaceted relationship between British colonialism, wildlife and, ultimately, conservation efforts in colonial South Asia. Hunting by colonisers in India was at once recreational, a means to assert authority and also involved the utilisation of native hunters for procuring food or trophy heads (Mandala 574). The appointment of large numbers of indigenous people as *shikaries*, often provided with very destructive modern weapons by the British, led to unsustainable hunting practices and a decline in animal populations which also threatened the livelihood of indigenous forest dwellers and villagers. Buldeo, the village hunter in "Tiger! Tiger!", is clearly a representative of local men employed by the British. He is equipped with a gun, and uses it unwisely, accidentally shooting a village cow, and in

"Letting in the Jungle" he brandishes this with foolish pride. Deer hunting, a prevalent practice in South Asia, saw the involvement of *shikaries*, and an adaptation of indigenous hunting traditions. Pig-sticking, a popular elite game during British colonial rule, had its roots in native practices of hunting wild pigs in the early 1800s (Baker 132). As British rule in India evolved, the transformation of hunting practices reflected evolving notions of sport and colonial power dynamics, culminating in the conquest and appropriation of Indian princely hunting traditions, and the hybridisation of Indo-British hunting traditions (Shresth 108). Later, the concept of "fair play" and "sportsmanship" became central in defining British hunting traditions, ostensibly distinguishing them from indigenous practices, aligning with Victorian expectations of empire builders as men of power and prestige (Shresth 66). However, it is hard to see how hundreds of men, many armed with modern weapons, tracking a tiger was in any way fair or sportsmanlike. Strategies for hunting tigers included throwing a mixture of mustard oil and latex around a tiger's drinking hole. When the tiger tried to remove the sticky substance with its tongue or paws it would cover its face with leaves and dirt, blinding it and making it easier to hunt. Common routes of tigers were set with traps into which a tiger could fall and be impaled on sharpened bamboo stakes. Horses and cavalry (often on elephants) would chase tigers in diminishing circles until the exhausted quarry was confined and easily killed. Prey carcasses were baited with poison and, perhaps the most destructive and feared by the animals in the stories, grass was set on fire 10 or 20 miles around a jungle area and beaters would drive the terrified tiger into netting (Perry 260; Mandala 247).

This was complicated by aspects of Romantic thought, and the colonial attitude towards Indian jungles (and its animals) as simultaneously beautiful and dangerous, a place to connect with nature and one to assert control over. As indigenous wildlife populations began to decline rapidly towards the end of the nineteenth century, some colonial officials, perhaps most famously Jim Corbett, played a role in conserving Indian forests and wildlife. Ironically, Corbett's conservation views evolved from his hunting experiences – he was an experienced killer of large cats, later made famous for his accounts of his exploits in books like *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* (1948) and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1952). According to Prasant Das,

> The colonial takeover of the forest provided the background for Corbett's dramatic exploits as a hunter. Indian rulers like the Mughals had indulged in tiger hunts in order to demonstrate their fitness to rule. But unlike hawking, which was popular with

> the Mughals, or sports like bear-hunting and pig-sticking (the latter a particularly dangerous one), it was tiger-hunting which was appropriated by the British and invested with important symbolic meaning. In imperial representation, Indian hunting came to be seen as wasteful and cruel while the British killing of animals, including the destruction of man-eating tigers, was supposedly regulated and defensive. Colonial hunting thus acquired conservation overtones despite the fact that large-scale tiger-hunting was quite the norm for British officials. (20)

Prasanta Das asserts that despite his conservationist leanings, Corbett was "a fully paid-up imperialist" (20), a claim that is shared by others.[46] William K. Storey argues, drawing on William Beinart, "Europeans first slaughtered game animals to the point of excess, then became more sensitive to the ecological problems involved in doing this, and eventually became ardent, but belated conservationists, the 'penitent butchers'" ("Cats and Imperialism" 136). A more complex assessment of Corbett is offered by Vijaya Ramadas Mandala who argues, in *Shooting a Tiger: Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India*, that "[d]espite being a prolific and well-known hunter figure, Jim Corbett has surprisingly received little attention in terms of a critical appraisal of his role as a conservationist" (58). Mandala seeks to situate Corbett "along a spectrum – of hunter and conservationist, killer and protector, ruler and saviour – that offers a far more nuanced analysis of [his] colonial caree[r] in India" (83). Corbett was Kipling's contemporary and I argue that his contradictory stance is also evident in the *Jungle Books* which in which nostalgia for prelapsarian nature and love of the jungle wilderness cuts against speciesism (and racism) that seems decidedly imperial. As environmental historians have pointed out, there is no small irony in the fact that hunting (and other incursions on wildlife) led to a decline in sought-after game animal populations and by the late nineteenth century this resulted in a growing emphasis on wildlife conservation. Corbett's hunting and conservation exploits are representative of the complex relationship between humans and wildlife, especially tigers, that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. I suggest these conflicting attitudes towards the Indian jungle and its inhabitants are a key feature of Kipling's *Jungle Books.*

[46] See, for example: Rani, Parul and Nagendra Kumar, "Contesting the man-eater animal(ity): changing paradigms of the colonial-colonised relationship." *Neohelicon*, vol. 48, 2021, pp. 751–768; Mandala, V. R. "The Raj and the paradoxes of wildlife conservation: British attitudes and expediencies." *The Historical Journal*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2015, pp. 75–110. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X14000259; Rajamannar, S. *Reading the animal in the literature of the British raj*. Palgrave McMillan, 2012.

Mowgli's feelings of pride after killing Shere Khan are evident, and the text validates his ostensible right to kill the tiger who has not only tormented him but stolen cattle and killed humans. Mowgli kills the tiger as a *human*, using human cunning to marshal and drive the wolves and who trap Shere Khan and the buffalo that stampede over him, just as Mowgli has earlier used a human 'tool' – fire – to frighten him away. The narrator in "Mowgli's Brothers" tells us that "no creature in the Jungle will call fire by its name. Every beast lives in deadly fear of it" (13). In "Mowgli's Song," the poem that prefaces "Tiger! Tiger!", he speaks of feeling shame after the killing because he wears "no cloth" and he speaks of returning to the Council Rock "with the knife of / the hunter, the man":

> *Alala!* I have no cloth to wrap me. The kites will see that I am
> naked. I am ashamed to meet all these people.
> Lend me thy coat, Shere Khan. Lend me thy gay striped coat that
> I may go to the Council Rock.
> By the Bull that bought me, I have made a promise – a little
> promise. Only thy coat is lacking before I keep my word.
> With the knife – *with the knife that men use* – with the knife of
> the hunter, the man, I will stoop down for my gift. (65; my emphasis)

Perhaps the allusion here is to the Garden of Eden where, after the fall, Adam and Eve realise they are naked and use fig leaves to cover themselves (Genesis 3:7). If so, is Mowgli's fall from animal to human, evidenced by his killing of the tiger (no other animal in the jungle – unless perhaps a snake – could do this)? The emphasis on his newly acquired knife (which is what he uses to skin Shere Khan) sits oddly here, as does his desire to cover his nakedness. The scene of the killing is also ambiguous, as Mowgli shows sympathy for the slain tiger while, again, the (human) knife is mentioned: "'Brothers, that was a dog's death,' said Mowgli, feeling for the knife he always carried in a sheath round his neck now that he lived with men" (Tiger! Tiger! 59).

In perhaps the only critical discussion of the significance of Mowgli's desire to cover himself with Shere Khan's coat, Briony Wickes writes, "wearing an animal skin is what marks Mowgli as a human rather than a wolf … . This act of skinning is the fulfilment of his threat to 'come to the Council Rock, *as a man should come* … with Shere Khan's hide on my head' ("Mowgli's Brothers" 19) and so it ultimately marks Mowgli as human." She continues,

asserting that Mowgli's "internal conflict" – man or wolf, "of the Jungle and *not* of the Jungle"– "can never thus be resolved in favour of his animalistic identity because the fact of his human skin prevents it." Thus, "Mowgli can never fully embody his performance of animality as his human skin will always lie underneath." Wickes continues:

> Such an emphasis on the irrevocable identity marked by one's skin may have troubling implications if one reads the *Jungle Books* as primarily allegorical. While Rudyard Kipling's insistence on the skin as demarcating the boundary between species such as humans and wolves might lead some to assume a similar insistence on such a boundary between human races, his very assertion of species difference implies otherwise. The failure of the skin to successfully demarcate race is foregrounded by the skin's contrastingly robust role in reinforcing the impossibility of mistaking humans and animals. By emphasizing the differences between man and animal, Kipling refutes the possibility of using animals as ciphers for humans: however anthropomorphized, animals are not humans and continually resist their interpretation as literary representations of humans through their non-human embodiment.

The upshot of this analysis is that despite Kipling's sympathetic portrayal of many of the animals in the *Jungle Books*, and his attribution to them of language, it is their difference from humans that is reasserted in scenes like the one just discussed in which the apex predator in the jungle is not a tiger but a human who clothes himself with the trophy of his kill.

Importantly, Mowgli's use of a human tool – a knife – is returned to repeatedly in the stories that follow "Tiger! Tiger!". This human weapon, and his use of fire, increasingly distinguishes him from the other animals in the Jungle despite him telling Mother Wolf that "he never wished to see, or hear, or smell Man again" ("Letting in the Jungle" 63). In "Letting in the Jungle," Mowgli thrusts his knife into the ground near Akela's paw, and elsewhere his fingers pla[y] round the halt of the skinning knife," and he "stab[s] furiously with his skinning-knife into the earth" (90). In "Red Dog" Mowgli is equipped with "a new and longer knife" (212) and promises, "this my knife shall be as a tooth to the Pack – and I do not think it is so blunt" (218). He uses his knife to cut off the tail of the dhole (red dog, C*uon alpinus*) pack leader, and he taunts the dholes from his perch in a tree where "the knife … shone in the low sunlight" (236). He dispatches of many dholes with the same knife, later in

the evening, and these killings are carefully detailed: "'Good hunting!' said Mowgli, as he rose boldly at the brute's side, and sent the long knife home behind the shoulder, pushing hard to avoid his dying snap" (241). As the fight with the dholes continues, "Mowgli's knife came and went without ceasing" (243) and when a dhole "leaped to his leader's aid … Mowgli's knife was in his throat, and Gray Brother took what was left" (245). Akela watches all this, and as he lies dying after the battle with the dholes is won, he tells Mowgli:

> 'Thou art *a man*, Little Brother, wolfling of my watching. Thou art *a man*, or else the Pack had fled before the dhole. My life I owe to thee, and to-day thou hast saved the Pack even as once I saved thee. Hast thou forgotten? All debts are paid now. Go to thine own people. I tell thee again, eye of my eye, this hunting is ended. Go to thine own people.' (247)

In these stories, Mowgli is marked as a "man," distinguished from the animals, by his use of a knife to skin and kill animals. Both "Tiger! Tiger!" and "Red Dog," then, appear to advocate and celebrate man's killing of dangerous carnivores and vermin.

However, a question remains – if the *Jungle Books* promote colonial fear of and negativity towards tigers as "dangerous beasts," and justifies their killing, why are other "dangerous beasts" portrayed benignly? Bagheera the panther (black leopard), Baloo the bear and, most significantly, wolves, all of which were deemed a threat to human life in colonial India, are portrayed as loving, tender and wise. Interestingly, wolves are widely documented as killers of humans in India (even today, particularly babies and children), as discussed by Rangarajan (see above) but also others, like Paula Wild: "in 1878 alone," she writes, "624 people were killed by wolves in India's Uttar Pradesh region, most being children under the age of 16" (24). Both sources agree that more people were killed by wolves than by tigers in the nineteenth century, although tigers remained the prime target for colonial hunters.

The animals most vilified in the *Jungle Books* (apart from the lone individual, Shere Khan), are not wolves, or snakes or crocodiles but, surprisingly, dholes, an Asian canines also known as Indian wild dog, whistling dog, golden dog and red dog. In the story "Red Dog," Mowgli, with the help of Kaa and the wolves (and an "outlier" wolf named Won-tolla, whose mate and cubs have been killed by dholes), take on and triumph against a large roving pack of dholes. When Mowgli tells Kaa about the approach of the dhole pack, Kaa goes into a trance and searches his long memory for a strategy to overcome the invaders, recalling "all that he had seen and known since the day he came from the egg" (223). He then takes Mowgli to the

Bee Rocks, where huge hives hang in the rocks above a deep river gorge. This is the home of the swarming "Little People" indiscriminate killers of whom all the jungle dwellers are afraid, naming their habitat "the Place of death" (225). With Kaa's help, Mowgli hatches a plot to lead the dhole pack to the gorge by using himself as bait. Of this, Kaa says, "That is Man's talk and Man's cunning" (230). When he gets to the gorge, with the dholes hot on his heels, Mowgli rouses the bees to great anger (avoiding their stings because he has smeared himself with garlic) and jumps into the water where he is rescued by Kaa. The dholes follow Mowgli and many are either stung to death by the bees or drown when they leap into the water. Those who survive wash up further down the river where they are dispatched by the waiting wolves – and by Mowgli with his knife. Many wolves die in the battle, too, including Won-tolla and Akela who, in his dying words, tells Mowgli to "Go back to thy people. Go to Man." Mowgli's *human* dominance is stressed throughout, not least in the multiple mentions of his knife, and the narrator asserts "all the Jungle was afraid of him" (211). The cruelty and brutality of the killing of the red dogs by Mowgli and the wolves is detailed and bloody, remarkable in a story written for children. Timothy C. Bakers writes, "[t]he story depicts what can only be described as a genocide, where many of the heroic wolves, and all of the villainous red dogs, or dholes, are slaughtered. Whether or not this was intended as a metaphor for colonial rule, the cruelty is astonishing" (67). Peter Havholm also uses the world "genocide" in his discussion of "Red Dog":

> [C]ritics have a tendency to treat all the Mowgli stories as if they were fables like 'How Fear Came' and 'The King's Ankus.' But if 'Red Dog,' for instance, were fable rather than adventure, someone would surely have demanded by now that children not be allowed to read it. For the story opposes Mowgli and the Pack against the Hun-like Red Dog of Dekkan, who are anathematized not just because they kill needlessly but also because they produce larger litters than the wolves. Mowgli 'despised and hated them because they did not smell like the Free People, because they did not live in caves, and, above all, because they had hair between their toes while he and his friends were clean-footed.' Following the fabular line, Mowgli's leading the dholes through the bee-cliffs is the atrocity made 'necessary' by the threat to the civilized tribe. The story would then end with genocide: 'But of all the Pack of two hundred fighting dholes, whose boast was that all Jungles were their Jungle, and that no living thing could stand before them, not one returned to the Dekkan to carry that word.' (97)

The story is thus read as a thinly veiled allegory of racially-motivated slaughter; the inferiority of the dholes is signalled by not only their barbaric behaviour, the narrator informs readers that "[t]he dholes are a very silent people as a rule, and they have no manners even in their own Jungle" (233) but by their physical difference from Mowgli and the wolves – they have "hair between their toes" as Mowgli emphasises throughout. Allen MacDuffie, discussing the story, argues that "the anthropomorphism of the *Jungle Books* creates a seemingly fantastic world of bio-cultural openness, while quietly inscribing fixed biological distinctions between groups" (28) and so Mowgli represents "Man, who recapitulates in his onto-genetic *bildung* of increasing self- mastery the phylogenetic narrative of human ascendancy over nature and the animal" (29). Once again, however this insight turns away from inter-species relationships to a discussion of racial difference. This, claims MacDuffie, has "significant implications for the understanding of human cultural and racial difference in nineteenth-century anthropological discourse" (24).

Without doubt, the *Jungle Books* favour some wild animals over others, even those belonging to the same scientific order and/or family. The panther is superior to the tiger although both are *Carnivora felidae*, the wolves are superior to the dholes, yet both are *Carnivora canidae*, the python to the cobra, yet they are both *Squamata serpentes*. The preference for wolves over the despised dholes is hard to explain given that wolves posed a real threat to human life in colonial India (and still do), whereas dholes did not. Both tigers and panthers are dangerous carnivores posing a threat to human (and both were hunted prolifically in colonial India). That said, cobras posed a far greater threat to humans than pythons. Presciently (although Kipling was not to know this) many of the animals portrayed negatively in the stories are endangered or now near extinction due to hunting and habitat destruction. This includes tigers, although they are experiencing a comeback, thanks to concerted conservation strategies and extensive tiger reserves which contain about 70% of the species population in India (3,682 in 2023, a twofold increase since 2010; "Wildlife Protection Society of India"). The (Bengal) tiger has fared less well with as few as 500 specimens alive in the wild. As noted above, adjutants are almost extinct and mugger crocodiles are endangered. Dholes, once prolific in India, are now listed as "endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, with only between 949 to 2,215 adults in the wild. They're extinct in 75 percent of their historic range, and remaining populations are isolated into pockets of protected or undeveloped land " ("Dhole"). Amit R. Baishya asserts that "because it does not fit into the paradigm of a 'national icon' like the tiger or rhino, it is rarely a target for

conservation efforts. Relatively small and secretive, it does not conjure epic narratives of human-animal interactions either" (407). This is an ironic claim if we consider the way in which decidedly *human* Mowgli masterminded the "epic" slaughter of the dhole pack in "Red Dog." What Baishya means, however, is that dholes do not conjure up the same excitement and awe as tales of tiger hunting or crocodile destruction. Phuntsho Thinley et.al claim that "dholes in India were considered vermin and hunted to near extinction" (140) and were the target of "mass persecutions" in the Indian subcontinent (141). Kipling's story appears to celebrate and precisely this. I have mentioned the contemporary endangered status of mugger crocodiles above.

Imperial environmental anxiety

What seems clear is that the valuation of some animals over others is arbitrary in the *Jungle Books*. Given this, it seems hard to make the case that tigers, certain snakes, crocodiles and dholes are representative of 'native' Indians, persecuted and killed by the British, when other equally dangerous indigenous animals are raised in stature (panthers, bears, wolves, etc.). As my analyses of selected stories reveal, it is also hard to make the case that Kipling was blithely unaware or totally supportive of colonial deforestation, bridge- and railway building and water diversion practices, or that he endorsed human cruelty towards animals (again, most commonly read as representing 'lesser humans' – the colonised) such as that portrayed in "Her Majesty's Servants," "The White Seal," or "Toomai of the Elephants." In fact, he seems to draw attention to this cruelty via his narrator's sympathetic perspectives and by employing animal voices.[47] Further, the stories are full of lyrical descriptions and factual details that reveal a deep love for an admiration of "wild" India and its forests. Greg Garrard argues that colonial literature often reflects anxieties about environmental degradation, even as it participates in imperial ideologies (*Ecocriticism* 87). This is also argued at length by James Beattie in *Empire and Environmental Anxiety.*, building on earlier arguments made by Richard Grove. Beattie begins his first chapter with a quotation from C.R. Markham (1866):

> Human action has produced great changes in the physical condition of the earth's surface, vast tracts of swampy wilderness have been converted into fresh pastures or

[47] "Men shoot us in the water and club us on the land," laments Kotick (the titular seal) in "The White Seal" (86). The story critiques anthropogenic extinction, showing seals as victims of human greed, from the animal's perspective.

> cultivated fields, and barren uplands have been covered in stately trees. On the other hand, many regions, in all parts of the world, which were once clothes with verdure are now treeless and arid wasted. All these changes are the work of man. (qtd. in Beattie 4)

Following this, Beattie asserts, "[b]ehind Victorian confidence, even arrogance, in the power of science and technology to bring constant material improvement and to aid in conquering ever more parts of the globe, lurked complex and sometimes contradictory environmental anxieties" (4).[48]

I argue that the curious ambivalences and unresolved tensions that I have discussed in my analyses of stories from the *Jungle Books*, reflects Kipling's "complex and sometimes contradictory environmental anxieties." This is not to deny his imperial leanings or his racism, but to insist that Kipling's stories cannot be straightforwardly read as allegories of colonial domination. I particularly challenge critical interpretations that ignore Kipling's portrayals of the 'animalism' *of* the animals and the *living* power and beauty of the Indian jungle and instead read these as racialised symbols in a one-dimensional narrative of colonial conquest.

[48] I cannot discuss Beattie's comprehensive book here. He discussed anxieties about heath, religion, aesthetics, forests, desertification and climates that are well beyond the scope of this thesis. I note, however, that he argues that responses to these anxieties, like early conservation efforts, represented a further attempt to control and contain.

Chapter 4: Nature as First Teacher: Rabindranath Tagore and the Child in Colonial India's Landscape

Introduction

In this chapter, and the next, I consider Rabindranath Tagore's contributions to children's literature, focusing on his ecological vision as reflected in his works for young readers. I advance three key claims: first, that some of Tagore's works were specifically written for children and he should be recognised as a deliberate and influential children's author, not merely a writer for adults who occasionally addressed younger audiences; second, that his works do not simply describe and evoke nature as settings and symbols but advance an active ecological ethos, one that promotes sustainability and human-nature symbiosis; and third, that Tagore's portrayal of nature offers a decolonial counterpoint to his contemporary Rudyard Kipling's imperialist depictions. By analysing selected texts, I demonstrate how Tagore's children's literature aligns with my broader research on the representation of nature in South Asian writing during the colonial era, while asserting his distinct legacy as both a pioneering children's author and an early environmental advocate.

Situating Tagore

Tagore, a leading voice in the intellectual landscape of colonial India, is widely regarded as a key figure in the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and the father of modern Indian literature. Dubbed the "Myriad-Minded Man" by his biographers and anthologisers, Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, he was a poet, painter, philosopher, social reformer and educator. Importantly for my purposes, he was also a children's writer although this aspect of his writing has been largely overlooked. I seek to address this in what follows. Equally importantly, he was Kipling's close contemporary. The two writers were born and died within four years of each other. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for his poetry in 1913 – the first Asian to receive the accolade – six years after Kipling was awarded the same (in 1907). Astonishingly, the two men never met.

Or perhaps it is not astonishing. Tagore and Kipling, writes Rukmini Bhaya Nair,

> seem to have lived lives that ran coldly parallel, like sets of railway tracks, designed not to touch even by accident. … Kipling and Tagore seem to have studiously ignored each other in the course of their long and concurrent lifetimes, which was also … roughly the lifetime of the empire. … [T]here is little in their official autobiographies to indicate that one knew the other existed. (*Lying on the Postcolonial Couch* 44-45)

This last claim is not entirely correct. While Kipling appears not to have mentioned or publicly acknowledged Tagore, the Indian author made at least one significant reference to Kipling in his essay "East and West," discussed in my next chapter.

The *India Heritage* website says much the same as Nair:

> "[Kipling and Tagore] never met. And in case they had met, they would certainly not have liked each other. […] Kipling and Tagore were poles apart in thoughts and ideals, viewing society and the Empire from opposite ends of the spectrum. Kipling was strongly nationalistic, while Tagore was a humanist and against the idea of nationalism and the British Empire. ("Kipling versus Tagore")

Amit Chaudhuri asserts, "When Kipling published his stories … they were treated as almost unique in having contemporary India as their subject; and this notion persists, quite commonly, in Britain and America. Indeed, no one reading Kipling would suspect that Tagore and [Bankimchandra] Chatterjee might be living in the same world as Kim, Mehboob Khan, Shere Khan and Mowgli" (*Clearing a Space* 256).

In one of few lengthier comparisons of the two writers, Amrit Ray compares Kipling's *Kim* (1901) with Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916), arguing that these novels "share an Orientalist notion that reason resides in the West and spirituality in the East" (102).[49] What differs, however, is that each man valued reason and spirituality differently. Ray continues:

> While these two authors exist almost diametrically opposed to one another in terms of their position on the legitimacy of British rule in India, both anchor their representations of the past on the subcontinent as one rooted in religious belief – both endorse the idea that the ancient legacies of human spirituality lie in the East. … Whereas Kipling frames the 'cultural' heritage of East versus West as a binary of

[49] See also, Kalyan Kumar Chatterjee's "Incognitos and Secret Sharers: Patterns of Identity: Tagore, Kipling and Forster." *Indian Literature*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1989, pp. 111-130.

> mysticism versus reason, Tagore's terms are grouped around the pairing of spirituality and science. (102)

Tagore's spirituality, which he sets against western science if this is used to advance materialist goals, is deeply connected to nature and the natural world. This informs every aspect of his writing. In contrast, references to Eastern, specifically Hindu, spirituality, are almost entirely absent in the *Jungle Books*, which are generally agnostic, although some critics have suggested similarities with the biblical book of Genesis.[50] The few times that Hindu religion or cultural practices are mentioned these are mocked or discredited, as I have suggested in my previous chapter. Moreover science – in the form of commercial-scale forestry – is the world to which Mowgli turns when he leaves the Jungle. I have argued that this is an ambivalent turn, however, full of loss: loss of childhood innocence, loss of a (mythical) past, and loss, more than anything, of a deep and symbiotic relationship with nature. But it is necessary and *manly* – and presumably British and civilised – to turn from nature to embrace western reason, science and technology. Tagore's writing, in contrast, favours nature and a spirituality based on the monistic and universalist aspects of the Upanishads and Vedanta as well as aspects of Sufism, Vaishnavism and the Bhakti tradition, and Bengali mysticism (i.e. the Baul singers of Bengal). The natural world is a place of retreat from urbanisation and colonialism, a realm of wonder, education and spiritual connection. Before moving on to discuss Tagore's writing for children and how this differs from Kipling's, it is necessary to provide some biographical details and offer a context for Tagore's beliefs and his particular emphasis on children's education.

The wealthy, landowning Tagore family played a pivotal role in Bengal's cultural and intellectual renaissance, with Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), emerging as a pioneering industrialist and philanthropist who co-founded India's first multinational firm, Carr, Tagore & Co. He championed social reforms like widow remarriage while bridging Indian and European elite circles. His son, Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), Rabindranath's father, was a spiritual visionary who founded the reformist Brahmo Samaj ("Society of Brahma"), rejecting idolatry and advocating rational spirituality. He established an ashram at Shantiniketan, which later became the cornerstone of Rabindranath's educational experiments, considered below. Debendranath's household, Jorasanko, was austere but intellectually vibrant and became a centre visited by artists, musicians and writers

[50] See, for example, Nagai, *Imperial Beast Fables*, 104

in which Sanskrit scholarship merged with western ideas. Bashabi Fraser states that "Jorasanko was a veritable hive of creativity and experiment, where tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western modes of thought, culture and art forms, were cultivated and transfused at the time of the Bengal Renaissance, in which the Tagore family played a leading role" (8). Indeed, he suggests that the Tagore family collectively embodied the tension between tradition and modernity that characterised the Bengali Renaissance. This eclectic, stimulating upbringing deeply influenced Rabindranath's creative and philosophical outlook.

According to his memoirs, the relationship of Rabindranath Tagore with his father, Debendranath, was unusual for its time. Few children in colonial India, regardless of gender, had the privilege of traveling alone with their fathers as Tagore did on a four-month trip to the Himalayas. Debendranath was strict and instilled discipline in his children in many ways. Tagore recalls lengthy lessons in drawing, anatomy, geography and history, literature, mathematics, Sanskrit, and English; being made to take ice baths and drink (much hated) milk; and having to undertake extensive physical activity including mountain treks, swimming the Ganges, doing judo, gymnastics and wrestling. In *My Reminiscences* (1917),[51] Tagore asserts that, at the age of eleven, his father gave him the task of managing his cashbox: "He had no reason to imagine that I was the fittest custodian for the considerable sums he kept in it. … So, I can only suppose he wanted to train me to the responsibility" (68). While this responsibility fostered a sense of agency in young Rabi, as he was called, any lapse in his duties was met with stern consequences (68). Despite his demanding upbringing, Tagore acted quite differently in his roles as a husband and father. His own son, Rathindranath Tagore confirms Tagore's tender and intimate bond with his mother, Mrinalini Devi (Tagore's wife); he often expressed his deepest emotions through letters written to her during his travels. These letters not only reveal Tagore's love for his wife but also his concern for the welfare and happiness of their children. He was a hands-on father, breaking away from the detached and authoritarian image of his own father. After Mrinalini's death in

[51] *My Reminiscences* gives a personal account of Tagore's early life. It is unlike a traditional autobiography, being composed of sketches and reflections that give insight into the writer's psychology, emotions and developing creativity. it was translated into English by Tagore's nephew, Surendranath Tagore. The Translator's Preface to *My Reminiscences* states: "These Reminiscences were written and published by the Author in his fiftieth year, shortly before he started on a trip to Europe and America for his failing health in 1912. It was in the course of this trip that he wrote for the first time in the English language for publication. In these memory pictures, so lightly, even casually presented by the author there is, nevertheless, revealed a connected history of his inner life together with that of the varying literary forms in which his growing self found successive expression, up to the point at which both his soul and poetry attained maturity" (v).

1902, he took on the full responsibility of raising their five children and supporting their spouses, balancing traditional gender roles with a nurturing and engaged parenting style that defied the societal norms of his time (S.M. Bannerjee par 22**).**

Education and the growth of the educator

Rabindranath Tagore's educational journey evolved in a zigzag trajectory. His independent and somewhat rebellious nature prompted him to resist the rigid structure of the colonial education system. After leaving multiple schools, he ultimately abandoned formal education entirely at the age of fourteen – the same year his mother died. Tagore began educating himself within the culturally rich atmosphere of Jorasanko, in which siblings, cousins and visitors read and recited poetry, played music on a vast array of instruments and performed plays (*My Reminiscences* 117 – 133). The Tagore household, described by Kathleen M. O'Connell as a "living university," provided him with a unique blend of Indian and European influences. Here, he absorbed a wide array of classical and popular literature, alongside the rhythms of folk traditions, nursery rhymes, Baul songs, and Vaishnava poetry and lyrics which became integral to his early intellectual and artistic growth, shaping the foundation of his creativity (O'Connell 44-45). Freed from the shackles of British education, he "felt a real urge to teach himself" (Tagore *My Life in My Words* 69). In his essay "Personality," he writes:

> Fortunately for me I was brought up in a family where literature, music and art had become instinctive. My brothers and cousins lived in the freedom of ideas, and most of them had natural artistic powers. Nourished in these surrounds, I began to think early and to dream and to put my thoughts into expression. In religion and social ideals our family was free from all convention, being ostracized by society owing to our secession from orthodox beliefs and customs. This made us fearless in our freedom of mind, and we tried experiments in all departments of life. This was the education I had in my early days, freedom and joy in the exercise of my mental and artistic faculties. And because this made my mind fully alive to grow in its natural environment of nutrition, therefore the grinding of school system became so extremely intolerable to me. (169)

According to Nita Kumar,

> In Bengal, the impact of English education had produced new classes and consciousnesses, as well as familiarity with European literature and philosophy. After the first flush of the encounter with the West, most educated Indians had also turned to their own past (and continuing) values and practices because of a half-understood conviction that true creativity could arise largely from there. In these experiments that lasted over the second half of the nineteenth century, Bengal was at the forefront in India, and the house of Tagore was at the forefront in Bengal. (134)

The basic reason behind his rejection of the colonial education system has been vividly described by Tagore in his memoir *Boyhood Days,* written when he was nearly eighty:

> From morning till night, the mills of learning went on grinding. To wind up this creaking machinery was the work of Shejadadd J. Hemcndranath. He was a stern taskmaster, but it is useless now to try to hide the fact that the greater part of the cargo with which he sought to load our minds tipped out of the boat and sank to the bottom. My learning at any rate was a profitless cargo. If one seeks to key an instrument to too high a pitch, the strings will snap beneath the strain. (33)

> School grabbed the best part of the day, and only fragments of time in the morning and evening slipped through its clutching fingers. As soon as I entered the classroom, the benches and tables forced themselves rudely on my attention, elbowing and jostling their way into my mind. They were always the same – stiff, cramping, and dead. In the evening I went home, and the oil lamp in our study-room, like a stern signal, summoned me to the preparation of the next day's lessons. There is a kind of grasshopper which takes the colour of the withered leaves among which it lurks unobserved. In like manner my spirit also shrank and faded among those faded, drab-coloured days. (50)

Tagore also throws light on the alienation he felt in the British Normal school he attended, where the language, lessons, and culture were foreign and uninspiring. He recalls singing English verses without understanding their meaning and struggling to associate with Anglo-Indian classmates whose manners he found intolerable (*Boyhood Days* 33). This distaste reflected the broader challenges of the colonial education system, which, as scholars like Gauri Viswanathan and Krishna Kumar note, oscillated between imposing a British model

and addressing India's distinct needs. While the Charter Act of 1813 aimed at promoting science and literature among learned Indians, education remained a contested domain, heavily influenced by Christian missionaries and with lessons always taught in English. This remained so for decades after Tagore's childhood schooling. In his famous "Minute of Education" (1835), Thomas Babington Macaulay asserted that "of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects." The intention that informs the Minute, and which was operative at the time Tagore went to school(s), was to create an educated class of compliant Indians who would do the bidding of the British officials. The result, in the decades that followed, was tension between attempts "by non-Indians to impose a cheap imitation of the British educational system on India and the desire of the people of the country to create a new system to meet their own peculiar needs and problems" (Nurullah and Naik xiv).

It was very clear to Tagore that the colonial education system promoted conformity over creativity. He found more value and greater fulfilment in the culturally vibrant and intellectually diverse environment of his home. In stark contrast to his descriptions of the colonial education system, in *Boyhood Days* Tagore portrays the comfort and satisfaction he would feel while taking study sessions with his third older brother, Hemendranath, who insisted he learned in Bengali, not English. Without doubt, these experiences translated into his own ideas about education and ultimately the development of his own ashram school. In this, states N. Kumar, he aimed to "revive the ancient ideal [of Upanishadic teaching and ashram retreats] and people his country once again with sages and heroes. He would also replace the soulless and mechanical system of education that the British rulers had imported from the Victorian slums by a new and creative one in which both teaching and learning would be pleasurable" (137).

After his childhood experiences at four different colonial educational institutions, the adult Tagore wanted a revolution in the Indian education system, mainly against the educational dogmas of the West. Being an artist and a poet, Tagore conceived his literary works as both educational and polemical tools. Many of his poems (for example those collected in *Gitanjali* and *The Crescent Moon*, discussed below) and parables, like "The Parrot's Training" (first published in Bengali as "Tota Kahini" in 1918; in English translation in 1924), functioned to "awaken consciousness" (Lai 32) while raging against colonial pedagogy and satirising rote learning as entrapment in a "golden cage." In the story, which is only two pages in length, a Raja owns a parrot, described this way: "It was ignorant. It sang all right, but never recited

scriptures. It hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners" (17). The Raja summons pundits to advise him: "They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage" (17). A beautiful golden cage is built and widely admired: "'Culture, captured and caged!' exclaimed some, in a rapture of ecstasy, and burst into tears" (17). It is decided that to be properly educated, the caged parrot needs to be fed pages of textbooks:

> The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper. It sent a thrill through one's body to watch the process. […] The bird thus crawled on, duly and properly, to the safest verge of insanity. In fact, its progress was satisfactory in the extreme. Nevertheless, nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes fluttered its wings in a reprehensible manner. And, though it is hard to believe, it pitifully pecked at its bars with its feeble beak. (18)

The bird is chained and its wings clipped for this impertinence: "With textbook in one hand and the baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!" (18). When the bird dies, the pundits and his sycophantic nephews tell the Raja that its education has "been completed":

> "Does it hop?" the Raja enquired.
>
> "Never!" said the nephews.
>
> "Does it fly?" "No."
>
> "Bring me the bird," said the Raja.
>
> The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoys. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.
>
> Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded Asoka leaves made the April morning wistful. (18)

The thrust of the fable is clear: it is a critique of (western) rote learning in which indigestible and useless information is stuffed into children, stifling their natural instincts and "choking" them, fatally. But the final lines introduce a new, lyrical note to the otherwise deeply satirical

piece. Here "book-leaves" are juxtaposed with natural ones, newly budded on an Asoka tree. Asoka (or Ashoka; *Saraca asoca*) are rain-forest trees native to the Indian subcontinent. It's leaves and bark are used in traditional medicine and is considered sacred throughout the subcontinent with many folkloric, religious and literary associations, appearing in ancient Hindu scriptures as a symbol of love and the absence of grief (Trivedi 253).

Nature is foundational in Tagore's conception of education. "I started a school in Bengal when I was nearing forty," writes Tagore at the start of his essay, "My School." (It was not really a school, but an ashram founded in 1901 in an isolated rural region in southern West Bengal, "Santiniketan," which means "Abode of Peace"). He continues, "[a]nd I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of my school-days. I started with this one simple idea that education should never be dissociated from life." Later in the essay he writes,

> From our very childhood … knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature, and our mind and the world are set in opposition. … Thus the greatest of educations for which we come prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar.

In his introduction to *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator,* Mohammad A. Quayum discusses the significance of nature as "pivotal to Tagore's worldview and imagination," offering two prime reasons for this:

> first, because he believed in the Upanishadic idea of *Advaita* or universal identity of creation, and second, because he loved the village folk, 'the helpless children of providence' (qtd. in Kripalani 148), who lived close to nature but were socially disadvantaged and ruthlessly exploited by the urban *bhadrolok*. According to the Vedantic concept of *Advaita*, God alone is permanent and real, while the phenomenal world is only a transient expression of the Creator. In other words, nature is a manifestation of divinity; therefore, getting close to nature also translates into taking a step closer to God. Wandering in nature would not only nourish the body and soul of the learner, bring them joy of mind and happiness, but also make them wiser by acquainting them with the secret treasures of the world. That's why Tagore believed that nature was the best teacher: selfless, compassionate and giving, unlike those who

> saw teaching as a mere source of livelihood. He also believed that trees, a clear sky and open spaces were more important for education than bench, books and exams.

At Santiniketan Tagore rejected conventional pedagogy instead seeking to foster spiritual-emotional growth through lyrical songs and open-air worship (Aronson "Tagore's Educational ideas" 386, 388). Syed Salamatullah notes that he celebrated "unity in diversity" by blending Vedantic ideals with experiential learning: "To Tagore, the whole universe is a manifestation of one All-Powerful Being which pervades all time and space. This is why he sees the principle of unity in diversity operating in all things – animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic" (133). Salamatulla continues, "Tagore raised a new world of children far from the madding crowd in an atmosphere of freedom and spontaneity. Here children were provided ample opportunities for play of their imagination and sense of wonder and for satisfaction of their curiosity" (135). Learning in the open air, Tagore believed, was far more conducive to learning in a walled-in classroom. It enables simultaneous mental and physical growth, which he deemed essential.

Tagore wrote a great deal about education and gave many speeches on the topic. In "*Shikshar Herfer*" (also spelled as *Shishār Herpher*, which has been translated as "The Vicissitudes of Education," "The Problem of Education" or "Our Education and its Inconsistencies"), he frames education as the liberation of innate creativity, and the development of empathy and a holistic engagement with nature, achieved through mother-tongue instruction. This speech, the first in which he spoke directly about education, was given when he was thirty-one, in 1892, long before he created his ashram school. It outlined five fundamental aspects of education that be believed were optimal to children's learning. Kathleen M. O'Connell lists these as, "joyous learning and the experience of mental and physical freedom" (71); "linguistic medium connected to a child's social and cultural environment" (72); "accessible, well-educated teachers who inspire" (73); "a multilevel curriculum to stimulate critical thought and creative imagination" (74); and, finally, "education for empathy in the holistic world of nature" (76). Together, these formed the basis of the educational experiment conducted at Santiniketan and remained core tenets of his educational philosophy.[52]

[52] In addition to numerous journal articles and book chapters, a there have been several monographs and collections of essays published that address Tagore's educational philosophy. See for example: Mukherjee, H. B., *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (1962; reprint 2020); Bratin Chatopadhyay, *On Education and Rabindranath* (2000); Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator* (2002); Kumkum Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventures of*

There was no fixed curriculum at his school, where children were given a great deal of freedom to explore and learn as they desired. Music was played and listened to morning and evening; history learned through performance, novels and art; science through natural observation and experimentation. The aim was not to be prepared for a career, or a government job, but "to experience freedom, to attain the maximum development of one's personality, or innate attributes, to learn from nature and to exercise what the poet often called 'spirituality'" (N. Kumar 138). This was fostered through meditation and the chanting of Sanskrit verses. According to Ranjan Ghosh, "[i]n his school, he associated science with curiosity and wonder – an orientation of learning that he believed did not necessarily have to be undergirded with reason, rationality, the limits of precision, and the live wire of clarity" ("Caught in the Cross Traffic" 403). Throughout his writing, and deeply invested in his vision of education, "curiosity and wonder" is associated with the natural world. As he puts it, in "The Problem of Education," "[t]he highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" (77).

Tagore as a children's writer

The question of whether or not Tagore is a writer for children can be approached by considering the conflicting attitudes towards childhood and its representation that framed the colonial-era India in which Tagore lived and wrote. This influenced attitudes towards and definitions of children's literature and the legacy of this is still evident in attempts at categorisation today. I have discussed in my first chapter, British children's literature set in India often portrayed Indian children as either delinquent, pitiable victims or exoticised "others," reinforcing colonial hierarchies. These narratives positioned European children as morally superior agents of empire (Comer 52). In contrast, Indian authors in the (later) colonial era developed a hybrid children's literature that blended imported genres and styles with indigenous storytelling traditions and cultural motifs. While the British introduced print-based children's books to Indian children, pre-colonial India already had rich oral narratives that were told to children and adults, like the *Panchatantra*, a collection of ancient Hindu tales that impart *niti* (wise conduct). Indigenous fables, folktales and fairy tales were abundant and passed down through the generations.

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ideas and Innovative Practices in Education (2013); Mohammad A. Quayum (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on his Poetics and Praxis* (2022).

This literary landscape reveals childhood as a contested concept in India under colonialism. Where British texts framed Indian children as problems to be managed, or Indian adults as themselves unruly children needing discipline, Indian writers – especially from the late nineteenth century onwards, and particularly in Bengal – reclaimed childhood's imaginative and cultural potential. As Debasree Ghosh argues, "Indian children's literature was neither purely imitative nor wholly resistant but creatively adapted Western forms to local contexts" (*A Literature of One's Own* iv). Regional variations in attitudes mattered profoundly and Sreemoyee Dasgupta reminds us there was no singular "Indian childhood" (*Nationalism, Genre and Childhood* 19), while Dutta's research on pre-colonial Bengali poetry argues that indigenous conceptions of childhood predated colonial influence ("The Genre, Games and Gender" 170). The tension between these colonial and indigenous conceptions appears to be captured in the differences between Kipling's and Tagore's writing for children and in critical evaluations of both writers' standing as children's authors.

As discussed in my first chapter, colonial constructions of childhood in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were intricately bound up with the colonial project and, as Suzanne Manizza Roszak argues, "used the imagined Indian child to rationalize the structures of imperial governance" (204). The difference between the "ideal" (and idealised) European childhood, heavily influenced by Romanticism, and the lives of Indian children became a justification for empire, just as the ostensible treatment of women in India became a justification for British rule. If, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's claims, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", empire involved "white men saving brown women from brown men" (93); it also seemed to involve white adults saving brown children from their parents and native teachers. Children were taken from their parents, for example, and placed in juvenile reform school under the guise of educating and "improving" them. Ghosh states that "[t]he British were accused of deploying their strategies of control and hegemony through educational policies and agendas. In the decades following the birth of the Indian National Congress (1885), the general feeling was that the decision to promote education in English … was a mistake" ("Caught in the Cross Traffic" 401). This was certainly a position held by Tagore, despite his fine grasp of the English language. After an unsuccessful couple of years studying law in England, Tagore returned to Bengal in 1880 at a time in which an organised Indian national movement was emerging. The partition of Bengal by the British Raj in 1905 led to the rise of the *Swadeshi* ("of our country") movement and this, according to Goswami, "had an enormous impact on his literary output for both children and adults" (108). This does

much to explain the emphatically political aspect of much of Tagore's post-1905 writing for both children (and adults) and why, for some scholars, this writing is not often considered to be children's literature.

What cannot be disputed is Tagore's interest in and scholarly engagement with Indian folklore, fables and nursery rhymes. Tagore published two volumes of Bengali folk rhymes, in 1894 and 1895. His 1907 essay collection "*Lokashahitya*" ("Folklore") and accompanying collection *Chhele Bhulano Chharha* ("Rhymes for Lulling Children" or "Nursery Rhymes") demonstrate his fascination with Indian oral traditions, which he viewed as spontaneous, dreamlike expressions of collective imagination (Sukumar Sen 1-2). Sukumar Sen argues that Tagore celebrated the cultural resonance of nursery rhymes, promoting the idea that their apparent nonsense masked deeper emotional truths about childhood innocence (5-7). This folkloric influence permeated his own poems, like those in *The Crescent Moon*, which some argue are not strictly for children but *about* them. However, I understand this as a children's book that can also be read by adults, following critics such as Suzanne Roszak, Dipankar Roy and Purnima Mehta. In these poems, lyrical simplicity and nature imagery craft a distinctly child-centred worldview, as I discuss in more detail later.

Tagore helped to shape Bengali children's literary culture through editorial work in the pioneering *Sandesh*, an influential children's magazine founded by his associate Upendra Kishore Ray in 1913 (Lal 433-34), to which Tagore also contributed some children's stories. His family played an equally vital role: his sister Swarna Kumari Devi edited *Balak*, Bengal's earliest children's journal, while his sister-in-law Jnanadanandini Devi authored children's books (Lal 435). Tagore's nephew, the artist and writer Abanindranath Tagore, published illustrated mythic retellings for children: *Rajkahini, Buro Angla, Nalak,* and *Khirer Putul*. In addition, Tagore wrote the foreword to the iconic *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907; *Grandmother's Bag [of Tales*]), a collection of Bengali folk tales and fairy tales collected by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. In this he lamented the displacement of indigenous tales by western stories. According to Naina Dey, "the stories contrast with the European fairytales that the British introduced during colonial rule, and for this reason, Tagore considered *Thakurmar Jhuli* as an artifact that resisted the Anglicization of Bengali children under British rule" ("*Roop Taraashi*" 133). Cumulatively, these efforts, in which Tagore was very much involved,

helped to establish a Bengali children's literary culture rooted in traditional lore yet innovative in pedagogy and artistic expression.[53]

Dipankar Roy discusses Tagore's love for children and his frequent portrayal of the innocence of childhood, especially in his earlier writings. Roy draws attention to the first essay in Tagore's collection of essays on Bengali folklore, *Lokashahitya* (1907), in which Tagore writes about children and childhood. In this essay, Tagore writes,

> If one thinks deeply, one must arrive at the realisation that there is nothing as ancient as the child. The adults of the world in different countries and in different ages have undergone many changes according to changes in customs and education systems. But the child-figure has remained the same as it was thousands of years ago. The same ancient infant continues to be born in people's homes time and again, and yet it has remained as young, innocent, guileless and sweet today as it was during the dawn of human history. (qtd. Roy "Of Broken Umbrellas" 232)

The ideas expressed here about children have a distinctly Romantic element and the extent to which Tagore was influenced by Romantic conceptions of children and childhood is one that has been much discussed. Goswami, for example, states that "Tagore's validation of folklore – echoing the romantic nationalism of the British Romantic poets who glorified children and common folk as embodiments of purity and interest – ignited an interest in compiling Bengali folk tales and rhymes" (141). It is D. Roy's contention that not only can Tagore be regarded as a writer for children, but his writing for children has passed through several evolutionary changes in theme and style. Roy observes that Tagore's early works were based on historical narratives, fairy tales, and plays that celebrated seasonal festivals at Santiniketan, alongside stories grounded in contemporary reality. Over time, his writing shifted towards allegory, culminating in his later works such as *Khapchhara*, *Shey*, *Chhara Chhobi* (1937), *Galpo-salpo* and *Chhara* (1941).[54] These embrace fantasy and nonsense, showcasing his inventive engagement with the imaginative world of children (236).

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[53] See Goswami for an extensive account of this Bengali writing for children, 135-168; see also Prabhash Ranjan Dey's *Children's Literature of Bengal*, which surveys children's literature from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth.

[54] The spelling of these titles, and their English translations, varies amongst critics and translators.

The categorisation of Tagore as a writer for children continues to be debated today. Buddhadev Basu in his book *Bangla Shishusahitya* (1992), and several other critics like Manabendra Bandyopadhyay, argue that none of Tagore's works are written solely for children except his early primer *Sahaj Path* which is comprised of four parts. The first two parts function as a Bengali language learning book, while the third and fourth parts feature stories, poems and songs.[55] Lila Majumdar, a renowned children's writer, asserts in "Tagore as a Writer for Children" that some critics feel that Tagore's poetic imagination may have overshadowed a child's perspective (175). She disagrees, however, and outlines three key qualities for excellent children's literature that is also appropriate for adult readers, all of which she deems many of Tagore's texts exhibit: suitable themes, simple presentation, and timeless literary merit (176). While she finds many of Tagore's works are not suitable for children, she identifies about twenty of his works that she thinks are. Sukanta Chaudhuri, in her editor's introduction to *Tagore: Selected Writings for Children* comments, "His collected works already run into thirty-one volumes, with more to come. Out of this, enough matter for at least two volumes consists of writing for young people. This is a much bigger proportion than with any other of the world's great poets, writers or philosophers" (1). In her entry on Tagore in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature*, Peggy Lin Duthie concurs, stating, "Much of his work is regarded as suitable for all ages, particularly the fairy tales and light verse in collections such as *Sonar Tari* (*The Golden Boat*, 1894), *Katha o Kahini* (*Legends and Tales*, 1908), *Shishu Bholanath* (*The Child Bholanath*, 1922; also known as *The Young Shiva*), and *Chhara Chhabi* (*Pictures for Rhymes*, 1937). About children's literature, Tagore himself had this to say:

> In the world of children's literature at the present time, books are written that embrace a process of large-scale dilution of literary qualities and in which children are treated as mere infants. Children are seldom respected in these books as individuals in their own right. There should be a rule somewhere that children will understand the meanings of the books meant for them only partially, and the rest of it should remain incomprehensible to them. (qtd. and translated by Dipankar Roy, "Of Broken Umbrellas" 232).

[55] D. Roy argues that *Sahaj Path* was the first Bengali primer "to introduce young kids to issues of caste and class oppression in contemporary society. In the last lesson of the second part of the book, Tagore discusses oppressive social conventions, unjust property rights under the zamindari system and unfair police actions in a most unambiguous way" (242).

This idea, that children should not be written 'down to' but offered literature that respects their intuition and intelligence, is central to an understanding of Tagore as a children's writer. Children may "only partially" understand what they read or is read to them, but they will hold the words they gain and grow to understand them. In a lecture given in Japan, titled "My School," Tagore said this: "Children's minds are sensitive to the influence of the great world to which they have been born. Their subconscious mind is active, always imbibing some lesson, and with it realising the joy of knowing" (qtd. D. Roy, 234). Roy argues that one of the key philosophies at Tagore's school in Santiniketan was "that opportunities should be given to young learners to make attempts to comprehend texts, even if the works are most likely to remain partially incomprehensible in the end. This possibility was especially true in the case of literary texts" (235). This is very important to remember in any debate about which of his texts were written for children.

As I have suggested, Tagore held very different views from the British on both Indian childhood and Indian children's education. Roszak claims, "Tagore was interested in childhood experiences of play and learning across social strata, a fact that we can see, for instance, in his interest in the nursery rhymes and folktales for young audiences that he remembered being told by a household maid during his own childhood, and which he would become among the first in Bengal to compile and publish" (*They Also Write for Kids* 205). Roszak stresses "Tagore's insistence on taking children seriously as thinkers and artists" and suggests "this is visible not only in the nature of the children he depicts in *The Crescent Moon* [see below] but also in the text's engagement with complex, serious ideas that he trusted child readers to be quite capable of absorbing" (205). Further, she argues that his writings "invalidate the constructions of Indian childhood that typified the colonial education system" (205). Ranjan Ghosh argues similarly: "the manner in which Western educational reforms and principles were introduced through the colonial machinery incurred the suspicion [of Indian intellectuals]," including Tagore ("Caught in the Cross Traffic" 401). In response, he developed his own principles of education, because he believed the way Indian children were being taught – like "hailstones on flowers" (quoted in Seth, *Subject Lessons* 163) – was damaging to the growth of children. He claimed that pedagogy of the British kind took place in "borrowed cages" that "treat the students' minds as captive birds, whose sole value is judged according to the mechanical repetition of lessons, prescribed by an educational dispensation foreign to the soil" (quoted in Seth 165). This, of course, is precisely what he satirises in "The Parrots Training."

Supirya Goswami notes that Tagore is "largely overlooked as a children's author" (105). However, she asserts, he "not only produced an impressive and diverse body of writing for children, but he also played an active role in shaping the field of Bengali children's literature" (105). Sibaji Bandyopadhyay makes an important point when she states that "Bengali *shishusāhitya* or children's literature is not overdetermined by the word *shishu*, 'child'" ("On the Seashore" 257). Themes deemed suitable for adults only by western readers and critics can be found in Bengali children's literature, if under the surface; and literature that westerners find more appropriate for adults are enjoyed by Bengali child readers. At stake here are Indian conceptions of the "child." Nita Kumar argues that on one level Tagore "could not be expected to know the world of the child because as an Indian, he lived in a society that had not 'discovered' the child yet [the reference is to Aries *Centuries of Childhood*]" (137). Kumar notes that Tagore "was married in 1886 when 25 to a girl of 14 [Mrinalini Devi]; his older brother was similarly married at 19 to a girl of 9. Legally, socially and discursively, Indian society did not have a clear delineation of childhood, and no separate identity or space for the child was recognized" (137).[56] However, she continues, Tagore drew on nature to develop his own conception. What notion of childhood he lacked, "Rabindranath filled in from the abundance of his ideas about the wealth of nature, the importance of freedom, the oneness of the self with the whole of creation, and the fundamental innocence of the human spirit before it was bound and gagged by modernity" (138). He had, then, "a strong intuitive sense of the child that he buttressed by the philosophies of Vedanta and Vaishnavism [discussed below], and he came up with an ideology of childhood that was a synthesis of the modernist one with his own readings of Indian philosophies" (138). What this "ideology" looked like and how Tagore worked it into his pedagogical practice can be found scattered through a number of his writings and speeches about childhood education, such as "*Sikshar Herpher*" (1892); "*Dharma Siksha*" (1912; translated as "Religious Education"); "*Shikkha o Sanskriti*" (1935; translated as "Education and Culture"); and his memoirs, *Jiban Smriti* (1917; *My Reminiscences*) and *Chelebala* (1940; *My Boyhood Days*).

Deepa Agarwal, discussing Tagore's "concept of childhood" lists a number of works by Tagore that were specifically written for children and young readers;

[56] Other sources suggest Tagore was 22 and Mrinalini Devi was 10 ("Marriage of Rabindranath Tagore and Mrinalini Devi.") Apparently, she gave birth to their first child when she was thirteen.

> A significant part of the great Nobel Laureate's immense body of work consists of poems, plays, short stories and a novel for young readers, and much of his other writing is accessible to them too. Among them are *Kadi-o-Komal* (*Sharps and Flats*) his first collection for children published in 1886, followed by *Sonar Tari* (*Golden Boat*, 1894) [and] *Kshanika* (*The Flitting One*, 1900). The celebrated *Sisu* (*Child*, 1903) was written for his younger son Sami after his wife's tragic death. Tagore translated some of these poems into English himself and Macmillan in London published a representative collection in 1913 titled *The Crescent Moon*. … Tagore's poems for children reflect a variety of moods, from the pensive and philosophical, springing from his religious beliefs and his oneness with nature, to the playful and inspirational. There are lengthy historical narrative poems that communicate a message as well as nonsense verse. The child's world is idealized and depicted as one of innocence, free of materialism and with spontaneous joy in nature. Violence and prejudice do not exist in this world, nor does hatred. Only love and trust prevails. At the same time Tagore displays faith in children's innate intelligence, their insight that is honest and unclouded by other considerations. (52-53)

Of those works listed by Agarwal, only *The Crescent Moon* is available in English translation (although a few individual poems from the others have been translated) and I discuss poems contained therein below, noting that some critics dispute whether these poems were written for or merely about children, and whether the intended audience is the latent child in adult readers. This is the opinion of Joe Winter, the editor and translator of the English edition of Tagore's *Lipika* (*Brief Pieces*, 1919-1920). Of this collection, Winter writes, "[a] way to read the text is to let the child in one to listen to the voice of the narrator, to take it on trust; and to allow the deeper intent to sink in, or not, to its own pace and leisure. … Nature is always at our side, in story after story lending its hint. … [R]eaders of *Lipika* are of all ages. … This is its magic" (12).

Defending Tagore as children's writer is Roszak's task in, *They Also Write for Kids* (2023). She writes that the "legitimacy or appropriateness as works of children's literature" of some of Tagore's fiction for children has been "sometimes called into question based on … rigid [western] conceptualizations" of "the readerly categories of adult and child" (9). In a chapter that focuses on Tagore and Langston Hughes, titled "Sophisticated Children," she argues that Tagore's poetry collection, *The Crescent Moon*, does important political work and foregrounds "ethnic histories that run counter to western-centric narratives and make vital

expressions of cultural pride" and that the poems offer "subversively alternative ways of seeing culture, ethnicity, and power" (19). Roszak's account does not focus on Tagore's portrayal of nature, except tangentially. However, it is important because it seeks to outline what she believes is the writer's significant achievement, that he "frustrate[s] the purported boundary between the 'primitive,' instinctual child [aligned with nature] and the intellectual, evolved adult [exiled from nature]" (19). This is in strong contrast with Kipling's clear division between child and adult, a division that requires the child / native to leave nature for an anti-natural maturation and "civilisation."

Nature in *The Crescent Moon*

Tagore's writing is heavily imagistic and many of his images are drawn from nature, as is frequently observed. The "Bard of Bengal," as he is often called, was a true lover of nature, as is abundantly evident in the sheer volume of natural imagery he uses. Given the vast number of Tagore's writings, many of which were not for children, I will pay particular attention to his representation of nature in *The Crescent Moon* in this chapter. In the next chapter I will consider poems from *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener*, in addition to other selected poems, short stories and plays that I think are important to the claims I seek to advance. The poems in *The Crescent Moon* reflect on nature and childhood, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the mother and child, often postulated as due to the loss of his own mother when still a child and the death of his wife, Mrinalini Devi, mother of their five children. (She died in 1902, at the age of 30, and Tagore never remarried. Two of their children died in childhood.)

The first (prose) poem in the collection, "The Home," merges nature and mother in the figure Mother-Earth who is described by the speaker thus:

> I stopped for a moment in my lonely way under the starlight and saw spread before me the darkened earth surrounding with her arms countless homes furnished with cradles and beds, mothers' hearts and evening lamps, and young lives glad with a gladness that knows nothing of its value for the world. (lines 5-6) [57]

[57] I have used the Project Gutenberg eBook of Tagore's translation of *The Crescent Moon* as my source for this poem and others quoted in the pages that follow. There is no pagination provided in this version and the line numbering of poems is very difficult to determine correctly as many are prose poems in which line divisions appear arbitrary and dictated by front and page size (later translations often follow more conventional formatting and structure). I have thus not provided line numbers for the poems I quote. However, the poems are generally very short and the quoted lines can easily be identified via the poem titles.

According to a psychoanalytical reading by Anyita Banerjee, "Tagore transcended his psychic pain of 'infinite loneliness' and despair [due to the early deaths of his mother and the mother of his children] through his intense modes of identification with nature's objects, enabling him to relinquish the yearning of the lost object [mother]" (3). This may be so, but it is equally possible to claim that for Tagore, the Earth *is* the mother, not simply a metaphorical substitute for an individual one that has been lost. Banerjee's psychological reading is somewhat undone in her later assertion, with which I concur: "[a] close study of Tagore's *The Crescent Moon* reveals his eco-poetic consciousness embracing the real experiences of living and uniting oneself with the organic wholeness of nature" (5). (Likewise, his poems in *Gitanjali* reveal a vision of spirituality that was inseparable from his conception of the Earth as nourishing and maternal as I discuss further below.)

"The First Jasmines," one of the better-known poems from *The Crescent Moon*, points to the joyful abundance of Mother-Earth to which/whom readers have been alerted at the start of the collection. The poem highlights not only the spiritual and devotional role of nature in human lives, but also emphasises children's unimpeded engagement with nature, childhood innocence, and its capacity to later influence them as adults, through recollection of childhood memories. This is an idea we find abundantly in Wordsworth's poetry, perhaps most emphatically in *The Prelude* and the "Intimations Ode;" however it is not necessary to attribute this notion to the Romantic poet, but rather to the keen observations of a man who loved both children and nature and was deeply influenced by the animistic Vedas.

In the poem, the adult speaker recalls the day when, as a child, he first held a handful of jasmines. Jasmines symbolise purity and beauty in India and are associated with the Hindu god of love, Karma. They are used in many temple rituals, including those for birth, puberty, marriage, anniversaries, betrothals, and death. This religious symbolism on the part of the mature narrator may resonate with an adult reader, but in the poem the jasmines are shorn of all such associations by the recollected child who simply experiences nature's beauty and abundance. Indeed, the poem turns on the difference between the experiences of the older, knowing narrator and those of the child he remembers being.

The poem is short and can be reproduced here in full (with layout as in the original):

> **The First Jasmines**
>
> Ah, these jasmines, these white jasmines!

> I seem to remember the first day when I filled my hands with these jasmines, these white jasmines.
>
> I have loved the sunlight, the sky and the green earth;
> I have heard the liquid murmur of the river through the darkness of midnight;
> Autumn sunsets have come to me at the bend of a road in the lonely waste, like a bride raising her veil to accept her lover.
>
> Yet my memory is still sweet with the first white jasmines that I held in my hand when I was a child.
> Many a glad day has come in my life, and I have laughed with merrymakers on festival nights.
>
> On grey mornings of rain I have crooned many an idle song.
> I have worn round my neck the evening wreath of *bakulas* woven by the hand of love.
> Yet my heart is sweet with the memory of the first fresh jasmines that filled my hands when I was a child.

The jasmines in the poem represent the unadulterated, and unlearned joy that children experience in nature. The word "jasmine" is repeated four times in the first two lines, and twice more in the remainder of the poem, achieving a kind of incantatory tone, further enhanced by the simple diction and repetition.[58] The repetition of "when I was a child," appearing in the middle of the poem and in its final line, stresses the speaker's act of recollection from an adult perspective. The speaker reflects contentedly on his adult life, in which "many a glad day has come," involving festivities, song, sights of nature, religion (signalled by the "wreath of *bakulas*"– Bakula trees (*Mimusops elengi*) are sacred in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) and love. But just as important, and "sweet," is "the memory of the first fresh jasmines / that filled my hands / when I was a child."

The poems in the collection are not only about the child-mother dyad, although many are. The collection ends, for example, with "The Last Bargain" in which the narrator recounts attempts by various people to "hire" him – a King, an old man, a fair maid – with "power," "money," and "a smile," respectively (the influence of folklore is very evident here). The final lines of the poem read:

> The sun glistened on the sand, and the sea waves broke waywardly.
> A child sat playing with shells.
> He raised his head and seemed to know me, and said, 'I hire you with nothing.'

[58] According to Josephine A. McQuail, "Tagore's experiment with language in the poem … cannot be reproduced entirely in translation" (491). See also Radha Chakravarty, "Translating Tagore: Shifting Paradigms." *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals*, edited by Debashish Banerji, Springer, 2015, pp. 25 – 36 and my discussion of translation issues in the next chapter.

From thenceforward that bargain struck in child's play made me a free man.

Here the child is firmly paced *in* nature and being outside the economy of payment and exchange enables him/her to gift liberty to the narrator.

The seaside imagery in this hopeful, gentle poem seems to look back to the second poem in the collection, "On the Seashore," which is more ambivalent in tone and alerts readers to an aspect of nature Tagore highlights in much of his writing, its harsh brutality. Again, its brevity means it can be reproduced in full:

On the seashore

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.

The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.

They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds.

They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl-fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.

The sea surges up with laughter, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach. Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play. On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

As with so many of the poems in the collection, repetition is used to enhance the folkloric, oral sound of the verse and echoes the undulating movement of waves. "On the seashore of endless worlds," is repeated four times, and there are multiple variations of phrases that contain the phrase "on the seashore" in which the simple image of children playing on the seashore is complicated, and mystified, by the words, "endless worlds." Where or what might be a "seashore of endless worlds"? Perhaps this is an image for the seemingly open-ended sense of time and space experienced by children, who have no need for clocks or maps. On this shore, children "meet" (repeated three times) and "play" (repeated three times) with natural objects – "empty shells, "withered leaves," "pebbles" – they "shout" and "dance."

They are immune to and protected from the profit-making activities of "merchants," "pearl-fishers" and treasure seekers. However, there is something sinister in the poem, too. "[T]he restless water is boisterous," it is "deep," "[t]he sea *plays with* the children" [my italics] and the "smile of the sea-beach" gleams "pale." The most disturbing line compares the actions of a crooning mother, "rocking her baby's cradle," with the "meaningless ballads" that the "Death-dealing waves sing." Almost as ominous is the penultimate sentence: "Tempest roams in the pathless sky,/ ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad, and children play."

As in "The Last Bargain," the poem seems to contrast childhood innocence and play with mercantile adult concerns and awareness of death. However, what differs in this poem is that nature is far from a simple source of delight and pleasure. It is personified as if a malevolent agent: "Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballards." The adjectives that are used to describe aspects of nature are often negative: the water is "restless," the sky is "pathless," the water "trackless." Perhaps this gestures to the larger, adult world that the children are oblivious to but will inevitably have to face. Roszac reads this, and other poems in the collection as anti-colonial:

> *The Crescent Moon* contrasts the wisdom of Tagore's child characters with the shortsightedness of adulthood and, in doing so, makes an intricate, resistive response to British imperial ideology. In many of the poems, the collection yokes childhood with a class consciousness that rejects received notions of adult accomplishment through materialism. … [They call] into question the very notions on which British imperialism in India was based, with both its literal and figurative investment in profiting from the natural and human resources of the colonized. (xx)

She thus asserts that "[i]t seems clear that those who believe children's literature in just now 'getting political' have not been reading Tagore." This is perhaps a stretch because although Tagore was deeply anti-colonisation, and in other works links imperialism with greedy, destructive modernity, there is nothing in these poems that directly suggest that the negative mercantilism he critiques is caused by "British imperial ideology."

As in so many of his poems, for adults and children, water imagery is abundant in *The Crescent Moon*. In "The Further Bank," for example, the child speaker longs to become "the boatman of the ferry boat" that carries people to and from across the river, that separates their village home from the town where the father works. They long not for commerce (in town)

but for communion with nature, desiring to be part of the daily rhythm where "cowherds make their lowing cattle swim across to the riverside pasture" and where they might observe hidden pools where "snipes with their dancing tails stamp their tiny footprints upon the clean soft mud." They address their mother, "I shall never go away from you into the town to work like father." They don't aspire to reach the "further bank." Instead, they wish to be on the water, in a kind of liminal space: "I shall cross and cross back from bank to bank." Perhaps this suggests the child's unwillingness to transition fully to adulthood, or to be severed from their nurturing mother, to whom they promise they will always return:

> When the sun climbs the mid sky and morning wears on to noon,
> I shall come running to you, saying, 'Mother, I am hungry.'
> When the day is done and the shadows cower under the trees,
> I shall come back in the dust.

This desire not to grow up, and so to remain with the mother, is one found in many of the poems. "The Land of Exile," for example, concludes:

> Mother, I have left all my books on the shelf – do not ask me to do my lessons now.
> When I grow up and am big like my father, I shall learn all that must be learnt.
> But just for to-day, tell me, mother, where the desert of Tepântar in the fairy tale is?

In "The Rainy Day," the malevolence of the world outside the child's home is again highlighted, and captured in descriptions of stormy weather:

> Sullen clouds are gathering fast over the black fringe of the forest.
> …
> The palm trees in a row by the lake are smiting their heads against the dismal sky; the crows with their draggled wings are silent on the tamarind branches, and the eastern bank of the river is haunted by a deepening gloom.
> …
> The sky seems to ride fast upon the madly-rushing rain; the water in the river is loud and impatient …
> …
> The road to the market is desolate, the lane to the river is slippery. The wind is roaring and struggling among the bamboo branches like a wild beast tangled in a net.

Between each of these descriptions appears the repeated line, "O child, do not go out!", suggesting that the natural world – or perhaps the adult one – is a place of danger, away from the haven provided by the figure of the mother. This contradictory portrayal of nature can be found throughout Tagore's writings.

The figures of the unnamed children in *The Crescent Moon* act as links between nature and human beings. Their speech is laden with imagery drawn from nature. The child speaker in

"Paper Boats," for example says, "Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down the running stream." They continue:

> I load my little boats with *shiuli* flowers from our garden, and hope that these blooms of the dawn will be carried safely to land in the night.[59]
>
> I launch my paper boats and look up into the sky and see the little clouds setting their white bulging sails.
>
> I know not what playmate of mine in the sky sends them down the air to race with my boats!

And the child speaker in "The Flower School" addresses their mother: "Branches clash together in the forest, and the leaves rustle in the wild wind, the thunder-clouds clap their giant hands and the flower children rush out in dresses of pink and yellow and white.// Do you know, mother, their home is in the sky, where the stars are." In "The Merchant," the child again addresses their mother asking, "do you want pearls big as the raindrops of autumn?" and follows this with a promise, "I shall cross to the pearl island shore. There in the early morning light pearls tremble on the meadow flowers, pearls drop on the grass, and pearls are scattered on the sand in spray by the wild sea-waves." The pearls imagined by the child are droplets of water, not gems with monetary value as in the money-focused, adult world.

The poems explicitly contrast the perspectives of children and adults, alternating child-narrators with adult ones, highlighting the imaginative and playful worldview of the child over the more practical, constrained outlook of adults. Alicia Alves comments on this contrast and adds that, "Tagore emphasizes the child's innate harmony with nature, celebrating the purity and creativity of youthful perception, in contrast with adult concerns about the material world" (42). The same contrast is evident in poems like "Playthings," where the adult narrator, busy with "accounts, adding up figures by the hour," looks with envy at the child who is "happy... sitting in the dust, playing with a broken twig all the morning." The adult confesses to spending strength "over things I never can obtain," while the child creates "glad games" with whatever they find, embodying a sustainable, non-acquisitive relationship with the material world.

[59] *Shuili*, also known as the night-flowering jasmine and the tree of sorrow (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*), is a tree native to South Asia.

Ayanita Banerjee reflects on Tagore's emphasis on this child-nature relationship, noting that *The Crescent Moon* reveals his "eco-poetic consciousness through experiences uniting humanity with nature's organic wholeness" (5). Banerjee argues Tagore celebrates this harmony "like a symphony mingling the voices of a stormy day with the tumult of delight," where nature serves as "an antidote to his melancholic mood" (5). The child's world is one where this symphony is perceptible, like in the "Baby's World," the child's reality includes "stars that talk to him, and a sky that stoops down to his face to amuse him with its silly clouds and rainbows" (5). The child's mind is a landscape where "Reason makes kites of her laws and flies them, and Truth sets Fact free from its fetters" demonstrating the organic, playful unity Banerjee describes. For many of the child-narrators, nature is not separate but a direct extension of self and family, as seen in "Clouds and Waves," where the child invents a game in which they are a cloud and the mother the moon; they cover her "with both my hands," transforming their house-top into the "blue sky." This vision is an outstanding example of the "symbiotic co-existence" Banerjee notes, promoting an "ecological vision for a better world" (5) that has its roots in childhood imagination and joy.

As noted, these poems were written *for* children remains a critical moot point. I share the opinion of the scholars I have quoted above, who defend (some of) Tagore's writing, notably *The Crescent Moon*, as children's literature. To be sure, adults may understand the poems in ways that are different to the understandings of children, and children may only intuit their meanings, 'bedding down' learnings that shape their apprehension of the world around them.

Tagore's (Western) critical reception

Not least due to his veneration of nature and his emphasis on the intuitive moral perception (and moral purity) of children, Tagore is often compared with English Romantic poets by critics who ignore his Indian spirituality, reading only the influence of western Romanticism in his writing. Goldberg, for examples, writes "My main argument … is that the religion of Rabindranath Tagore is essentially the religion of the romantic poet"; "it is our intention to show that Tagore's art most closely parallels the romantic ideal proclaimed by English romantic poets" (203). The dismissal of the poet's "religion" and reduction of it to something "English" is a striking insult to Tagore, in my opinion.

In contrast, other (many of them not European), critics resist the simple definition of Tagore as a late, Asian Romantic. In the words of V.A. Shahane, "Whereas many critics have touched upon the problem of 'relevant and irrelevant comparisons' between Tagore on the one hand and many Western poets on the other in an attempt to 'place' him and fit him into Western literary tradition, almost none of these has given adequate consideration to the Eastern characteristic of Tagore's sensibility" (53). Tagore shares the Romantic's "intense faith in the imagination" (55), "divergence from the artificial to the natural ways of feeling and expression" (56) and "belief in the authenticity of intuition rather than reason" (57) but, Shahane argues, this is not something simply borrowed or learned from the Romantics but is inherent in "oriental mystic[ism]" which predates European Romanticism (57). Moreover, he argues "He surely draws sustenance from the tradition of Bengali and Sanskrit poetry. Romanticism in his work, therefore, is related to his Vaishnava faith; his adherence to the doctrine of Bhakti; his intuitional awareness of the Divine, his mysticism, his idealism, and his intense love of liberty" (60). He concludes: "The charge of subservience to foreign culture and literature is therefore untenable" (60); "[Tagore] is not swept off his feet by winds blowing from foreign lands" (61).

Further, as Tagore's biographer Edward Thomson writes, "his rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces; they flow by meadow and pasture. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His fellow-men were a necessity to him" (25). In other words, although Tagore valued solitary immersion in nature, he did not simply seek to "wander lonely as a cloud." His commitment to others refused this. In the words of D. Banerji, his socio-political thinking, evident in many of his writings, embodies a "practical hermeneutics of an affective inter-subjectivity" (8). This is perhaps most obviously seen in his educational project, but also in his many attempts to improve the life and conditions in rural Indian villages. This involved a repudiation of city life, which may be considered Romantic, but it did not involve a repudiation of science or modernity as such, only the greed and materialism that science and modernity enabled. It is not possible to consider this in this thesis as it will take me too far away from my primary focus. But it is important to note that despite his veneration of nature and childhood, Tagore does not seek a retreat to these but rather an integration of them into adult, communal values.[60]

[60] See Amrartya Mukhopadhyay, *Tagore's Solutions for Colonial Degeneration* (2024); Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Rabindranath Tagore's Ideational Universe* (2023).

Moreover, the culture and landscapes evoked in Tagore's poetry are certainly not derivative of those in British Romantic writing. In her discussion of *The Crescent Moon*, Roszac notes that the poems are replete with Bengali cultural and religious motifs and untranslated references to Indian nature like the *champa* flower or *banyan* tree. Roszak argues that the poems generate an image "of a culturally independent India with its own languages as well as its own ecosystems." She continues,

> Even while writing – or at least translating – for an audience of potentially foreign children, Tagore makes no effort to define these words [Bangala ones]. There is no glossary, there are no footnotes, and there is no descriptive language that explains what a *champa* flower or a *banyan* tree looks like. In withholding this information, Tagore literally requires readers to meet each poem on its own terms, unsettling the assumption that white, English-speaking people who are unfamiliar with this vocabulary should be the default primary audience for literary art. Insofar as he was writing for an Anglo-American audience in this translation, Tagore challenges and trusts his young readers to take an interest in a reality that is explicitly marked as lying outside their own world, even if some elements of that world prove difficult to parse. (207-208)

Rather than claiming Tagore as a late European-Romantic imitator, writing back to western poetic traditions from the East that has only just discovered them, it is more fruitful to regard him as a man whose found that his eastern spirituality, intimately bound up with the natural world, resonated with that of the European poets who turned to nature for respite from urban, adult preoccupations. It is perhaps fair to say, as Josephine A. McQuail concedes, that "Rabindranath Tagore was influenced by the British Romantic poets as well as by the sights, sounds and tradition of his own Bengali culture" (491).

On his third visit to England in 1912, at the age of 51, Tagore met with many influential literary figures including Ezra Pound, Thomas Sturge Moore and W.B. Yeats. His meeting with the latter was especially important. Tagore had shown his translated poems (the collection that would later be published as *Gitanjali*) to the painter William Rothenstein who shared them with Yeats. Yeats had nothing but praise for the work. He offered to edit the poems and write an introduction to the collection which was published later that same year. Yeats's introduction was hyperbolic (and orientalist) as this excerpt reveals:

> A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream. … Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity. … An innocence, a simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and the leaves seem as near to him as they are near to children, and the changes of the season's great events as before our thoughts had arisen between them and us. (No pagination in the Project Gutenberg edition of *Gitanjali*, from which I quote.)

Tagore received the Nobel Prize, based on *Gitanjali*, the following year. He was the first non-European, first Asian, and only Indian to receive the prestigious award. It has been argued that it is precisely this non-European otherness that is responsible for the success of *Gitanjali*, especially as it was released during the turbulent pre-WWI years in Europe. As Yeats' introduction to *Gitanjali* makes clear, the poems were celebrated for their freshness, lyrical simplicity and explicit expressions of faith at a time when the West felt the loss of these. As Rita Kothari writes, "Tagore personified to the West not only his poetry and his message, but also India. The binary dichotomous view that India had spirituality while the West had rationalism was reinforced by the image of Tagore" (23). Amrita Ghosh and Elizabeth Brewer Redwine explain that "This fetishized presentation of Tagore exploded within Western literary circles. … Tagore was cast in a saintly, mystic, orientalised vision" ("Introduction" 7). Controversy ensued following his award of the Nobel Prize.

> There was also an unfounded rumor that the whole text was a 'production of Yeats.' Initially, Yeats was ambivalent about the whole controversy, but in 1935, his charmed vision for Tagore had faded, and he denounced Tagore for his 'sentimental rubbish.' … By early 1914, the disappointment in Tagore's Nobel win among the British public had turned 'hostile.' (7)

This controversy, public hostility and the (subsequently soured) friendship between Tagore and Yeats has been the topic of many journal articles and books and I will not discuss these in depth here.[61] Suffice it to say that a great deal of the critical discussion turns on the matter of

[61] For a fulsome account of Yeats' (and others) involvement in the promotion of and assistance in the translation of *Gitanjali,* see William Radice's Introduction to his translation of *Gitanjali* (2011). On the complex

Tagore's translations (with or without the help of others) and on the extent to which he appeared to willingly accept and promote the image of himself as an Indian mystic. As Armadeep Singh asserts, "Tagore was encouraged to trade on the exoticism of a particular colonial culture, and he was presented to readers – by Yeats himself – as a saintly, otherworldly genius" (26).

In his English translations, Tagore appears to have consciously crafted a poetic voice for a western audience. This worked for and against his western reception. The early evaluation of Tagore as an oriental(ised) sage is evident in the award speech given by the Nobel Prize committee in 1913. In addition to insisting, at some length, that Tagore's poetry was influenced by the Christian mission in India, and even conducive with Christian religious belief, the speech asserted:

> In contrast to the cult of work, which is the product of life in the fenced-in cities of the Western world…; in contrast to all that enervating hurry and scurry, he places before us the culture that in the vast, peaceful, and enshrining forests of India attains its perfection, a culture that seeks primarily the quiet peace of the soul in ever-increasing harmony with the life of nature herself. ("Nobel Prize in Literature 1913")

Indian spiritual naturalism, then, versus western, rational urbanism; Nature versus profit-driven attempts to "conquer nature." However, later in the speech, the committee insists that Tagore's spirituality is not of the kind "dispensed and purveyed in the marketplaces as Oriental philosophy, from painful dreams about the transmigration of souls and the impersonal *karma*, from the pantheistic, and in reality abstract, belief that is usually regarded as peculiarly characteristic of the higher civilization in India." There seems to be an attempt to distinguish Tagore's "philosophy" from the "peculiar" beliefs of the Orient and align it with Christianity or a form of "aesthetic theism": "He proclaims the coming of … peace for weary and careworn souls even within the bounds of Christendom (n.p.)."

The western reception of *Gitanjali* was further complicated by the fact that the English version was significantly different from the Bengali one, "and so oriented to Western readers that Tagore came to repent his Frankensteinian creation" and the "professed mistranslations" it contained (Trivedi 189, 190). As Radha Chakravarty notes, "Tagore himself was aware

relationship between Yeats and Tagore, see the essays collected in *Tagore and Yeats: A Postcolonial Re-envisioning*, edited by Amrita Ghosh and Elizabeth Brewer Redwine, Brill, 2022.

[that] the rapid decline in his international reputation shortly after he won the Nobel Prize was to a great extent due to faulty translations of his work [including translations he undertook]" (27). Sisir Kumar Das concurs: "[t]he quality of translation is poor, many of the poems in English are [mere] paraphrases of the original Bengali and some ... have been so radically changed in the translation that it is quite difficult to locate the source" (*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Poems* 17). As Michael Collins writes, "There is no doubt that these [poor translations] had an impact, adding credence to a saccharine and ultimately unsatisfying image of Tagore as an Eastern 'poet-seer'" ("Misrepresentations"). Tagore himself came to realise the damage done by his hasty translations, as attested to in a letter he wrote to Sturge Moore (24 May 1921): 'I myself in my translations have done grave injustice to my own work. My English is like a frail boat – and to save it from an utter disaster I had to jettison most part of its cargo. But the cargo being a living one it has been mutilated: which is a literary crime that carries its own punishment.' ("Letter to Sturge Moore" 272-73).

It is worth a brief detour here to discuss Tagore's self-translations, not least because my decision to draw on poems from his original English publications, translated by him, in this thesis. William Radice, in the Introduction to his translation of selected poems by Tagore (selected by Radice), published as *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems* (1994), has written about the problems with Tagore's translations of his poems, in the years following the success of the English version of *Gitanjali*, in collections like *The Crescent Moon* (2013), *The Gardener* (2013), *Fruit Gathering* (1916) and *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (1936). Radice writes, "His own translations … have not proved sufficient to sustain the world wide reputation he enjoyed in his lifetime." He draws attention to the inventiveness of Tagore's Bengali originals, his play with form and meter, and also the multiple differences between Bengali and English, and the eclectic mix of words drawn from Sanskrit and Persian that characterise Bengali, stating, "in the final analysis Tagore's writings cannot move from the language to which they belong; and the language is not one that many foreigners will probably ever learn." Further, and more importantly, Radice claims, "most of the lyrics that Tagore chose to translate are actually *songs*, intimate combinations of words and melody. … I do not believe you can translate songs. … [H]is own translations do not really take us close to the scope of fabric of his creative work."

I offer these comments to frame my choices when selecting poems by Tagore, *in English*, to discuss in this thesis. I do not read or speak Bengali and, moreover, this is a thesis on literature in English. In recent years some critics and writers have followed the path

established by Radice, and attempted their own translations of Tagore poems. However, some of these translations are of only a single poem or two, published in journals or on internet websites, or as part of biographies of Tagore, or they form part of collections of poems that have been selected by the translator for any number of personal reasons, but are in no way comprehensive. They also tend to format the translated poems in line with traditional English poetic conventions of line and verse, contrary to the prose-poem format of the Bengali originals. I made the decision, then, to draw mainly from original editions of poems (available on Project Gutenberg) translated into English by Tagore himself, while also seeking to make clear concerns about the effectiveness of some of these translations. This means I am also largely restricted to commenting on thematic rather than stylistic elements in the poetry, given that – as Radice notes – the translations do not do justice to the *music* of the Bengali originals. I note, too, that Tagore's English translations of his work form only a small part of his vast output which was mainly written and published in Bengali. At times, where relevant, I quote from translations of poems (and essays), by various translators, that were not undertaken by Tagore.[62]

Tagore's international reputation declined rapidly. Within a matter of years after the Nobel award, critics from the West started making assertions like this one: "[Tagore] has preached the petted and pious platitudes of whining sanctimonious preachers" (qtd. Collins, "Politics of Friendship" 120-121). A reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote of *The Crescent Moon* that the poems it contained were more "childish than childlike" (qtd. Alam 162). Fakrul Alam notes that, "[b]y the end of the decade [the 1910s], Yeats, Pound, and other established literary figures, who had once chorused their approval, now seemed to compete in disparaging every new volume directly or indirectly, or damning them with silence. (160)

Another reason for the decline in Tagore's reputation, especially after World War One, was his anti-imperial and anti-nationalist stance (he saw imperialism and nationalism as deeply connected), which is especially evident in his *Nationalism* lectures (discussed below). Those

[62] This can be complicated, even confusing in cases where there are several different translations, all by different people of individual poems/stories/essays. Often the titles of these are discrepant and it is not always made clear what the original Bengali title of the poem/story/essay was. Even proper nouns, like names, differ in these different translations. There is work underway to publish authoritative and peer-reviewed editions of Tagore's extensive Bengali writings, translated into English, but this is by no way complete given the sheer amount of work he produced. Tagore published 235 books (36 posthumously), including 60 volumes of poetry, 13 novels, 36 collections of essays, and produced over 2265 songs and 2000 paintings. In addition, he wrote multiple stories and poems that appeared as individual works in journals, newspapers and books written or edited by others.

wishing to embrace him as an exotic mystic poet were less impressed by his vehement political prose and even less by his return, in 1919, of the knighthood given to him by the British in 1915, in protest at the Amritsar Massacre (also known as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre**)**.

One of the problems that resulted from the promotion of Tagore to the status of eastern mystic and then, soon after, his demotion as a poet, is that this obscured his role as a cultural reformer and critic of colonialism. Further, it also meant his staunch and prescient eco-critical sensibilities were ignored and have received little critical attention until recently (and even now it is mainly non-western scholars who discuss this aspect of his writing). I turn to this in my next chapter. First however, it is necessary to rebut both the charge that Tagore's writing is imitative of European, especially British, Romanticism and claims that the writer is an "oriental mystic." This requires a discussion of his spiritual beliefs and a response to the question: what is meant by the spirituality that appears so persistently in Tagore's writing, and how does it shape his representation of nature?

Tagore's Spirituality and the Representation of Nature

The western image of Tagore as an "Indian mystic" reduces a complex philosophical and cultural position to a simplified idea of Eastern spirituality. Moreover, framing his waiting as 'Romantic' risks devaluing the crucial environmental impetus in his writing.[63] Importantly, the engagement with nature in Tagore's work is not simply nostalgic and aesthetic. Tagore's spirituality is not simply an escape from the material and increasingly industrialised world into an abstract or otherworldly realm. Rather, it is closely connected to his understanding of the relationship between the individual, other human beings and the natural world. Sitansu S. Chakravarti explains that "[s]pirituality to Tagore is the dynamic principle touching every aspect of life, or any form of existence, for that matter, that touches human life. It is the supreme guiding principle of life that leads human existence from partiality to fullness, and from darkness to light, to use the expressions of the Vedas" (268). Chakravarti's assertion is useful because it presents spirituality not as something separate from ordinary existence but as a principle that operates through life itself. For Tagore, the movement from "partiality" to

[63] This is not to dismiss the ways in which Romantic thought acted as a precursor to modern notions of conservation, a discussion outside of the scope of this thesis.

"fullness" or "wholeness" (*purnata*) – notably discussed in *Sadhana* and "The Faith of an Artist" (also translated as "The Religion of an Artist") – is crucial. Put simply, this means the movement from isolated or ego-driven existence to harmonious integration with others and the universe. This belief envisions that individual human beings are incomplete (partial) and discover a fuller sense of self through relationships with other forms of life (human and non-human) and with the larger reality of which the individual is a part. Crucially, this is achieved not through renunciation of the world or isolation from others (in contrast to Romanticism). He writes, "Why are you all by yourself, confined to / Your own ego?" (qtd. K. R. S. B Mukerji, xxvi). What carries a person from partiality towards fullness is love (not simply romantic) and creativity. As Martha C. Nussbaum explains, "[f]or Tagore, the defining moment of becoming human is to discover that one loves another individual human being" and "the significance of creativity is inseparable from the freedom of the individual to discard all traditions, all group norms, in favor of a profoundly personal vision" (149, 150). Spirituality, therefore, has an experiential, creative and relational quality rather than being simply a set of religious beliefs.

This understanding is closely related to the philosophical traditions that shaped Tagore's intellectual and cultural formation. The Upanishadic conception of the relationship between the individual self and the larger reality of existence is particularly important here. Tagore's engagement with Vedantic thought encouraged an understanding of reality in terms of connectedness rather than absolute separation.[64] This does not mean that Tagore simply reproduces Advaita Vedanta (Hindu philosophy) in literary form, nor that his environmental thought can be reduced to a single philosophical doctrine. Rather, Vedantic and Upanishadic ideas provide an important intellectual background for his recurring emphasis on unity, interdependence and the spiritual significance of the natural world.

The importance of the Upanishadic tradition here is that it provides a way of thinking about the self that does not depend upon an absolute division between the human subject and the world around it. Tagore repeatedly returns to forms of unity between the individual and the larger world, and this helps explain why nature has such a central place in his poetry. The natural world is not merely an external object observed by the human subject. It becomes part of a larger reality within which the human subject participates. In *Human Values*, he writes:

[64] The Vedas are the large body of ancient sacred texts of Hinduism (1200-400 BCE). They focused on details of rituals and traditions and contain four parts. The Upanishads are the last, later fouth part of the Vedas and comprise philosophical texts focused on inner spiritual knowledge and enlightenment (700-400 BCE).

> In the world wherever my heart remains indifferent, right from a blade of grass up to a human being, we must realise that our spirituality is limited. When our consciousness, our soul expands to encompass all, then it is by our own quintessence that we apprehend all essences in the world, not by the senses, not by the intelligence, not by scientific logic. That experience of wholeness is an astonishing affair. If I experience profoundly even this tree before me as a manifestation of that essence, my entire being is filled with bliss. (8)

This does not mean that Tagore denies the individuality of human beings. Rather, individuality acquires significance through relationship: the self becomes more fully aware of itself through its connection with other people, with nature and with the larger reality of existence: we can reach the goal of fullness if we "feel every creature in the soul and … feel our soul in everything" (*Human Values* 288). This understanding also helps to clarify the relevance of non-duality to Tagore's representation of nature. As noted, it would be too simple to describe Tagore as merely reproducing the philosophical system of Advaita Vedanta, and his writing should not be reduced to a single religious doctrine. Nevertheless, the idea that apparent divisions between self and world do not represent the whole of reality provides an important context for his recurring concern with unity. Nature can consequently become a medium through which the individual experiences something larger than the isolated self. The tree, river, flower, bird, sky or changing season is not simply an object in the landscape but is an active participant in the experience of connectedness. In Nussbaum's formulation: "Tagore's religion is the religion of a poet, a view of culture and society based upon the capacities in each human being that are the bases of poetic creation: passionate experiences of wonder and beauty, love of both nature and other particular people, and the desire to make something whole and meaningful out of the isolated fragments of one person's perceptual experience" (152).

Shefali Moitra's discussion of Tagore's thoughts on religion is useful in this context because it places his religious thinking within a broader understanding of human existence rather than treating religion simply as institutional belief (403–15). Aseem Shrivastava similarly places Tagore's experience of nature in relation to what may be understood as an "ecology of the spirit," making the connection between spirituality and nature central to an understanding of Tagore's thought (323–36). These approaches are particularly relevant to this thesis because they make clear how, in Tagore's writing, nature must be understood as more than a poetic backdrop. His natural world is connected to a spiritual understanding of life in which human

beings participate in, rather than stand apart from, the larger world. Tagore's spirituality therefore has direct implications for his representation of nature. If the self understands itself as intrinsically part of the whole world, then nature cannot simply be treated as an object that exists outside human experience. Nor can the elements in nature be reduced to merely viewed objects through which humans experience sublimity or solace. This helps explain the frequency with which Tagore represents rivers, trees, flowers, birds, seasons, sunlight, rain and other elements of the natural world as active presences in his writing rather than things simply contemplated or viewed by humans. They are not merely descriptions of scenery. They are part of the relationships through which human beings encounter the world and themselves.

This is one of the important differences between Tagore's representation of nature and a simple conception of nature as a place of escape from civilisation, such as that which characterises much Romantic through and art. Tagore certainly criticises forms of urban life associated with materialism, greed and separation from the natural world, but his solution is not simply to abandon society, although he certainly valued the village over the city as a communal unit. Nature remains connected to human relationships, education, work and community. The spiritual value of nature consequently has an ethical dimension. To recognise one's connection with the natural world is also to reconsider the relationship between the individual and other forms of life: "Our life gains what is called 'value' in those of its aspects which represent eternal humanity in knowledge, in sympathy, in deeds, in character and creative works" (Tagore, *Religion of Man* 35). For Tagore, "fullness" and connected interdependence are not simply abstract religious or spiritual goals. As Christine Kupfer stresses, "Tagore's approach to spirituality is down to earth and this-worldly. … Connecting with nature can be a precondition for caring for the environment. Caring for others through political or social actions requires empathy and therefore a connection to others" (xvi). His writing repeatedly articulates what we might call a pragmatic empathy towards all life forms that cannot be contained in the idea of veneration of nature *alone*.

Bengali, Sanskrit, Vaishnava and Bhakti traditions

V.A. Shahane, quoted above asserts that Tagore "draws sustenance from the tradition of Bengali and Sanskrit poetry. Romanticism in his work, therefore, is related to his Vaishnava faith; his adherence to the doctrine of Bhakti; his intuitional awareness of the Divine, his

mysticism, his idealism, and his intense love of liberty" (60). Shahane's argument is particularly important because it shifts the question of whether Tagore emulates the British Romantics to an emphasis on the traditions that shaped his own sensibility. The reference to Bengali and Sanskrit poetry, Vaishnava faith and Bhakti[65] is especially significant for understanding Tagore's representation of nature. Bhakti traditions place emphasis on an intimate and affective relationship with the divine, while the Vaishnava traditions that influenced Bengali literary culture provided Tagore with a cultural vocabulary through which love, longing, the human world and the natural world could be brought into relationship with the divine.

France Bhattacharya's discussion of Tagore and the Bhakti poets provides a useful context for understanding the relationship between Tagore's spirituality and the Bengali devotional tradition (379–90). This tradition helps explain why Tagore's spirituality cannot be treated simply as an abstract philosophy or as conforming with a single religious tradition. It is also emotional, relational and expressed through poetic and musical forms. Love, longing, communion and the perception of the divine in the world become interconnected rather than separate categories. In the words of Ramaswami Subramony, Vaishnava adherents expressed "ecstatic devotion to Krishna, expressed through *kirtan* (devotional singing), transformed religion into an intensely emotional and participatory experience. … This Vaishnava devotionalism profoundly shaped the cultural and literary environment into which Rabindranath Tagore was born." He argues that "Tagore emerges not merely as a poet of devotion but as a philosopher of Bhakti, who redefines the tradition in modern terms. His poetry transforms devotion into an aesthetic and spiritual experience, where the finite self seeks union with the infinite through love, humility, and creative expression" (153). Subramony claims that what is especially unique in Tagore's spirituality is his "ability to synthesize … the emotional fervor of Bhakti and the metaphysical depth of the Upanishads" (153) and to further incorporate "Sufi mysticism, which similarly emphasizes love as the path to God" (154). Taken together, these religious influences combine into a spirituality in which "devotion becomes a means of realizing the interconnectedness of all existence" (154). Understanding this is crucial to recognising the ecological dimension of Tagore's thought and beliefs. God is not *apart* from the world but *within* all of interconnected creation. For him, it

[65] The Bhakti movement arose in South India around the 6th to 10th centuries CE, later spreading to the North and East. It emphasised that all people, regardless of caste or gender, could gain spiritual access and practices singing, chanting and reciting ancient poetry. In Bengal, the Bhakti tradition found powerful expression in the devotional Vaishnava movement, led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533).

is not simply that communion with nature is a form of worship or that nature is an expression of God's creative power. Nature is not something that can be exploited or conquered because together, in all its interconnectedness, it is God. This is also why Tagore's treatment of nature differs from purely secular descriptions of the environment. A river or a flower can remain physically real and materially specific while also being part of a larger whole divinity that pulses through all forms of life. The distinct natural object does not have to cease being itself in order to acquire spiritual significance. Instead, its significance emerges through the inextricable bonds between the human observer, the natural world and the larger reality in which both participate. This is captured in Poem 69 in *Gitanjali*:

> The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
> runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
>
> It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth
> in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
>
> It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death,
> in ebb and in flow.
>
> My limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.
> And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

Nature, community and rural life

Human beings are a part of the pulsing world. They are not above it or divorced from it. Hence Tagore's vision incorporates not only 'natural' or 'rural' ecosystems but urban ones, too. Tagore's biographer Edward Thomson writes, "his rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces; they flow by meadow and pasture. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His fellow-men were a necessity to him" (25). In other words, although Tagore valued solitary immersion in nature, he did not simply seek to "wander lonely as a cloud." His commitment to others refused this.

In the words of D. Banerji, his socio-political thinking, evident in many of his writings, embodies a "practical hermeneutics of an affective intersubjectivity" (8). This is perhaps most obviously seen in his educational projects, but also in his many attempts to improve the

life and conditions in rural Indian villages. This involved a repudiation of modern city life, which may be considered Romantic, but it did not involve a repudiation of science or modernity as such, only the greed and materialism that science and modernity enabled. It is not possible to consider this in this thesis as it will take me too far away from my primary focus. But it is important to note that despite his veneration of nature and childhood, Tagore does not seek a retreat to these but rather an integration of them into adult, communal values.

This integration of nature and (human) community is important to the discussion about Tagore's spirituality being developed here. If spirituality involves movement from "partiality" to "fullness," as Chakravarti suggests, then an isolated individual separated from other people and from the natural world cannot represent the fullest expression of Tagore's thought. Nature is encountered within lived communities: rivers pass through villages, trees grow in inhabited landscapes, agricultural life depends upon the seasons, and children encounter the natural world through everyday experience. Tagore's spirituality therefore has a social as well as an environmental dimension.

Sourin Bhattacharya's discussion of Tagore's vision of village economy is particularly useful here because it connects his prioritisation of rural living with a broader vision of wholeness (309–22). The significance of rural life in Tagore should therefore not be reduced to a nostalgic return to an imagined pre-modern past. Rather, his concern was with forms of social and economic life in which human beings could maintain meaningful relationships with their communities and environments.

Childhood, nature and spiritual perception

The connection between childhood and nature deserves attention because it recurs throughout Tagore's writing. The child is often presented as possessing an openness to the world that becomes restricted in adult life. This does not necessarily mean that Tagore idealises childhood as a permanent state to which adults should return. Rather, childhood represents *a mode of perception*: a capacity to encounter the world with curiosity, imagination and a sense of relationship. Nature becomes particularly important in this context because it offers the child a world that is not yet divided into rigid categories of human use and value.

This helps explain Winter's suggestion that readers of *Lipika* are "of all ages" and that nature is "always at our side" (12). The child reader (or child in the adult reader) is not important simply because children are innocent; the child functions as a figure for ways of approaching the world differently, in other words, open to our place within it. The spiritual significance of

nature can therefore be experienced through an imaginative openness that Tagore associates with childhood. This is another point of contact with Romanticism, but in Tagore it is also connected to his wider understanding of unity and the relationship between the human and natural worlds.

Winter also emphasises that many of Tagore's (translated English) 'poems' were initially conceived of as (Bengali) songs; he was a prolific composer whose poetry was intimately connected with music. The lyric in Tagore's Bengali work frequently exists in relation to melody, rhythm and performance. Consequently, the spiritual experience conveyed through the poems cannot always be separated from the musical forms through which it was intended to be experienced.

It is worth a brief detour here to discuss Tagore's self-translations, not least because my decision to draw on poems from his original English publications, translated by him, in this thesis. William Radice, in the Introduction to his translation of selected poems by Tagore, published as *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems* (1994), has written about the problems with Tagore's translations of his poems, in the years following the success of the English version of *Gitanjali*, in collections like *The Crescent Moon* (2013), *The Gardener* (2013), *Fruit Gathering* (1916) and *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (1936).

Radice writes, "His own translations … have not proved sufficient to sustain the world-wide reputation he enjoyed in his lifetime." He draws attention to the inventiveness of Tagore's Bengali originals, his play with form and meter, and also the multiple differences between Bengali and English, and the eclectic mix of words drawn from Sanskrit and Persian that characterise Bengali, stating, "in the final analysis Tagore's writings cannot move from the language to which they belong; and the language is not one that many foreigners will probably ever learn." Radice asks: "Were Tagore's translations spurious? They were started in all modesty, and the first book, *Gitanjali*, was the best. Thereafter their increasing inaccuracy and truncatedness owed something to the sheer pressure of work on Tagore, something to the fact that their success gave him inflated confidence in their quality." Further, and more importantly, Radice claims, "most of the lyrics that Tagore chose to translate are actually *songs*, intimate combinations of words and melody. … I do not believe you can translate songs. … [H]is own translations do not really take us close to the scope of fabric of his creative work." Radice asserts that Tagore's songs are his best work: his "genius showed itself most naturally and faultlessly in his songs." He also states that in his later work,

“Tagore’s late poetry becomes less and less poetry, more an unadorned human voice. … Only in its own language can that voice be entirely itself.” (This is the reason Radice provides for not translating any of the later poems, which were also not translated into English by Tagore.)

Radice’s observations are especially significant for the present discussion because they show that the difficulty of translating Tagore is not limited to the choice of individual English words. If the Bengali lyric is simultaneously poetry and song, then melody, rhythm, sound and linguistic texture form part of its meaning. The loss of these elements in translation can therefore affect not only the aesthetic qualities of the poem but also the way its spirituality is experienced. A poem that originally combines language and melody may create a sense of emotional or spiritual unity through sound as much as through its explicit statements about the divine or the natural world.

This is highly relevant to Tagore’s representation of nature. The natural imagery of his Bengali songs / poems cannot be separated entirely from the musical qualities of the language in which that imagery was originally expressed. Rivers, seasons, flowers, birds and changing skies are not only visual images; they can participate in rhythm, repetition and song. The music of the original Bengali therefore forms part of the relationship between nature and spirituality that this thesis seeks to recover, even though a thesis written around English-language texts cannot reproduce that experience in full.

My use of Tagore’s English publications therefore involves a necessary methodological limitation. I cannot claim to reproduce the full linguistic and musical qualities of the Bengali originals, and I do not want to imply that the English versions provide an uncomplicated representation of Tagore’s poetic achievement. At the same time, these English publications are important historical texts in their own right because they were the versions through which Tagore entered the English literary world and through which much of his Western reputation was formed. I therefore use them both as translations of Bengali texts and as part of the history of Tagore’s writing in English. Where the argument depends upon features that may be altered in translation, I will be cautious about making claims concerning sound, form or linguistic texture.

As I have discussed, the problem of the translation into English of Tagore’s writing intersected with the problem of reception. Western readers did not encounter Tagore’s Bengali poetry directly but encountered it in a decidedly foreign medium: English. This made it easier for the image of the “Indian mystic” to become detached from the linguistic, musical

and cultural contexts of the original works. One of the things that was lost, I argue, is the spiritual vision that inspires the songs / poems. It is too easily reduced to a mysticism that is distinct from and divorced from the urgent task that faces human beings from all cultures, especially today: how to live equably in a world human beings have for too long regarded as a reservoir of resources for personal – and nationalistic – gain. This exploitative use of the world that is (for Tagore) constitutive of and intimately entwined with being human is expressed in Tagore's essay "City and Village." In this he offers a fable about moon people imagined as precursors to humans on Earth:

> I often like to imagine that the moon, being smaller in size than the earth, produced life on her soil earlier than the earth. Once, the moon too had her festivals of colour, music, movement; her storehouse was perpetually filled with food. Then, on the moon, a race was born that began greedily to devour its surroundings. […] Their plunder soon outstripped nature's power of recuperation. Their profit-makers created wants that were unnatural. They dug deep into the stored capital of nature and ruthlessly exploited her resources. (313-314)

After offering this fable, Tagore concludes: "My imaginary selenites behave exactly in the way that human beings are today behaving on this earth" (314). As I will discuss in the chapter that follows, Tagore not only portrayed nature as something to be venerated and adored, or as a source from which artists could *extract* (personal) value, and even spirituality, as is arguably the case in many European Romantic accounts of nature.

Christine Marsh argues that when reading Tagore it is useful to adopt

> 'deep ecology, deep anthropology and political theology' to refer to his spiritual worldview, and the 'sustainable retreat' which he taught about and practised. Deep anthropology is the most important of the three components. In his lectures and essays, Tagore explained repeatedly, in various ways, that it is by understanding ourselves that we shall be able to address our destructive alienation from the natural world, and this is crucial to the 'deep ecology' and 'political theology' parts of his message. (146)

In brief, Marsh argues that Tagore's "spiritual worldview" is not one of surface aesthetics, or a vision of nature as appropriable by humans as a means by which they can glimpse the sublime, or escape communion with others. Instead, it is founded in a conception of 'the human' as just one aspect, one partial and interconnected agent, in the pluriverse of being.

Even more, non-human life forms are agential, too. Even the conventionally inanimate – the rain, rivers, wind, rocks and sand – are vital parts of the divine that is the universe.

Understanding this is central to understanding Tagore as not merely poet who writes about nature, but as an Eco-poet. Writer Forrest Gander explains the distinction:

> There are, of course, long traditions of pastoral or 'nature' poetry in both Eastern and Western-language literature. But whereas 'nature poetry' often takes the so-called 'natural world' for its themes, as though it were separate from the human world, ecopoetry asks how we are involved in – and a part of – all that surrounds us.

Many critics, at least in the West, situate the advent of eco-poetry in the 1980s, along with the rise of theorisations of deep ecology. Timothy Clark argues that advocates of deep ecology, elaborated most famously by philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, "urge a drastic change in human self-understanding: one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as part of a greater living identity" (2). Quite simply, in the words of John Shoptaw, eco-poetry is "ecocentric, not anthropocentric" (396). Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard claim that these ideas are already evident in the "idea of a non-anthropocentric nature poetry … introduced by Robinson Jeffers in the "Preface" to his 1948 collection of poems, *The Double Axe and Other Poems*" (40).

It is clear that until recently eco-poetry has conventionally been conceived in western terms, as the preserve of "a rather exclusive club of Neo-romantic, male poets" (Harriet Tarlo, qtd. Walton 2). Samantha Walton asserts:

> Many writers now consciously reject Romanticism as a source of ecopoetics. This is because Romanticism, in brief, addressed historically specific conditions of urban expansion and agricultural and industrial revolutions … [and] is argued to be incapable of addressing the globalised conditions of our environmental crisis. It also excludes nonwhite, non-Western environmental understandings and spiritualties, and instead centres the experiences of able-bodied men trained in the intellectual traditions of European philosophy. The existential and emotional dramas of those writers have provided to be far from universal. (2)

The response has been a flourishing interest in postcolonial eco-writing in the last decade or so and an attempt to "decolonise[e] ecopolitics" (Walton 3). Key publications include:

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals and the Environment* (2010): Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley' collection *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011); Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan's collection *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* (2015).

Strikingly, in this work by western academics, indigenous, colonial-era writers are sparsely treated, perhaps because there were relatively few who wrote in the language of the coloniser (most often English). Tagore, who did write in English (at least in some of his publications), has been largely overlooked. Only in the past five or six years have non-western (Indian) critics begun to consider the poet via an ecocritical lens. Key in this development is the historian and sociologist Ramachandra Guha who, in *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism* (2024), places Tagore squarely as a central figure in Indian environmental thought. However, Guha pays scant attention to literary writing in the book, something he notes in his introduction:

> Conventional literary scholars may see my underplaying of poems, plays and novels as a weakness – and even a disqualification. I myself do not regret focusing here on … varied forms of non-fiction writing, while accepting that there is perhaps a complementary book to be written (by someone else) on the ways in which environmental change has been represented by Indian Poets, novelists and playwrights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (xxvi)

The chapter that follows is the beginning of an attempt to rise to the challenge of writing about "the ways in which environmental change has been represented by" Tagore in his literary writing and how this creatively articulates the often didactic messages evident in his non-fictional work and, crucially, his anti-colonial sentiments. In it, I am mindful of the ways in which other South-Asian scholars in only the past few years, have also begun to think about Tagore as a writer deeply concerned with India's natural environment. This work informs my own, but I seek to push further in this analysis than I, respectfully, believe has been achieved to date. I seek to move beyond a recurrent tendency to read Tagore as both a (British) Romantic heir and a nature writer. Doing so requires being attuned to the ways in which Tagore's eclectic and profound spiritual vision of ecological interdependence finds expression in everything he wrote.

CHAPTER 5: Nature, environmentalism and ecological insights in Tagore's writing

Gitanjali: song offerings to God

Tagore's poetry and philosophy reveal a deep, spiritual kinship with nature, portraying it as a dynamic, living force. Nature, as he perceived it, is not as a passive backdrop for life's activities but a source of joy, wisdom, and divine connection. This perspective is captured in *Gitanjali*, a collection of 157 prose-poems that Tagore published in Bengali in 1910. He translated 53 of the poems into English and combined these with a further 50 poems, in translation, drawn from some of his earlier Bengali publications (it includes "On the Sea Shore," from *The Cresent Moon* and discussed in my previous chapter, for example).[66] This combined, self-translated collection was published in English in 1912 as *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* as I have discussed. Several translators have re-translated the English version of *Gitanjali* (for example, James Talarovic in 1983 and Joe Winter in 1984) and multiple versions of the original English version have been republished by different presses. William Radice has offered what he refers to as an "audacious option" ("Introduction" *Gitanjali* xvii) – a new translation including some of other poems from the 1910 Bengali original, not included in the 1912 English edition (and deleting others), published in 2011. This edition works to reproduce what Radice (based on extensive research) believes was Tagore's original conception of the collection. To this end he revises the order of the poems in the original English, and adds and deletes some poems. Radice also alters the line lengths and form of many poems in an attempt to capture original Bengali verse forms and rhythms.[67]

While I acknowledge the significant work done by Radice, in this thesis I will, for the reasons discussed above, refer to the poems in the 1912 English edition of *Gitanjali* translated by Tagore, which ate the ones most often cited by critics. Readers of any edition of *Gitanjali* are likely to agree on one thing: the poems are "song offerings" to God. Which God, precisely, is

[66] The changes Tagore made in the translations of the poems from Bengali to English are often quite significant. He left out or changed large parts of some poems and in some cases fused two together. See Sukriti who argues that "Translation is both Tagore's supreme strength and singular weakness. While it is his translation of *Gitanjali* that made him world famous and earned him the Nobel prize for literature, some of his hurriedly done and less successful translations subjected him to scathing criticism [for example from W.B. Yeats]" (4).

[67] See also Martin Kämpchen, editor. *Gitanjali Reborn: William Radice's Writings on Rabindranath Tagore*, Routledge, 2018

hard to pin down. At times this God is transcendent and ineffable, at other immanent and material. As Bharatwaj Iyer suggests, "Gitanjali's God is a shifting God. It sometimes risks becoming nothing but the object of the poet, for no sake other than to fulfil poetry's need for an object" (166). He continues, "the poet dreams of a God who fills up the hollow of the flute [as in Poem 1], inspiring it to music. This God both offers itself to song, and is reached by the sweetness and melody of music" (166). But the singer's songs keeps breaking down in the poem (and the collection); they are always waiting for a union that while promised and anticipated, remains unfulfilled.

The collection begins by evoking the image of a "frail vessel" in Poem 1, a "little flute of reed," which is a metaphor for the life of someone empty and longing to be filled with a breath of air that will enable them to make music. The speaker appeals to "thou" to fill them, "ever with fresh life": "Ages/ pass, and still thou pourest and still there is room to fill." This sets the tone for the remainder of the collection in which speaker appeals, again and again, for fulfilment that comes only from the infinite and immortal. Poem 3 is addressed to "my master," and is an invocation to music and song imagined as eternal and life-giving, emanating from the Creator or Divine; the poet can speak but is unable to sing:

> The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.
>
> My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled. Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master!

The same idea is repeated in Poem 13: "The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day./ I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument." This is at once a metaphor for the poet who has not managed to capture what it is he wishes to say in his poem-song, and also a metaphor for the human supplicant to a God he cannot reach or find the words to address: "I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet."

As in many of the poems, the speaker feels unable to join fully with the Divine; they can speak but not voice themselves in song. Their instrument is broken; they can merely wait. This is a recurrent idea, as captured in the final stanza of Poem 41:

> But time glides on and still no sound of the wheels of thy chariot. Many a procession passes by with noise and shouts and glamour of glory. Is it only thou who wouldst

> stand in the shadow silent and behind them all? And only I who would wait and weep and wear out my heart in vain longing?

Or in these lines from Poem 44:

> From dawn till dusk I sit here before my door, and I know that of a sudden the happy moment will arrive when I shall see.
> In the meanwhile I smile and I sing all alone. In the meanwhile the air is filling with the perfume of promise.

Or in this simple refrain, from Poem 45: "He comes, comes, ever comes" in which the present tense effects an eternal deferral.

Many of the poems in *Gitanjali* are devotional monologues addressed to "Thou," but despite the use of the second-person address, the addressee is not a specific entity or God as worshiped via an institutionalised religion.[68] Rather it is a divinity conceived as the universe, as nature (or Nature), and as all that is good and just in a life of struggle. Iyer argues that the God addressed in the poems is sometimes transcendent, sometimes immanent, "[b]ut in either mode, it is very rarely an entity. … [O]verall it is equated with the sighs and murmurs of the silent heart" (167). It is not "an essential Absolute" (167). The complex nature of Tagore's spirituality and how it manifests in *Gitanjali*, has been widely debated and I do not have time to discuss this here. Nor can I trace the many sources and influences that inspired Tagore's religious beliefs.[69] Rather, I will focus on the significance of nature that informs the poetry, although this is not always easily divorced from the poet's conception of divinity because, for Tagore, God manifests in the physical world. According to Rajeev Nair, "Tagore finds the presence of God in the nature around him. He addresses God by admiring the beauty of nature which is the reflection of the presence of God himself" (7). Similar claims abound in Tagore scholarship. Paula Hayes, for example, states, "In Tagore, love of nature equates at one level to love of God; for, in recognizing the worth of the natural world, one is giving assent to the fact that there is a God who created it" (482). Love of creation, as the natural world, infuses every poem. Indeed, "To Tagore the world of nature is … a medium for accomplishing indivisibility with the infinite" (Nagar 77).

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[68] See Tagore's *The Religion of Man*.

[69] These are argued to include the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, and devotional poetry found in Sufism and Vaishnavism. In broad terms, Tagore believed that individuals were part of a greater cosmic unity, and divinity was not separate from the physical world but was a part of it. See, for e.g., Partha Sarathi Das, "Rabindranath's Concept of Religion."

A close reading of the poems highlights not merely a spiritual lyric sequence but an exemplary reimagining of the link between self, God and nature. The framework in *The Crescent Moon* and *Gitanjali* is almost similar, where the child's consciousness is intimately woven into the rhythms of the Bengali landscape, but Tagore's vision in the latter is more emphatically that of a spiritual ecology. Here nature is portrayed as an active being (to be respected and worshiped) and the poet asserts this by presenting a world where the local Bengala environment – the monsoon clouds, the river's flow, the *babla* and *neem* trees – is inherently sacred and instructive. The child, whether explicitly present as a speaker or implicitly invoked through a stance of wonder, becomes the ideal perceiver of this sacred unity, while the adult speaker often laments a separation that is both spiritual and environmental. The majority of the poems in *Gitanjali* alternate between two fundamental voices: that of the child engaged in direct, unmediated play within nature, and that of the adult seeker who interprets nature through a lens of spiritual longing.

Poem 35, which is spoken from an adult's perspective, begins, "Where the mind is without fear…" and nature is portrayed in contrast to a felt spiritual absence. The flute, the lamp, the boat and the river are repeated metaphors for the soul's yearning for the divine, reflecting the speaker's perception of a fall from a childlike state of ecological unity into a condition of separation – a "desert" that must be crossed. The "dreary desert sand of dead habit," alluded to in several references to the mythical "desert of Tepântar,"[70] represents more than spiritual aridity. Phrases like "The narrow domestic walls" further reenforces this idea of the barrenness of imagination and lack of connection with nature, which has been replaced by the hollow ritual and rigid social structures of adulthood, restricting both community and spirit. Yet if the adult speakers in the poems do not achieve unity with the Divine, they achieve glimpses of divinity in nature – birds singing, flowers and trees of all kinds, clouds and endless skies, rivers and streams – and in observing people engaging with nature in organic and harmonious ways: farmers tilling their fields, women drawing water from rivers; people tending to animals. According to Kailas B. Giri, Tagore's poems in *Gitanjali* evidence that he "has a broad, multifaceted, and grounded love of nature. His meticulousness of observation and description is what distinguishes his depictions of nature. Since he believes that nature is

[70] The "desert of Tepântar" is a key symbolic landscape in Tagore's work, most notably explored in his poetic drama "The Cycle of Spring" (*Phālgunī*). It represents a barren, transitional space of spiritual testing and longing, a state of separation from the divine often mirrored by a separation from a fecund, living ecology.

the primordial repository of all life, he frequently identifies with it and uses it to represent the abstract and the human" (42).

The poems highlight specific local (Bengali) elements as essential actors in life's drama, like the "fragrant days of sunny April" and the "rainy gloom of July nights" (Poem 46). The references are not to generic seasons but are specific to the subcontinental cycle. Trees like the "banyan" (Poem 48), and flowers like the "red lotus" (Poem 58) and "babla" (Poem 54), root the spiritual experience in a tangible, Bengali geography. When the speaker in Poem 54 pours water from his jar for a thirsty traveller under the shade of a tree, the act of mercy is framed by the rustling leaves and the scent of "babla" flowers (*Acacia nilotica*, a well-known near evergreen tree with fragrant bright yellow flowers that is common in West Bengal and Bangladesh). Similarly, the pervasive imagery of water – as rain, river, sea, and tears – ebbs and flows in a rhythm of giving, receiving and repetition that is suggestive of the spiritual economy of divine gifts. In Poem 40, the speaker says "The rain has held back for days and days" (40) and links an external, agricultural drought with an internal, spiritual one, pleading for the storm of grace to break the "silent heat" that burns their heart. In many poems, the emotional state of the speaker is reflected in or linked to the natural environment. The adult's quest to "knock at every alien door to come to his own" (Poem 12) shows the modern condition of alienation, which Tagore associates with westernisation and urbanisation, and disconnection from the "innermost shrine" of one's own being, which Tagore consistently associates with a natural, unadorned state. The child who loses "all pleasure in his play" when decked in princely robes (Poem 8) offers a direct critique of materialism that severs the individual from the "healthful dust of the earth." In the collection as a whole, Tagore's spiritual message can be interpreted as ecological insofar as what nurtures the soul is intrinsically linked to the dynamic equilibrium of an unfettered and unexploited natural world in which all living things coexist and interact sustainably: to find God, one must first re-learn to see the world with the eyes of a child who sees beauty, not resources, in all of nature, and who can hear the divine in the rustle of leaves and the flow of rivers. What is sacred is not locked in a temple but is present in a tiny flower, a giant tree or "where the tiller is tilling the hard ground," working in harmony with rather than exploiting nature (Poem 11).

Tagore's veneration of the forest

It is not only the *Gitanjali* poems that are infused with natural imagery linked to ethical value. Tagore's poetry more generally often breathes life into natural elements, as in "Talgach" ("The Palm Tree"). The poem first appeared in his 1903 children's collection *Sishu* (later translated, in part, as *The Crescent Moon*) but its significance was underscored when Tagore republished it in his 1906 adult philosophical collection *Kheya* (*The Ferry*) (see Sanchayita 522). The choice to include the poem in both a collection of poems for children and one for adults suggests Tagore believed the poem was important for all readers. In the poem, a solitary, tall palm tree (*Borassus flabellifer*) strains upwards, wanting to be even taller and "float like black clouds" (line 4). The tree imagines its leave are like wings and "nothing can stop it from flying/ leaving its home behind" (11-12). When "the winds stop blowing/leaves stop shivering" (19-20) and the tree forgets its yearning and the "flight of its mind returns to land" (21). It is finally content to remain rooted in "this corner of earth", "the land its mother" (24, 22). The poem, originally written for children but later appearing in an adult-directed philosophical collection advances a clear moral message: do not strive to be greater, or higher; remain content, rooted in the natural world which is (a repeated idea) a – or *the* – mother.

Tagore's work embraces nature's dualities, like its nurturing gentleness and its untamed power, and celebrates the coexistence of the human spirit and the natural world (Mukherjee and Baghira 152). Patrick D. Murphy notes that Tagore's nature writing holds immense depth, particularly in its exploration of what the writer called *jiban-debata* (which translates as 'Lord of Life' or 'Life God') – a philosophy that balances deep engagement with the world with serene detachment from it and combines ancient Indian philosophy with modern scientific thought. William Radice, in his introduction, to his 2011 translation of *Gitanjali*, writes of the *jiban-debata*:

> Two aspects are of particular importance. One is that the *jiban-debata* represents a *creative* principle. It connects Tagore's own poetic creativity with the creative processes of the universe as a whole. The other crucial point is that the *jiban-debata* makes sense of even the darkest, most painful, and most confused thoughts, feelings and experiences. Everything has a purpose. From everything there are lessons to be learned. ("Introduction [*Gitanjali*]" lxxvi)

For Tagore, India's forests, in particular, symbolised "the language of liberation, a stark contrast to Western industrialisation. He argued that Indian civilization, rooted in the forest's diversity, embraced "the unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism" (Murphy 315). This seems particularly important in light of my discussion of the *Jungle Books*: the reverence with which Tagore speaks of Indian forests. In his first extended piece of prose writing in English, *Sādhanā*: *The Realisation of Life* (1915), a collection of spiritual discourses given to boys at his school/ashram, compiled and translated by Tagore, the writer begins by evoking the importance of forests in Indian culture. Tagore writes, "When the first Aryan invaders appeared in India it was a vast land of forests, and the new-comers took advantage of these" (6). He continues, "was in the forest that our civilization had its birth … and it took a distinct character from this origin and environment. It was surrounded by the vast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her, and had the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects" (6). In short, it was from the forests that Indian culture and religion drew its keenest resources. Tagore contrasts this reverence for nature with the attitude of the West which "seems to take pride in thinking that it is subduing nature" (7). He states that "In the west the prevalent feeling is that nature belongs exclusively to inanimate things and beasts, that there is a sudden unaccountable break where human-nature begins" (8). He contrasts the scientific "mere knowledge" (10) of nature with the way it is understood by "the man who has spiritual eyes" (9), an understanding that "does not lead us to power, as knowledge does, but it gives us joy" (10). Interestingly there is an echo of Wordworth, intentional or not: "When a man does not realise his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him" (10). This kinship with nature is, for Tagore, to be found in the *Gayatri*, one of the significant Vedas.

Sādhanā also speaks with awe and respect of water, rivers and the sea, the sky and the earth. But it is to the forest that Tagore returns repeatedly. In an essay written five years later, "The Message of the Forest" (1919), given as a lecture in many places as he travelled the world, he directly compares European attitudes towards nature with those of Indians and contrasts the representation of nature in the ancient Vedas and various myths with those of Shakespeare and Milton. He states that "the environment, in which we see the past of India, is the forest, the memory of which permeates out classical literature and still haunts our minds. … The memory of these sacred forests is one great inheritance which India cherishes through all her vicissitudes and economic disturbances" (386); the Indian "view of life and love … has come to us from the great peace of our ancient forests" (387). In his very similar essay, "Tapovan"

(1922; translated as "The Religion of the Forest," collected in *Creative Unity* (1922))[71] the significance of ancient forest dwellers is also discussed. In this, Tagore writes,

> India holds sacred, and counts as places of pilgrimage, all spots which display a special beauty or splendour of nature. These had no original attraction on account of any special fitness for cultivation or settlement. Here, man is free, not to look upon Nature as a source of supply of his necessities, but to realise his soul beyond himself. The Himâlayas of India are sacred and the Vindhya Hills. Her majestic rivers are sacred. Lake Mânasa and the confluence of the Ganges and the Jamuna are sacred. India has saturated with her love and[63] worship the great Nature with which her children are surrounded, whose light fills their eyes with gladness, and whose water cleanses them, whose food gives them life, and from whose majestic mystery comes forth the constant revelation of the infinite in music, scent, and colour, which brings its awakening to the soul of man. India gains the world through worship, through spiritual communion; and the idea of freedom to which she aspired was based upon the realisation of her spiritual unity. (62-63)

Key ideas in the essay include India's greatest thinking arose from sages who lived in harmony with nature: recognition of inter-species coexistence in the forest taught the importance of respect for diversity and cooperation; the concept of "enoughness," which means sustainable use of natural resources without unnecessary accumulation or exploitation; and respect for the harmony and peace of the forest, which foster democracy and compassion.

More than a nature poet:

Of course, using nature imagery in one's writing doesn't make one an environmentalist, let alone evidence an Eco-critical response to the world. As mentioned in my previous chapter, several (largely Indian) scholars have moved beyond merely tracing the abundant use of nature imagery in Tagore's writings to make claims about him as an environmentalist or as a writer who is firmly Eco-conscious. In this vein, Vandana Shiva writes about Tagore's vision of the forest that it reflects Tagore's ecological understanding of nature:

[71] 'Tapovan' is a Sanskrit word originating from the root words, 'tapas' – meaning austerity and penance in spiritual practice, and 'vana' – meaning forest. It signifies a concept that links environmental and spiritual elements. The word can also refer to a forest school, such as Santiniketan.

> The forests are sources of water and the storehouses of biodiversity that can teach us the lessons of democracy – of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. Tagore saw unity with nature as the highest stage of human evolution. It is this unity in diversity that is the basis of both ecological sustainability and democracy. … The forest teaches us unity and compassion. The forest also teaches us enough-ness: a principle of equity, it shows us how to enjoy the gifts of nature without exploitation and accumulation. … No species in a forest appropriates the share of another species. Every species sustains itself in cooperation with others. (222-23)

Another defender of Tagore as an environmentalist is Ramachandra Guha, to whom I referred at the end of my previous chapter. In *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism* (2025), Guha challenges the idea (which he argues is "dominant in North American and West European scholarly circles") that "individuals and societies need to achieve a certain degree of economic prosperity before they developed any sort of environmental sensibility." Guha offers a "history of Indian environmental ideas" (xxviii) and situates Tagore as a central figure in this. Tagore is discussed in the first chapter as a forerunner of contemporary Indian environmentalism. Guha argues that Tagore's intimate connections with and advocacy of the stewardship of nature predate such thought in North America/Western Europe. The chapter offers a rich "exploration of the role of nature in Tagore's work" (11) and defends the claim that his poems "display a lifelong engagement with nature, with what plants, trees, birds and animals, as well as land, sky and water, meant to him and the human world to which he belonged" (13). They are remarkable, Guha asserts, for "their acute (and minute) observations of birds, plants and trees in the world of nature" (5). And yet, he argues, "most biographers of Tagore have not paid proper attention to his responses to the natural world …[They] focussed on how Tagore had transformed their language, their literature, their music and their cultural life, without quite seeing how nature had transformed him" (32).

Guha also finds a deeply embedded environmental message in Tagore's famous political tract, *Nationalism* (1917)[72] arguing this contains "a profoundly ecological message that has unfortunately escaped most commentators on that work" who focus on its political message,

[72] *Nationalism* was originally written and published in English by Macmillan and Co. I have drawn on the 1918 eBook edition provided by Project Gutenberg.

its warnings against the ills of nationalism and xenophobia (28-32). In *Nationalism* Tagore writes that "the Western nations are following that path of suicide, where they are smothering their humanity under the immense weight of organizations in order to keep themselves in power and hold others in subjection" (77). He doesn't mince his words when he urges Japan not to follow the path of the West:

> But now, where the spirit of the Western nationalism prevails, the whole people is being taught from boyhood to foster hatreds and ambitions by all kinds of means – by the manufacture of half-truths and untruths in history, by persistent misrepresentation of other races and the culture of unfavourable sentiments towards them, by setting up memorials of events, very often false, which for the sake of humanity should be speedily forgotten, thus continually brewing evil menace towards neighbours and nations other than their own. This is poisoning the very fountainhead of humanity. It is holding up gigantic selfishness as the one universal religion for all nations of the world. We can take anything else from the hands of science, but not this elixir of moral death. Never think for a moment that the hurts you inflict upon other races will not infect you, or that the enmities you sow around your homes will be a wall of protection to you for all time to come. To imbue the minds of a whole people with an abnormal vanity of its own superiority, to teach it to take pride in its moral callousness and ill-begotten wealth, to perpetuate humiliation of defeated nations by exhibiting trophies won from war, and using these in schools in order to breed in children's minds contempt for others, is imitating the West where she has a festering sore, whose swelling is a swelling of disease eating into its vitality. (*Nationalism* 79-80)

Time and again in his writing, Tagore uses natural metaphors to under-gird his arguments about the greed of the West and the canker of science when stripped of spirituality or respect for nature and other human beings. Guha offers this example, from a lecture Tagore gave to the community at Santiniketan: "Men cut down trees to meet their endless needs and stripped the Earth of shade. As a result, the air became increasingly hotter, while the fertility of the soil increasingly diminished … [and] now lies scorched by the harsh rays of the sun" (qtd. Guha 18). Or consider this, from *Nationalism*:

> Take away man from his natural surroundings, from the fullness of his communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and you will

> be able to turn him into so many fragments of a machine for the production of wealth on a gigantic scale. Turn a tree into a log and it will burn for you, but it will never bear living flowers and fruit." (*Nationalism* 37)

However, as I have asserted, Guha's chapter on Tagore does not consider his creative writing. This is something Jyoti Pandey and Upasna Yadav begin to do in their essay, "Promoting Ecological Consciousness Through Literature" (2024). in which they argue that "eco literature serves as a powerful tool for promoting environmental awareness through its portrayal of the natural world and exploration of ecological issues and human-nature relationships" (74). They explore Tagore's work as "eco-literature" asserting that a great number of Tagore's works reflect an interdependent relationship between human beings and nature. Their claim is that nature, as portrayed by Tagore, is not idealised and bucolic, but is both gentle and severe (78), something that, as I have discussed, is also evident in *The Crescent Moon*. Pandey and Yadav's analysis of Tagore's work reveals how the poet oscillates between celebrating nature's grace and acknowledging its destructive power. They draw attention to Song 6 in *Gitanjali*, which I reproduce in full here:

> Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust.
>
> I may not find a place in thy garland but honour it with a touch of pain from thy hand and pluck it. I fear lest the day end before I am aware, and the time of offering go by.
>
> Though its colour be not deep and its smell be faint, use this flower in thy service and pluck it while there is time.

The beauty of nature is not perfect but, paradoxically, this is what makes it so. Although they do not use the term, Pandey and Yadav suggest the "little flower" is portrayed in the spirit of *carpe diem*: "pluck" the flower, seize the day, and offer it to God, or another person (the pronoun "thy" is not specific), "lest the day end" and "while there is still time" before it "droop[s] and drop[s] into the dust." This is not plucking in the service of greed or material gain, but in the celebration of nature's beauty and fragility despite the cycle of life and death.

The Gardener: "lyrics of life and love"

Pandey and Yadav also briefly mention Tagore's poem collection *The Gardener* (translated into English by Tagore and published in 1913). Tagore refers to these poems, in his brief Preface, as "lyrics of love and life." Together, the poems offer a series of meditations on seasonal change, metaphorically suggesting the cycle of life not only in plants, but for

humans, too. Pandey and Yadav have very little to say about the collection, apart from noting that it "portray[s] the softer side of nature" (79) and contrast it with Tagore's "The New Year"[73] which is focused on "the dynamic, cruel, harsh and devastating side of nature" (79). The poem begins,

> Like fruit, shaken free by an impatient wind
> from the veils of its mother flower,
> thou comest, New Year, whirling in a frantic dance
> amid the stampede of the wind-lashed clouds
> and infuriate showers,
> while trampled by thy turbulence
> are scattered away the faded and the frail
> in an eddying agony of death.

Tagore translated and compiled *The Gardener* more or less concurrently with *Gitanjali* and *The Crescent Moon*. Time and again, in the collection, human love is figured as organic, intimately bound up with the fecundity and beauty of nature. In the poems, when the speaker addresses a beloved it is almost always as if nature speaks. I argue that the integral role of nature in *The Gardener* is a crystallised adult, often romantic (not Romantic), expression of the same Eco-consciousness – a vision of sustainable interdependence with nature and in nature – that animates the child's play in *The Crescent Moon* and the spiritual songs to God in *Gitanjali*. Tagore moves beyond the portrayal of the child's instinctual unity with nature (in *The Crescent Moon*) and the yearning of unity with the Divine (in *Gitanjali*), to voice a poetic philosophy where nature provides the fundamental metaphors for the very language of love itself, as connection, comfort, mutuality and respect, reinforcing Ayanita Banerjee's observation of nature in Tagore as the ultimate "ground of delight" (5) and the template for a harmonious existence.

The poems in *The Gardener* often externalise the inner emotions in the portrayal of particular plants and landscapes of Bengal. These poems differ from those in *Gitanjali* in so far as they are less about spiritual devotion and more about earthly love and longing. However, as in *Gitanjali*, natural imagery dominates. The unnamed author of the introduction to the Mint Editions 1992 edition of *The Gardener* writes:

[73] Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Naba-Barsha" ("The New Year") was first published in the Bengali magazine *Probashi* in 1915 and later included in his collection *Balaka* (1916; translated in full and published in 1955 as *A Flight of Swans*)

> In the 1880s Tagore spent extended periods managing family estates in rural East Bengal, traveling by boat along the Padma and other rivers. Those years offered close contact with agrarian life, seasonal labor, village festivals, and monsoon ecologies. *The Gardener's* riverbanks, fields, and dusk-lit thresholds, while not documentary, draw on the textures of that world. The lyric stance of someone awaiting a beloved's arrival in fading light resonates with Bengal's daily rhythms. This pastoral or riparian sensibility counterposes the urban bustle of Calcutta, suggesting a continuity between intimate emotion and the cyclical time of the countryside. (vii)

Many of the poems are poems are dramatic lyrics, often structured as dialogues or monologues where the speaker – male or female, a lover, a servant, a poet, or a restless seeker – addresses a beloved, a queen, or a divine presence. The poems emphasise reciprocity, mutual recognition, humility and tenderness and are often overtly sensual. For example, in the opening poem, a servant petitions his queen, "Make me the gardener of your flower garden." This is not a request for a mere job, but a deeply sensuous appeal (the sexual connotations are clear). He tells the queen, "I will keep fresh the grassy path where you walk in the morning /… I will swing you in a swing among the branches of the / saptaparna, where the early evening moon will struggle / to kiss your skirt through the leaves."[74] The servant's desired reward is an intimacy that is sensual and naturalistic. When the queen asks, "What will you have for your reward?", the servant replies, "To be allowed to hold your little fists like tender / lotus-buds and slip flower chains over your wrists; to tinge / the soles of your feet with the red juice of ashoka / petals and kiss away the speck of dust that may chance to / linger there." Here, the role of the servant-gardener is that of a priest or intermediary who facilitates a direct, tactile communion between the human and the natural, using spiritually significant trees and flowers common in Bengal, saptaparna and ashoka, as both instruments and witnesses.[75]

Of a brief glance shared with their beloved, the speaker in Poem 19 uses imagery drawn from nature to emphasise their emotion:

> That gleaming look from the dark came upon me like a breeze that

[74] The sapaparna tree (*Alstonia scholaris*), found abundantly in Bengal, is an important medicinal plant in the Ayurveda with spiritual relevance in Jainism and the Brahma Purana.

[75] The ashoka tree (*Saraca asoca*) is a sacred tree in Indian tradition, its name meaning "without sorrow." Celebrated in Sanskrit poetry (e.g., Kālidāsa) as a symbol of love and fertility, its vivid orange-red flowers are used in ritual. Tagore's reference roots the poem's sensual imagery in a specific, culturally resonant Bengali natural environment.

sends a shiver through the rippling water and sweeps away to
the shadowy shore.

It came to me like the bird of the evening that hurriedly flies
across the lampless room from the one open window to the other,
and disappears in the night.

You are hidden as a star behind the hills, and I am a passer-by
upon the road.

Poem 5 amplifies the speaker's restless longing, "O Great Beyond, O the keen call of thy flute! / I forget, I ever forget, that I have no wings to fly, that I am / bound in this spot evermore." The wind carries this "keen call" which is part of the sensual fabric of the world. In Poem 6 Tagore again uses the image of a caged bird. The poem begins, "The tame bird was in a cage, the free bird was in the forest." The birds meet and fall in love, but the caged bird will not, or cannot leave the cage and the free bird will not agree to live in the cage, asking, "Among bars, where is there room to spread/one's wings?" To this, the caged bird responds, "'Alas … I should not know where to sit / perched in the sky.'" The brief poem concludes:

Their love is intense with longing, but they never can fly wing
to wing.
Through the bars of the cage they look, and vain is their wish to
know each other.
They flutter their wings in yearning, and sing, 'Come closer, my
love!'
The free bird cries, 'It cannot be, I fear the closed doors of
the cage.'
The cage bird whispers, 'Alas, my wings are powerless and dead.'[76]

The poem is about the impossibility of love between two beings who have such different backgrounds and values and belong to incompatible worlds, one of freedom and spontaneity, the other of captivity and routine. The caged bird offers to teach the wild bird "the speech of the learned" and the wild bird, in turn, offers to "sing the songs of the woodlands … songs [that] can never be taught." Once again, then, Tagore contrasts rote learning with free and natural expression. It is also a poem about unrequited love and, unlike many of the other poems in the collection, starkly refuses compromise or reconciliation. True union is

[76] Radice notes that this 'poem' was in fact written as a song ("Introduction" [Collected Poems]).

impossible for the birds who may also represent indigene and colonial product, tradition and modernity.

Poem 12 is a powerful extended invocation where a lover's invitation is entirely framed by descriptions of what the speaker refers to as "my lake," which is metaphoric rather than literal. However, the descriptions of the lake, and the lover addressed, are naturalistic: "The shadow of the coming rain is on the sands, and the clouds / hang low upon the blue lines of the trees like the heavy hair / above your eyebrows." Each stanza proposes a different way that the beloved may engage with the speaker's "lake": filling a pitcher with water, sitting idly on the shore, or diving into it. As in Poem 1, the imagery is sensual, even sexual, from the suggestive line, "Come, O come to my lake, if you must fill your pitcher," to an invitation to "Let your blue mantle lie on the shore; the blue water will cover / you and hide you," to full immersion when "The waves will stand a-tiptoe to kiss your neck and whisper in / your ears." The poem concludes with the evocative line, "Come, O come to my lake, if you would plunge to your death." This perhaps utilises the traditional trope of orgasm and sexual fulfilment as a kind of death, but the immersion described is couched in terms that equate love, and death, with all that is wholly natural.

The poems in *The Gardener* are deeply concerned with the tension between wild, untamed nature and domestic, human spaces; a tension often explored through the figure of the child or the memory of childhood. This is evident in Poem 70 which offers a poignant memory and reflection. The adult speaker, musing on life's losses, recalls a scene from childhood in which they "floated a paper boat in the ditch." Then,

> Suddenly the storm clouds thickened, winds came in gusts, and
> rain poured in torrents.
> Rills of muddy water rushed and swelled the stream and sunk my
> boat.

The speaker recalls his childhood belief that the storm was personally malicious, but now recognises that it is mistaken to "blam[e] my fate" for "all those games in life wherein I was loser." The speaker thus muses on the way they have projected personal emotion onto neutral natural occurrences, and decides to own their failures.

Time and again in the poems it is nature – wind, water, clouds, plants, dust, earth, animals – that dominates the scenes in which humans toil and rest and love. Tagore names many plants in the collection and they are not mere decorative additions but markers of Bengali cultural and environmental specificity. The champa flower, the kadam tree, the deodar tree, and the

tulsi plant are recurring motifs. In Poem 83, the mysterious disappearance of a woman who dwelt by a spring "near the deodar trees" is inextricably linked to the landscape. Her absence is marked by her "empty [water] jar" and burned-out lamp; "her voice was gone and where was her smiling face?" She returns as a dream-vision to the speaker one "summer night" and tells of the place she now lives: "'Here is the same sky,' she said, 'only free from the fencing / hills, – this is the same stream grown into a river, – the same / earth widened into a plain.'" The speaker awakes and hears only "the babbling of the stream and the rustling of the deodars at night." Her spirit has not left nature but has expanded into a wider, unbounded version of it, suggesting that true freedom and belonging are found not in escaping nature and the world but in transcending its perceived limitations.

This is one of several poems in the collection that treats death (see also Poems 68, 74, 81, 82). Always, in the poems, death is linked with nature, part of a cycle of life and growth. Of this, Aseem Shrivastava writes:

> Rabindranath's ecological vision is impossible to grasp unless one recognizes the cosmology in which it lives. He experiences life in wholes larger than his mortal self, feeling and thinking holistically in the most generous and expansive sense of even that inclusive term. This enables him to understand human life and death, as well as our place in nature and the broader scheme of things, in an ecological key. In varied genres of creativity, he demonstrates what it means not just to think but to *live* and *die* ecologically, never forgetting the power of nature within and around us. (323-324)

Shrivastava stresses that Tagore is "not an environmentalist as sometimes claimed." He is more than this:

> Some of his work – prominently the plays *Muktadhāra* and *Raktakarabi* [see below] – takes up, almost prophetically, environmental issues of great relevance in our own time, like giant dams and mining. But his fundamental commitment is to nothing less than the elusive simplicity of everyday sentience, ecological living and dying – something rendered remote, or even impossible, by the technocratic colonization of the planet in the twenty-first century. (323)

For Tagore, he asserts, "humanity … belongs to a cosmos beyond the earthly world of organic life" and for him, "the divine is not merely present in all creation, but exceeds all that exists" (325). Shrivastava quotes from one of Tagore's letters to his niece Indirā Debi: "I

have a very deep, intimate, truly living relationship with all nature, and I know and feel that affection, that bond to be my truest and best *dharma* [moral responsibility, calling, tenet]. ... It is a constant, everyday *dharma*: its observance is my constant act of worship" (qtd. 327). This responsibility, born of an all-encompassing *living relationship* with nature, cannot be explained or rationalised. In another letter to Debi, he strives to articulate this: "how can we possibly express it unless we feel it deep inside us, face to face with solitary nature? … We cannot really perceive this immense hidden mystery within us unless we sit in solitude on the shore of the vast ocean or under the open sky" (qtd. 329). In Tagore's spiritual ecology or ecology of the spirit, a Shrivastava calls it, "[w]onder at the unfathomable mystery of existence is woven into the most mundane, everyday experience of nature" (326). This wonder also infuses his poetry and its apparently often simple, repetitive and incantatory descriptions of nature's beneficence, beauty and also cruelty.

Tagore's veneration of the forest and the trees within it is particularly noteworthy, as mentioned above in my discussion of some of his essays / lectures, such as those in *Sādhanā* and also "The Religion of the Forest" in *Creative Unity*. This is also evident in many of his poems. A clear example is "In Praise of Trees," which was written in 1928 in connection with the annual tree-planting festival that was first celebrated at Santinekatan and became a national event in later years.[77] In the poem, the speaker addresses a tree, beginning with the apostrophe, "O Tree, life-founder." The speaker addresses the tree similarly at various points in the poem: "O valiant/ Child of earth (27-8); "O profound,/ Silent tree" (58-9); "O tree, friend/ Of Man" (83-4). The lyrical praise grants agency to the tree: "your height/ Raised from rhythmless rock the first/ Hymn to the light" (3-5); "Thus, in the sky,/ By mixed magic, blue with green, you flung/ The song of the world's spirit at heaven/ And the tribe of stars" (7-10). Or:

> Your branches offered
> Music its first shelter, made the songs
> In which the restless wind – colouring
> With kaleidoscopic melody
> Her invisible body, edging
> Her shawl with prismatic tune – first knew

[77] "In Praise of Trees" (original Bengali title: "*Briksha Bandana*") appeared in his 1928 collection, *Bana Bani* and was later collected in *The Message of the Forest* (1931) which brings together a number of poems and songs about trees. Tagore did not translate this poem into English. I quote here from the English translation by William Radice.

Herself. (40-46)

The tree is a powerful active agent, not simply a passive natural 'thing.' It not only provides for humans, offering shelter, beauty, shade and a place to rest, plus food, and fuel at the end of its life-cycle. It also gives form and meaning to elements of nature, like wind, sky, earth and sea that were formally (in an imaginary before when trees did not exist) "expressionless" (38). The tree creates beauty, music and light: "You possessed light's/ Hidden wealth to give colour to light" (49-50). It is creativity incarnate: "With patience, you revealed creative/ Power in its peaceful form" (60-61).

Of the poem, Radice writes "the originality of the poem is that it is not an expression of 'secluded communion' with God revealed through nature: it is as much concerned with humanity as with trees, with art and action as with Nature or mysticism. Its purpose is to show that humanity and Nature are inseparably linked" (*Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*). The tree is "the song of the world's spirit." Similarly, Alex Watson declares that in the poem "Tagore adopts the position of mediator between the reader and the natural world, seeking to attune the reader's attention to the co-dependence between all living [things]" (181). Watson makes this comment in an essay which attempts to show Tagore's debt to Keats, which I believe is a disservice to Tagore's originality and his fundamentally South Asian spirituality. However, what is relevant, and true, in this comment is Watson's claim about Tagore's belief in the co-dependence of all forms of life on Earth, whether human, non-human animal or plant life. This is a fundamentally Eco-centric perspective that refutes anthropomorphism and moves beyond mere environmentalism. It also stands in strong contrast to Kipling's conclusion to the *Jungle Books* in which the jungle is ultimately a place that is lost, relegated to an imagined an imaginary childhood world of talking animals, in the face of adulthood, colonisation and commodification and reason.

De-colonising nature: Tagore's challenge to colonial and anthropocentric views

Tagore's writing for children and young adults form a vital, imaginative front in his broader critique of colonial and anthropocentric worldviews. In his work, physical nature does not merely act as a passive backdrop but an active pedagogical force, a living classroom where a de-colonised consciousness is nurtured. Through child protagonists who experience deep kinship with trees, rivers, and seasons, Tagore challenges the extractive logic of empire and

the hierarchical arrogance of human exceptionalism. In this section of my thesis, I will focus selected stories and poems of Tagore, which, I argue, cultivate an alternative epistemology rooted in reverence, reciprocity, and attentive wonder, specifically attuned to the Bengali environment. I will also focus on Tagore's proposition of the child's unfiltered perception regarding earth and nature and his philosophy of de-colonising our relationship with the physical world and re-educating the imagination, sowing seeds of ecological harmony and ethical interdependence in the minds of the young.

Tagore's writings emerge as a profound site of resistance against colonial and anthropocentric worldviews, offering a unique lens through which to explore the de-colonisation of nature. This is as true of his works for children as it is for his other writings. Tagore crafted stories, poems, and plays that not only celebrated the innocence and imagination of childhood, and the profound gifts of nature, but also subtly challenge the dominant paradigms of his time. His children's literature, often imbued with ecological sensitivity and a deep reverence for the natural world, stands in stark contrast to the exploitative and hierarchical ideologies perpetuated by colonialism and anthropocentrism. By focusing on non-human entities, fostering a sense of interconnectedness, and critiquing the alienation of humans from nature, Tagore's works invite readers to re-imagine their relationship with the environment. In what follows, I seek to unravel how Tagore's children's literature serves as a counter-narrative to colonial and anthropocentric discourses, advocating for a more harmonious and equitable coexistence between humans and the natural world.

Abu Md Zafor argues that Tagore's poem "*Sabhyatar Prati*" (first published in *Chaitali*, 1896; translated as "To Civilization" highlights the trends of a modern culture that does not know how to show respect to nature and the natural world (9). The short poem begins:

> Give back the wilderness, take away the city
> Embrace if you will your steel, brick and stonewalls
> O newfangled civilization! Cruel all-consuming one,
> Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots
> And traditions of innocence.

Zafor asserts, of the 'civilisation' addressed by the speaker:

> Such civilization is based on greed and exploitation which does not bear a sustainable development for mankind. Tagore was fond of seeing the landscape of rural Bengal – its greenery, sights and sounds and the wilderness. He was terribly shocked when he

> saw the landscape being shrunk in the process of urbanization and industrialization. Tagore severely criticizes man's senseless act of destroying the wilderness and making structures there. (9)

Aseem Shrivastava agrees, asserting that for Tagore, "[i]ntimacy with the natural world from a formative age is the only way to restore humanity to spiritual and ecological health. This, to him, is the core of his practical religion as well as his pedagogy" (331). They claim the central question asked by Tagore is "Can we be human in the absence of nature?" (330). According to Shrivastava, Tagore attributed the progressively hotter summers of North India to the deforestation that had taken place there (332). It is this prescient realisation that led him to initiate the *briksharopan* [tree-planting] ceremony, mentioned earlier.

A deep love for nature, especially trees, characterises the boy Bolai in a short story of the same name. Tagore first read the story to those gathered at the first *briksharopan* festival at Santiniketan on 14 July 1928 and it was published later that year in the Bengali journal *Prabasi* (R. Chakravarty 3). Tagore did not translate this story into English, but several others have done so, including Radha Chakravarty, Prasenjit Gupta and Chaitali Sengupta.[78] Their translations, all available online, differ in style although the basic plot remains the same. In what follows I quote from Gupta's translation. As a small child, following his mother's death, Bolai is sent to live with his childless paternal aunt (Kaki) and uncle (Kaka), who narrates the story. Of Bolai, Kaka says, "in his nature, somehow, the fundamental notes of plants and trees sounded the loudest." Kaka finds this funny and his nephew rather odd: "We'd laughed about it no end," he narrates. It's almost as if Bolai *is* a tree, his affinity with trees is so deep. The descriptions of Bolai's love of plants and trees, and his profound response to them, are lyrical and compelling: "When dark clouds massed themselves in layers in the eastern sky, it was as if his soul became dense with the moist fragrance of the forest in July"; "When the mango trees bloomed in the month of Magh [January], 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 [*Shorea robusta*] flowering in Phalgun [February], would become suffused, become deeply coloured"; "After the night's rains, the early-morning sun would peer over the mountain tops, and its pale golden rays fell on the deodar [*Cedrus*

[78] Gupta's translation can be found on *Parabaas Translation* (https://parabaas.com) a website developed with the main aim of carrying English translations of work by major Bengali authors. Sengupta's version appears in *Borderless* journal (https://borderlessjournal.com/). Chakravarty's translation can be found in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Land of Cards: Stories, Poems and Plays for Children*, [Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Land of Cards: Stories, Poems and Plays for Children*, translated by Radha Chakravarty, Puffin India, 2010.

deodara; Himalayan Cedar tree] forest; and without telling anyone he'd go quietly and stand awestruck in the motionless shadows of the deodars, his body thrilling all over." Bolai is a sensitive, introverted boy who is mocked and teased by other children because of his deep affinity with plant life.

> 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. His most troubling time was when the grass-cutter came. Every day he had walked among the grass, peering closely at it: here a green tendril, there an unknown purple-and-yellow flower, so tiny; the occasional nightshade and its blue flowers, in their hearts a speck of gold; along the boundary wall, a kalmegh vine; elsewhere an onontomul; the small shoots just emerged from neem seeds pecked off the tree by birds, how pretty their leaves – and all these would be weeded by the ruthless weeder. These weren't the fancied plants of the garden, and there was no one to listen to their complaints.

The number of tree and vegetation species mentioned in this short story is notable. Each refers to a tress with important historical spiritual or medicinal value in India; all are native to South Asia (except some ornamental plants) and many are enormous forest trees reaching up to 60 metres in height. These plant species include (some of which I mentioned earlier), the deodar cedar, mango, sal, banyan, silk-cotton tree, bokul, neem, Indian gooseberry (*amloki*), nightshade, the medicinal kalmegh vine, and onontomul (*anantamul*). These are not mere background details; the central conflict of the story is catalysed by a wild silk-cotton tree seedling, which represents untamed nature growing in the wrong place, Kaki and Kaka's cultivated garden. The seedling is contrasted with rose bushes and other ornamental plants in the garden. Bolai's empathy extends to the overlooked and unnamed flora the grows in the garden, the wild grasses, tendrils, and tiny unknown flowers, that are callously cleared by the grass-cutter, representing the "unfancied" wilderness within the human-controlled space. This unique hierarchy (from the majestic deodars to the minuscule nightshade,) maps a spectrum of the ecological value and also signifies the intrinsic connection of the protagonist with the natural world (vegetation).

Bolai's "real age," says the narrator,

> was the age, those millions of years ago, when, from the womb of the ocean and the newborn layers of mud, the earth's would-be forests rose and first cried out … '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.' Even today that murmur of the trees rises in every forest, on every hill and grassland; and from their branches and leaves, the life-breath of the earth speaks out, again and again: 'I will stay, I will stay.'

The ideas expressed here echo those found in the poem "In Praise of Trees," discussed above. For Tagore, trees are foundational to life.

When the silk-cotton [Simul tree; *Bombax ceiba*] seedling starts to grow in a gravel path in the garden, Bolai is delighted. He waters it daily and watches it grow. But his uncle threatens to uproot it. The boy begs Kaka not to do so, and it is allowed to stay where it is, for a while. Two years later, his father returns from overseas travel and takes him away "for a Western education." After he leaves, his uncle cuts down the "overbearing," "wretched silk-cotton tree" and cannot provide a photo of it when Bolai writes to ask for one.

For Kaki, the loss of the tree mirrors and amplifies the loss of the child: "Bolai's father had taken him from her lap, as if breaking off the umbilical cord; and his Kaka had removed Bolai's beloved tree for ever, and that too shook her world, wounded her in the heart." The story concludes with an affirmation of the mirroring of Bolai's life and that of trees: "The tree had been her Bolai's reflection, after all, his life's double."

Little known in English for many decades, in recent years a number of English translations of "Bolai" have become available and the story has been hailed by literary eco-critics, mainly from Southeast Asia. Bapin Mallick writes of the story that it "exemplifies Tagore's portrayal of the non-human, showcasing his profound sensitivity and spiritual connection with the natural world. In the short narrative, Tagore subverts the narrative of human supremacy by advocating the importance of all forms of life for maintaining the ecological balance" (63). Likewise, Bolai, argues Saikat Chakraborty, "seems to be in perfect unison with the natural world. He can interpret the language of the wilderness and imagines the whole nature to be his own part. With the aid of his imagination Bolai ushers in a post-anthropocentric turn" (112). Each of these critics reads "Bolai" as expressive of post-humanist sensibilities, a label

that is rather often vaguely understood as synonymous with anti-anthropocentricism. Understanding anthropocentrism as fundamentally masculine and patriarchal, Md Rafiqul Islam writes, “The uncle’s dismissive attitude [towards the silk cotton tree] exemplifies patriarchal dominance over nature and the voices advocating for its preservation. It highlights the power dynamics where male authority overrides the nurturing, protective roles often associated with women and children” (116). In contrast, Islam asserts, “His aunt experiences profound grief after the destruction of the tree, which symbolizes broader ecological mourning for lost nature” (116).

Comparing “Bolai” and Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Salt” (1981), Radha Chakravarty argues

> that these two narratives, rooted in specific South Asian contexts, can offer a potential source of inspiration for contemporary post-humanist thought. Focusing on the false division between the human and nonhuman, these stories express a worldview privileging relationality, responsibility and connectivity, embracing the non-human, but without eschewing the idea of human subjectivity and agency. (2)

This last point is an important one. Tagore loved people and promoted what might be called a philosophy of collective humanism and intersubjective care, but he challenges hierarchical dualisms in which humans are privileged over non-human animals and plants. Certainly, humans have a role to play in the world, as he expresses in his essay “The Religion of the Forest.” In ancient India, “men found no barrier between their lives and the grand life that permeates the universe. The forest entered into a close living relationship with their work and leisure, with their daily necessities and contemplations. They could not think of other surroundings as separate or inimical. So the view of the truth, which these men found, did not make manifest the difference, but rather the unity of all things” (47-48). Many critics of an eco-critical bent have commented on this aspect of Tagore’s thought and the way it finds expression in his writing. Sanjukta Bala, for example, asserts, “Tagore’s stance is clear: knowledge does not lie in separation from nature; it lies in realising that man and nature are parts of a whole. Modernity on the other hand separates the two” (19).

Like many of Tagore’s stories and poems, “Bolai” can be read and appreciated by both children and adults. Children many not understand the adult losses the story articulates but are likely to be engaged by the vision of nature and the ‘natural’ child it presents. They, like the child protagonist, may feel “the unity of all things,” even if they, and he, lack the words to

express it. Bolai is wholly a part of nature and in this sense his relationship with nature is that of "a million of years ago," as the narrator-uncle states, and it is to this ancient and spiritual connectivity of all living things that Tagore appeals. Against this is set the instrumental, insensitive attitudes of his Kaka who, albeit unwittingly, compounds his wife's loss and pain.

Zafor asserts of Tagore's writings that they "are like a mine from where environmental issues can be extracted almost inexhaustibly. In Tagore's works man and natural world coexist harmoniously, man is portrayed as a humble ingredient of nature not as a king" (9). Zafor draws particular attention to Tagore's collection of poems *Banabani* (1926; variously translated as *Voices of the Forest*, *Stories of the Forest. The Forest's Message* or *Whispers of the Woods*). Of this he writes that all the poems contained therein "eulogize trees and the vegetative world. Most poems are titled with names of trees and plants …" (10). To my knowledge, *Banabani* has not been translated from Bengali into English, however several individual poems from the collection have been, in part or whole. One of these, "*Briksha Bandana*" (variously translated as "Tree Worshipping," "Invocation to the Trees" or "Tree Worship") shares many similarities with "In Praise of Trees," which I discussed above. Pankaj Bakchi offers this partial translation in which the speaker addresses trees:

> You heard the call of the sun from inside the dark rock
> In the first wake of life, you tree, the first life;
> High on top you uttered the first hymn of light
> On the chest of rhythmless solid; You bring life
> In the dreary desolate desert.
> ...
> Land or water was once speechless
> The seasons without festive-songs
> Your branch gave song's primitive shelter
> ....
> Man who is decorated with your wreaths
> O friend of man! I, a messenger, with these verses
> In tune with Sham's music, a poet enamoured
> Offer you this endowment of mine. (Tagore "Tree Worship"; Bakchi 16)

Sanjukta Dasgupta, a scholar working on a translation of *Banabani* (manuscript completion estimated to be April 2026), has this to say:

> In course of my reading of *Banabani* I have come across the poet's immersive concerns about the environment, expressed in his powerful and artistically crafted poems. The poems carry the message without ambiguity that it is crucial to understand the need to actively protect the natural environment. In the poems Tagore

> emphasizes that the responsibility of preserving the planet and its rich resources, primarily the forests and the natural phenomena that we have effortlessly inherited, lies with every thinking empathetic human person.

This is echoed by Sanjukta Bala: "The tree [for Tagore] becomes the epitome of the divine that has raised its head over the soil by listening to the call of the sun. Tagore sees the tree as the remnant of the first life on earth, the Adiprana. He considers the tree as the harbinger of life amidst lifeless desert that earth once has been" (20).

As the critical quotations above suggests, in the past decade a number of Indian critics have emphasised Tagore's role not only as a significant author and thinker, but also as an writer deeply attuned to the natural world.[79] I have already drawn attention to Ramchandra Guha's *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism* (2024), in which he makes this emphatic assertion: Tagore is "an unacknowledged founder of the modern Indian environmental movement" (36). Tagore, Guha claims, "was a precocious environmentalist. … [H]is words and warnings speak directly to the environmental challenges that confront India and the world today." In the estimation of these critics, Tagore is more than a nature-lover, or a writer who whose works are full of natural imagery. A striking feature of his Eco-critical sensibilities is his stress on the need to live sustainably, to balance ecological responsibility with survival, to ensure democratic access to natural resources while ensuring they are not depleted or abused. His environmental vision was also intimately tied up with social justice.

A handful of recent scholars also make the case for Tagore as a proto-ecofeminist, given his concern for all things on the periphery: children, nature, the poor – and women. Importantly, they revise the idea that Tagore's Eco-philosophy, expressed in his writing, was 'inherited' (or even copied) from western Romantics, arguing it has its roots in ancient Indian spirituality instead (notably the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedas*) and expresses a distinctly 'feminine' and 'subaltern' awareness of life's precarity. According to Anandita Biswas, "There is a striking similarity between [Arne Naess's] deep ecology and Tagore's Eco-

[79] See, for example: Debarati Bandyopadyay, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2019; Amartya Mukhopadhyay, *Politics, Society and Colonialism: An Alternative Understanding of Tagore's Responses*, Delhi: Cambridge, 2010; Sibaji Pratim Basu, *Rabindranath Tagore: Axiology of Politics*, UK: Frontpage, 2024; and Aseem Srivastava, "An Ecology of the Spirit: Rabindranath's Experience of Nature". *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2020).

philosophical perception. Both believe in the oneness of being and derive spiritual realisation from the teachings of the East" (16). However, she asserts,

> the harsh reality of life and the arduous journey of the common person to survive that Tagore witnessed led him to the mundane truth of life, away from the deep ecology's obsession with wilderness preservation. Deep ecology considers Nature as a repository of resources, and making use of it for human purposes is wrong. … Deep ecology's] indifference towards the issues of people experiencing poverty – food, fodder, fuel, soil erosion, deforestation, and water scarcity makes it a less appealing theory in the densely populated, underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, where the inhabitants share a strong kinship bond with the natural world based on reciprocity and cooperation. The poor and the female population, animals and the physically disabled are vulnerable as regards environmental damage. … Almost a century ago, Tagore was introspecting on issues of land and water resources, water scarcity, deforestation, soil erosion, and climate change, and was desperately seeking ways to ameliorate the suffering of the poor, peasants, women, children, and the non-human world. (18-9)

Tagore does not only advocate love and care for nature and the environment, but love and care for other human beings. He promotes a sustainable, symbiotic relationship between humans and all aspects of nature. This includes judicious use of natural resources so that future generations can inherit nature's bounty. His repeated message is one of benevolence and reciprocity in which greed and selfish individualism (which he finds characteristic of city life and western capitalism) are malign and destructive forces. In his essay, "The Modern Age," one of the essays in *Creative Unity*, Tagore writes of "our mentality with regard to the acquisition of money" and says that "in recent centuries", "[t]he whole of the human world, throughout its length and breadth, has felt the gravitational pull of a giant planet of greed" (*Creative Unity* 119-120). Later in the essay, he asserts, "In the modern civilisation, for which an enormous number of men are used as materials, and human relationships have in a large measure become utilitarian, man is imperfectly revealed" (126). In "The Spirit of Freedom," which is also collected in *Creative Unity,* he makes this strong claim:

> The civilisation of the West has in it the spirit of the machine which must move; and to that blind movement human lives are offered as fuel, keeping up the steam-power. It represents the active aspect of inertia which has the appearance of freedom, but not

> its truth, and therefore gives rise to slavery both within its boundaries and outside. The present civilisation of India has the constraining power of the mould. It squeezes living man in the grip of rigid regulations, and its repression of individual freedom makes it only too easy for men to be forced into submission of all kinds and degrees. In both of these traditions life is offered up to something which is not life; it is a sacrifice, which has no God for its worship, and is therefore utterly in vain. The West is continually producing mechanical power in excess of its spiritual control, and India has produced a system of mechanical control in excess of its vitality. (140)

Aseem Shrivastava writes, "Ever the prophet of renewal, Rabindranath's poetic vision is a challenge to the calculative utilitarian environmentalism in vogue at the present day. His is an invitation to a spiritual ecology, urgently needed to rescue imperilled humankind from its predicament in the Anthropocene" (334).

First and foremost, Tagore sought a balance between (human) progress and (nature) preservation. Always attuned to the Vedic call for the harmony of all living things, Tagore experienced a profound moment of ecological 'awakening' in 1916. On a sea voyage to Japan, he witnessed a massive oil spill and its destructive consequences for the sea and the life it sustains (Mondal and Dey 59). After this he became more ardent in his protests against mechanised life. He was a strong advocate for the revival of rural industry and the achievement of agricultural self-sufficiency for villagers, introduced and popularised various environmental programmes, including an annual tree-planting ceremony at Sriniketan during the monsoons in 1928. This ceremony, a protest against and remedy for widespread colonial deforestation, was adopted by the villages around the school (this is still practiced today).

Ecological prescience: *The Waterfall* and *Red Oleanders*

Although not written specifically for children, Tagore's play *Mukodhara* (translated by Tagore as *The Waterfall* and first published in *The Modern Review*, 1922) can be enjoyed and understood by children. It reflects his concern about the control of water, and changes made to India's natural waterways, something that, as I have discussed, went together with deforestation and railway construction in colonial India. The despotic antagonist in the play is not specified as a British coloniser but is a figure of power and authority: the king of an imaginary province called Uttarakut. King Ranjit dams a mountain spring, Muktadhara, that is the sole water source for a poorer, subordinate neighbouring state, Shivatarai. This means

the king can exercise great control of the inhabitants of Shivatarai, dispensing water if and when he chooses, and at great cost. The dam is constructed by the royal engineer, Bibhuti, who has dreamed of building it for twenty-five years. The scene notes for the Act 1 state: "*In the background is represented the upper framework of a big iron machine*." The opening dialogue of the play is between a Citizen and a Stranger:

> STRANGER|
>
> What's that there put up against the sky? It is frightful!
>
> CITIZEN|
>
> Don't you know? You're a stranger, I see. It's the Machine.
>
> STRANGER|
>
> Machine! What Machine?
>
> CITIZEN|
>
> The Royal Engineer, Bibhuti, has been working at it for the last twenty-five years. It's just been finished. A festival is now being held in honour of the occasion.
>
> STRANGER|
>
> What's the object of the Machine?
>
> CITIZEN|
>
> It has bound up the waterfall of Muktadhara.
>
> STRANGER|
>
> What a monster! It looks like a dragon's skull with its fleshless jaws hanging down! The constant sight of it would make the life within you withered and dead.
>
> CITIZEN|
>
> The life within us has got a thick hide to protect it! You needn't have any fear for us!
>
> STRANGER|
>
> All the same, this isn't a thing to put up nakedly before the sun and stars. Can't you see how it seems to irritate the whole sky by its obtrusion?
>
> (Tagore, "The Waterfall" 155)

Soon after, the engineer tells a messenger why he dammed the spring:

> My object was to make Man triumphant over the sands and water and stones, which conspired against him. I had not the time to trouble my mind about what would happen to some wretched maize fields of some wretched cultivator in some place or other. … [T] the cry of hunger cannot sway my Machine.

Devoted citizens sing "The Song of the Machine," which includes the following lines, throughout the play:

The Machine, whose claws wrench bare
The entrails of the earth.
Whose magic net captures in its meshes
The elements elusive and subtle.
We salute the Machine, the Machine!

Uttarakut's crown prince, Abhijit, who was found by the spring/waterfall when an infant and adopted because of an auspicious mark on his body, objects to the construction of the dam believing that water should flow freely and be available as a natural resource for the people of Shivatarai. He joins a protest movement against the dam, led by a singing sage, Dhananjay Bairagi (a Ghandi-like figure). During one protest, he finds the weakest part of the dam and breaks it, for which he is imprisoned by his father. He is freed from incarceration by his father's uncle (another king) and again breaks the dam wall. As he does so, he is stabbed in the back, falls into the swift 'free flow' of the released waters, and drowns.

Of the play, Tagore apparently said, "This play should not be taken as an allegory. The movement that has deeply permeated the country today is not represented through metaphor. … What has been especially portrayed is that clearing the path, opening the way for human unity, is the ultimate message of all civilisations" (qtd. Paul, n.p.). Interestingly, the year before the play was published fifty-two villages were submerged during the construction of the Mulshi Dam at the confluence of the Mula and Nila rivers, near Pune in Mashratata. This was authorised by the British colonial government. A *Satyagraha* movement, known as the Mulshi *Satyagraha*, protested against this and many of the protesters, including women, were imprisoned.[80] They were held in the same jail as Mahatma Ghandi and his secretary, Mahadev Desai. According to Sibaji Pratim Basu, "The Mulshi *Satyagraha* is regarded as the first anti-dam *Satyagraha* in the world. It was the point of departure for future anti-big-dam movements in post-independent India" (82).

As I have stressed, Tagore was not against science and technology, per se. However, he insisted that advances in these fields were to be used to improve the life of the poor and also, support and protect nature. Dams were not intrinsically wrong, but they were so if used to advance utilitarian profit and greed at a cost to other human beings and the environment.

In a similar way, Tagore's verse play *Raktakarabi* (1923; translated by Tagore as *Red Oleanders*, and published by Macmillan in 1925) (Tagore, "*Red Oleanders*" 212-61),

[80] *Satyagraha* is the philosophy/practice of non-violent resistance, developed by Mahatma Ghandi.

criticises unrestrained capitalism, environmental exploitation and the dehumanising effects of greed. This play revolves around Yakshapuri, a town ruled by an unseen, tyrannical king obsessed with gold and his sinister sidekick, a priest. The king, Makarraj, forces his citizens to dig extensive tunnels under the city to seek for gold. His workers are not named, only identified by numbers. Zafor argues that this anonymous ruler, hidden behind metal walls, symbolises the destructive forces of unchecked capitalism. He exploits both his people and nature, disrupting the harmony between humanity and the earth. Nandhini, the young female protagonist whose only jewellery is made from red oleander flowers, emerges as a beacon of resistance and the embodiment of benevolent nature. She represents life, beauty, and purity, standing against the king's oppressive greed. When the king's forces kill her lover, Ranjan, the workers rebel and finally experience freedom when they defeat the king's forces (the king ultimately joins the rebels). Through his portrayal of Nandhini, Tagore warns against the dangers of excessive materialism and the exploitation of both labour and the natural world. The play concludes with a harvest song heard from a distance, portending renewal and growth. As Mohit K. Ray writes, *Raktakarabi* portrays "the triumph of the values of an agricultural society over those of an industrial system through a lone woman's integrity and moral protest" (237). Ray continues, "Tagore noted with deep concern the assault of the industry-oriented materialistic life upon the agriculture-oriented rural ways which has taught men to live in harmony with nature. He was also worried over the exploitative materialistic society's insatiable accumulative instinct" (237). Bapin Mallick notes, similarly, "the play demonstrates the stark contrast between the capitalist world and the natural world through the presence of nature, a gorgeous natural backdrop, and the character Nandini, who … embodies nature itself and symbolises the inherent beauty of nature" (62). When the king first meets Nandini, he compares himself with a desert and her with a slender blade of grass: "Stretching hands to you; a little grass, I am bound to say – I am parched. I am empty, I am exhausted" (trans. Mallick, 62). These lines point to the inspiration for the play which, according to Mallick, occurred when Tagore was hiking in Shillong, Assam and saw a red oleander plant being crushed by a pile of discarded iron (62). The image of a frail plant, or blade of grass, struggling to survive in a mass of human-made rubbish, or a parched desert, lies at the emotional core of the play.

These plays share with many of Tagore's poems, stories and essays a deep concern about humanity's greed-driven destruction of nature. For him, this greed was inextricably linked with both western capitalisation and colonisation. I argue that colonialism, with its extractive

and exploitative logic, and anthropocentrism, which places humans above and apart from nature, are both subverted in Tagore's works. Tagore's decolonial approach towards nature is a strong counterpoint to the ravages of European colonial rule, which as historical scholarship demonstrates, subjected one-third of humanity to extractive regimes that reshaped economies, ecologies, and epistemologies for generations.

Samit Kumar Maiti asserts,

> India from the Vedic times had developed a reverential attitude towards nature because nature provides man not only sources of livelihood and sustenance but also [is] an integral part of man's moral, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects. India had its 'tapovan' culture in the past, and the religious texts propagate the principle of harmonious co-existence with nature. But the European conquest of India had not only established its physical dominion over the country, but it had been responsible for the disease, destruction of natural flora and fauna of the country, the deforestation, and the exploitation of natural resources and environment, causing unprecedented ecological disasters and environmental hazards. (7)

Tagore's depiction of environmental degradation cannot be separated from his critique of colonisation. The colonial project did not only involve political domination but a wholesale restructuring of relationships – between people and land, between cultures and ecosystems – reducing the vibrant lifeworld to calculable resources in service of imperial capital. It is against these violent, systemic forces that Tagore writes in his essays, fictions, poems and dramas including works written for children. Where colonial administrators saw timber, minerals, and taxable acreage, Tagore perceived forests as sources of spiritual and intellectual growth and rejuvenation.

Tagore's anti-colonialism

Several essays collected in *Creative Unity* further develop the ideas Tagore promoted in *Nationalism*: "East and West," "The Moden Age," and "The Nation." These contain some of his most vehement attacks on the colonial mindset that he believes is responsible for the greedy exploitation and destruction of the Indian environment, and its people. In "East and West," Tagore writes of "the effect of the West upon Eastern life – the West which, in its

relation to us, is all plan and purpose incarnate, without any superfluous humanity" (97). He continues,

> The wriggling tentacles of a cold-blooded utilitarianism, with which the West has grasped all the easily yielding succulent portions of the East, are causing pain and indignation throughout the Eastern countries. The West comes to us, not with the imagination and sympathy that create and unite, but with a shock of passion – passion for power and wealth. This passion is a mere force, which has in it the principle of separation, of conflict. […]
>
> It does not hurt my pride to acknowledge that, in the present age, Western humanity has received its mission to be the teacher of the world; that her science, through the mastery of laws of nature, is to liberate human souls from the dark dungeon of matter. For this very reason I have realised all the more strongly, on the other hand, that the dominant collective idea in the Western countries is not creative. It is ready to enslave or kill individuals, to drug a great people with soul-killing poison, darkening their whole future with the black mist of stupefaction, and emasculating entire races of men to the utmost degree of helplessness. It is wholly wanting in spiritual power to blend and harmonise; it lacks the sense of the great personality of man. […]
>
> The world to-day is offered to the West. She will destroy it, if she does not use it for a great creation of man. The materials for such a creation are in the hands of science; but the creative genius is in Man's spiritual ideal. ("East and West" 97-100)

Tagore's anger is very evident in passages like this:

> Possibly they [the British] believe that moral laws have a special domesticated breed of comfortable concessions for the service of the people in power. Possibly they ignore the fact that commercial and political cannibalism, profitably practised upon foreign races, creeps back nearer home; that the cultivation of unwholesome appetites has its final reckoning with the stomach which has been made to serve it. For, after all, man is a spiritual being, and not a mere living money-bag jumping from profit to profit, and breaking the backbone of human races in its financial leapfrog. ("East and West" 107)

Interestingly, Tagore directly address Kipling in the essay, although he doesn't name him. This is, to my knowledge, the only instance in which the Indian writer mentions the British one whom he refers to as "the Western poet":

> When we think of it, we see at once what the confusion of thought was to which the Western poet, dwelling upon the difference between East and West, referred when he said, 'Never the twain shall meet'" It is true that they are not yet showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is because the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine. Therefore, the poet's line has to be changed into something like this:
>
> > Man is man, machine is machine,
> > And never the twain shall wed. ("East and West" 108-109)

A page later, towards the very end of the essay, Tagore writes: "Earnestly I ask the poet of the Western world to realise and sing to you with all the great power of music which he has, that the East and the West are ever in search of each other, and that they must meet not merely in the fullness of physical strength, but in fullness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety" ("East and West" 110). Tagore is certainly alluding here to Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West" (1889).[81]

In "The Modern Age," Tagore states, "a relationship of pure utility humiliates man – it ignores the rights and needs of his deeper nature; it feels no compunction in maltreating and killing things of beauty that can never be restored" (115). He laments a "devastating change" that he avers has arisen "in recent centuries": "The whole of the human world, throughout its length and breadth, has felt the gravitational pull of a giant planet of greed," encouraged and aided by science. ("The Modern Age" 120). "Science," states Tagore, "has its proper sphere

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[81] This poem is often quoted as an example of Kipling's racism; however such claims disregard the lines that follow the (in)famous one:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth! (1-4)

The poem is about the meeting of "two strong men," one western, one eastern, who ultimately come to respect each other although (and it's an important 'although') the eastern man eventually agrees to serve alongside the western one, in the British army.

in analysing this world as a construction, just as grammar has its legitimate office in analysing the syntax of a poem. But the world, as a creation, is not a mere construction; it too is more than a syntax. It is a poem, which we are apt to forget when grammar takes exclusive hold of our minds" (124-5).

In "The Nation," Tagore again attacks what he calls "The Cult of the Nation": "With the growth of nationalism, man has become the greatest menace to man" (146); "With the unchecked growth of Nationalism the moral foundation of man's civilisation is unconsciously undergoing a change. The ideal of the social man is unselfishness, but the ideal of the Nation, like that of the professional man, is selfishness" (148). He ends the essay, typically, with a simile drawn from nature: "Our moral ideals do not work with chisels and hammers. Like trees, they spread their roots in the soil and their branches in the sky, without consulting any architect for their plans" (153-54).

Similar themes are articulated in Tagore's last work, a speech delivered at Santiniketan on his eightieth birthday, not long before his death, titled "*Sabhyatar Sankat*" (1941). This was subsequently translated into English by his editor and associate, Amiya Chakravarty, as "Crisis in Civilisation."[82] The speech is retrospective, as Tagore "look[s] back on the vast stretch of years that lie behind [him]." He speaks of his early admiration for the British and their literature at a time when "we had not lost faith in the generosity of the English race" and Indians held the "hope that the victor would of his own grace pave the path of freedom for the vanquished." Tagore says he was initially "impressed" by "evidence of liberal humanity in the character of the English." However, he turns quickly to his sense of "disillusionment (par 4): "[our] spirit of abject dependence upon the charity of our rulers was no matter for pride." Tagore laments how Indian ideas about "proper conduct" was replaced by "the ideal of 'civilization' as represented by the English term." He recalls "a painful feeling of disillusion when I began increasingly to discover how easily those who accepted the highest truths of civilization disowned them with impunity whenever questions of national self-interest were involved." He then says his admiration for British literature was not enough to compensate for the "utter and contemptuous indifference of a so-called civilized race to the wellbeing of crores of Indian people. That mastery over the machine, by which the British have

[82] I refer to the unpaginated English translation of the speech archived by the Indian scholarly depository *Samvit Kendra*. A recording of the speech can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tt5wtkos38M

consolidated their sovereignty over their vast Empire, has been kept a sealed book, to which due access has been denied to this helpless country."

Tagore next praises (1940s) Japan, Russia and Iran for the ways in which they have "tried to fight disease and illiteracy and has succeeded in steadily liquidating ignorance and poverty" and attempted to achieve national unity. Afghanistan, he notes, has "much room for improvement in the field of education and social development, yet … none of the European powers, boastful of their civilization, has yet succeeded in overwhelming and crushing her possibilities." In contrast to these nations, he asserts "India, smothered under the dead weight of British administration, lay static in her utter helplessness," and laments the same can be said of China. His anger towards Britain is clearly articulated:

> One cannot believe that Indians are in any way inferior to the Japanese in intellectual capacity. The most effective difference between these two eastern peoples is that whereas India lies at the mercy of the British, Japan has been spared the shadow of alien domination. We know what we have been deprived of. That which was truly best in their own civilizations, the upholding of the dignity of human relationships, has no place in the British administration of this country.
>
> If in its place they have established, with baton in hand, a reign of 'law and order', in other words a policeman's rule, such mockery of civilization can claim no respect from us. It is the mission of civilization to bring unity among people and establish peace and harmony. But in unfortunate India the social fabric is being rent into shreds by unseemly outbursts of hooliganism daily growing in intensity, right under the very aegis of 'law and order'.

Despite knowing some "really large-hearted Englishmen," he states, the collective force of the British Empire reveals that "the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere." And so, "[t]he spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man." Tagore ends the speech by expressing his hope for "a new chapter of history after the cataclysm is over": "Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises." He concludes by quoting "the Indian sages," adopting another metaphor drawn from nature: "By unrighteousness man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root."

Sentiments such as those evident in these essays are also found in Tagore's creative writing, including his poems and short stories for children. In these, argue Jitmohan Saha and Rubi Das, "[s]ymbols such as the river (representing flow and time), the bird (freedom and song), and the tree (growth and endurance) recur across his children's works. These symbols are never static; they evolve within the narrative, reflecting ecological cycles and human emotions. Through this symbolic economy, Tagore embeds environmental values in the very structure of his stories" ("Beyond Anthropomorphism" 832). Supriya Chaudhuri concurs, writing of Tagore's stories that "[t]hey create a *populated* landscape, the life of rural, riverine, pastoral Bengal, of humble individuals brought face to face, at critical moments, with the unboundedness of nature" ("Imagined Worlds" 135). In this sense, Tagore is not simply a 'nature writer" – he writes of a world inhabited by human and non-human (animals, vegetation) life forms that live together and locates moral value in harmonious, mutually supporting co-existence.

Arpita Ghatak suggests that these embedded "environmental values" also function to "resist" the exploitative practices that come hand-in-hand with colonisation:

> The short stories of Rabindranath Tagore whether written for children or young adults, carry a decolonial approach towards nature that resists the anthropocentric and exploitative frameworks imposed by colonial modernity – a vision deeply rooted in his intimate engagement with the riverine landscapes of rural Bengal during his time supervising family estates at Shilaidaha, Patisar, and Shahjadpur (6).

She further asserts that, "Tagore's narratives dismantle the hierarchies separating humans from the more-than-human world, presenting nature not as a passive backdrop but as a living, sacred presence that communicates, teaches, and even rebels, much like the traditional riverine cultures that colonial capitalism displaced and dislocated" (Ghatak 51).

That colonisation negatively impacted Indian nature and village economies is certain, as is Tagore's overt criticism of this in many of his creative writings, such as his novels *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, published in Bengali in 1916; in English in 1919) and *Gora* (published in Bengali in 1910; in English in 1924). However, not all of Tagore's stories that critique anthropomorphism are about the impacts of colonisation. The dangers of fervent Indian nationalism are also his target but not in the sense of opposing Indian independence (in which he was very much in favour) but because he opposed the nation-state as conceived in the West, a model he feared Indian nationalist sought to emulate. He also criticises aspects

of traditional Hindu culture that disregard the weak or promote patriarchal values and link these aspects of Indian culture with disregard for nature or a refusal to hear Nature's "voice." " In Subha,"[83] for example, the deaf-mute titular protagonist is socially rejected due to her disability and the narrator describes her as "silent and companionless as noontide" and as possessing "a lonely grandeur like Nature's own" (103). She chooses to sit alone on the banks of the stream that flows through her village. Her attunement with nature is described lyrically:

> Nature fulfilled her want of speech and spoke for her. The murmur of the brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatmen, the crying of the birds and rustle of trees mingled and were one with the trembling of her heart. They became one vast wave of sound which beat upon her restless soul. This murmur and movement of Nature were the dumb girl's language; that speech of the dark eyes, which the long lashes shaded, was the language of the world about her. From the trees, where the cicalas chirped, to the quiet stars there was nothing but signs and gestures, weeping and sighing. And in the deep mid-noon, when the boatmen and fisher-folk had gone to their dinner, when the villagers slept and birds were still, when the ferry-boats were idle, when the great busy world paused in its toil and became suddenly a lonely, awful giant, then beneath the vast impressive heavens there were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent, – one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow. (103-104)

Subha's only friends (apart from an idle boy who fishes near where she sits by the stream, but they rarely engage) are animals – her family's two cows, goats and a kitten. The narrator's descriptions of her interactions with them reveal her to be a young woman of deep feeling and great tenderness who finds comfort with the animals that she cannot with the cruel human beings who ignore her or taunt her:

> Whenever she heard any words that hurt her, she would come to these dumb friends out of due time. It was as though they guessed her anguish of spirit from her quiet look of sadness. Coming close to her, they would rub their horns softly against her arms, and in dumb, puzzled fashion try to comfort her. Besides these two, there were

[83] Originally published in Bengali in 1893. Here I draw on the translated version collected in *Stories from Tagore* available on Project Gutenberg. The story critiques colonial anthropocentrism through the deaf-mute protagonist's symbiotic relationship with nature, contrasting Kantichandra's violent hunting with her silent communion with animals and landscapes.

> goats and a kitten; but Subha had not the same equality of friendship with them, though they showed the same attachment. Every time it got a chance, night or day, the kitten would jump into her lap, and settle down to slumber, and show its appreciation of an aid to sleep as Subha drew her soft fingers over its neck and back. (104-105)

When Subha comes to marriageable age, she poses a problem for her parents: how to find a husband for their disabled daughter. “Many people do not realize that one who does not speak might nevertheless feel, and so they would express their anxiety regarding the girl’s future to her face” (107). The villagers spread a rumour that they will ostracise the family if the girl is not married and her “parents grew anxious, worried, agitated, as if the deity himself had come to choose the animal for sacrifice” (109). The narrator reveals to the reader a side to her maturation that the parents and callous villagers are completely unaware of: “Gradually she grew up. Gradually she began to find herself. A new inexpressible consciousness like a tide from the central places of the sea, when the moon is full, swept through her” (107). Her affinity with nature and emotional sensitivity is repeatedly expressed in the naturalistic imagery used to describe her: “heart was heavy with tears, like a mist-wrapt dawn” (108); “Nature seemed to compensate her for the lack of language. It seemed to speak for her” (105). When her parents decide to take her to the city, Calcutta, to marry a stranger, “Subha left her room, and flung herself down on her grassy couch beside her dear river. It was as if she threw her arms about Earth, her strong silent mother, and tried to say: ‘Do not let me leave you, mother. Put your arms about me, as I have put mine about you, and hold me fast’” (109). In Calcutta, Subha is dressed up and made up and presented to her prospective groom: The great man, after scanning her a long time, observed: ‘Not so bad’ (108). He notes her tears and thinks these show she has a “tender heart” (109). They marry soon after: “Having delivered over their dumb girl into another’s hands, Subha's parents returned home. Thank God! Their caste in this and their safety in the next world were assured!” (110).

The story ends abruptly. The final short paragraph begins: “In less than ten days every one knew that the bride was dumb! At least, if any one did not, it was not her fault, for she deceived no one” (110). Of course, it is her parents who have deceived the groom (and “everyone”) by not telling him of her inability to hear or speak. The final line leaves readers without any clue about her future, “In her silent heart there sounded an endless, voiceless weeping, which only the Searcher of Hearts could hear” (110). Readers, especially original ones in the late 1800s, could guess, however, what became of this ‘damaged’ bride (marginalisation, beating, servitude, even death). The story subtly critiques arranged

marriages, the commodification of young women, the dismissal of the disabled, an issues of caste and class. Against these social concerns stands the inarticulate, unspoken and unspeakable bond of Subha with non-human nature: animals, the river, Mother Earth herself. Ghatak argues that the story challenges the colonial privileging of speech and rationality, offering instead an embodied, non-verbal epistemology rooted in ecological reciprocity. She suggests, further, that Tagore exposes the parallel violence of anthropocentric and patriarchal systems, both of which reduce life – human and non-human – to utilitarian value (8, 12).[84]

Clearly, the overtly political tracts and speeches discussed above (*Nationalism*, "East and West," "The Moden Age," "Crisis in Civilsation," etc.) were not written for a child audience but the ideas they express – the dangers of science and machinery when harnessed for utilitarian and extractive purposes, the destructiveness of greed, the appropriative callousness of colonisation, the threat urbanisation poses to communities in tune with natural rhythms of life – are found abundantly, if not didactically, in Tagore's writings for children.

Perhaps Tagore has been largely overlooked as a children's author because he doesn't write down to children. He engages with them seriously, respecting what he seems to recognise as childhood wisdom. Many of his poems, stories and play can be read and appreciated by children and these "force a confrontation with stereotypical conceptions of children's liyterature, including children's poetry, as comparatively lacking in intellectual nuance, aesthetic richness, or activist power, making it difficult to maintain these distinctions" (Roszac xx).

Later writings: fantasy and nonsense as "heavy artillery"

In his later years, Tagore's writings changed significantly. Critics generally agree that this change became notable in the last decade of his life (from the early 1930s until his death in

[84] Tagore wrote *Nashtanirh* (*The Broken Nest* or *The Broken Home*) in 1901, a novella about the grief that child marriage can bring to everyone involved. This novella, the story "Subha" and Tagore's many comments against child marriage sit very uncomfortably with fact that he married off his daughters, to husbands they had never met, at the ages of 15, 12 and 10. According to The Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies website there are several possible reasons for this: financial worries, a dislike for the "current family atmosphere at Jorosanko" and "Tagore's wish to completely focus on his new idea of his school at Shantiniketan that made it necessary for him to disencumber himself from family commitments" ("Renuka Devi"). His biographers Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson ask, "Was he conscious of the grotesque contradiction – or did the two activities dwell in distinct mental compartments? There is no way of knowing. In later life, however, Rabindranath betrayed many guilty feelings about the marriages of his three daughters" ("Arranged Marriage").

1941). Dipanka Roy offers this acute observation, contrasting Tagore's early writing for children (some examples of which I have considered) with that he produced in later years:

> Instead of approaching the subject of children's literature to nourish and nurture young minds, Tagore began to use children's literature as a potent weapon to debunk the 'childishness' that he identified in the adult world. From a means of educating children in his early twentieth-century texts, Tagore's later writings for children would become like an indictment against the oppressive forces of [Indian] society, torn asunder by gender, caste, religion and racial hierarchies. Children become more mature and rebellious in Tagore's later writings. They seem to demand … their childhood back from the adults. For me, Tagore's later writings for children are meant as much for children in educating them in the ways of the world as for the adults to 'teach' them where they have gone wrong vis-à-vis the attainment of the full potential of the human race and the shaping of the human civilisation. ("Of Broken Umbrellas" 236)

In these later stories and poems, as Roy outlines at some length, Tagore turns to fantasy and 'nonsense' writing including the publication a collection of short, frivolous poems, *Khapchada* (1937), a collection of nonsense rhymes, *Chharar Chhabi* (1937; translated as *Pictures in Rhymes*), *Shey* (1937; translated as *He*), stories written in the fantastic or surreal mode, and *Prahasini* (1939; *The Smiling One*), a book of comic poems.[85] Often these were illustrated with drawings by Tagore which, according to Roy, "can best be described as 'grotesque'" (243). These stories and poems are very different from his earlier works, not only in terms of genre but also tone – they express a great deal of anger directed, emphatically against the woes of the contemporary word as it lurched towards the Second World War: "In his ambush against the materialist civilisation with its principles of political economy and the "nation-state," he used these modes [nonsense and fantasy] as heavy artillery" (Roy 246).

It is not possible in this thesis to carefully consider Tagore's late 'nonsense' writing for children or his childish' writing for adults. This would require analysis of the 'nonsense' genre, its claimed 'subversive' potential and how Tagore emulates and adapts elements of

[85] See also: Abu Farah Hoque, "Locating Textuality in the City through Literary Nonsense: Reading Tagore's *Khapchara* (1937)". *Language in India*, vol 22, no. 8, 2022, pp. 93-99; Subir Dhar, "The Nonsense Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore." *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 1*, edited by Mohit Kumar Ray, Atlantic Publishers, 2004, pp. 102- 111.

this, plus a discussion of the nonsense tradition in Bengali literature for children, especially the work of Sukumar Ray (son of the Bengali children's writer Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury) who was a close friend of Tagore and a student at Santiniketan.[86] What is interesting to note, however, is that in his later life Kipling wrote *less* for children. After *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910) he almost stopped writing for children completely (excepting his verse contributions to *A History of England* (1911) in collaboration with C.R.L Fletcher).[87] In contrast, Tagore's late output was mainly for children, whether 'nonsense,' fantasy or comedy, yet beneath the apparently flippant surfaces of the poetry and prose his thematic concerns remained serious. It is as if Kipling turned his back on the childhood,[88] just as Mowgli must to become a colonial adult, while Tagore returned to childhood, weaponising its innocent perspective to amplify the social and political critique that is evident in his writing from the very start. And always, in Tagore's writing, whether early or late, polemical or playful, spiritual or political, creative or non-fictional, nature is revered as not a resource to exploit but as a teacher that demands a politics of attentiveness, care and community that uproots what he perceives as linked forms of human arrogance and abuse: exclusionary nationalism, ingrained cultural discrimination (of caste and gender, for example), colonisation and anthropomorphism.

[86] It was my original intention, when planning this thesis, to write a chapter of Ray's children's writing and his relationship with Tagore.

[87] Kipling also contributed some stories to *Land and Sea Tales for Scouts and Guides* (1923) but these were unpublished stories that were written earlier.

[88] Or perhaps it was too painful after the death of his daughter, Josephine, to whom the *Jungle Books* were devoted, at the age of 6, in 1904; and the loss of his son, John (Jack) in WW1, in 1916. (See Ricketts.)

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

The work of Rudyard Kipling and Rabindranath Tagore contribute a great deal to the portrayal of the natural world and its elements in the colonial Indian subcontinent. They offer two significant, yet divergent, visions of human engagement with the natural world of South Asia. Although both have an intense spark and a sensory appreciation for the natural landscapes, animals and plants they portray, their narrative techniques, philosophical approaches towards nature and their ultimate extractions from it are quite different. Kipling's *Jungle Books* offer a complex portrait of what might be called imperial naturalism, structured by a conscious ideology of law and hierarchy that exists in unresolved tension with a deep, often elegiac, love for the Indian wildness. In contrast, Tagore's expansive oeuvre, encompassing poetry, stories, plays, essays, and pedagogical works, forges a deliberate decolonial vision rooted in Upanishadic non-duality, articulating a spiritual ecology of symbiotic harmony in which humans, non-human animals, plants, soil and climatic elements like the sun, wind and water co-exist sustainably. In the sections to follow, I will explore Kipling's and Tagore's contrasting treatment of childhood and maturation, their narrative frameworks, their perceptions and engagement with ecological changes, and the distinct ecological ethics that emerge from their works, based on the textual analyses undertaken in my preceding chapters.

The Jungle/British "Law" vs. the "bond of unity"

There is a stark contrast in the ways Kipling and Tagore represent the relationship between humans and the natural world. Many argue that for Kipling, this is clearly articulated as the "Law of the Jungle" which is not merely a code of survival but a comprehensive system of hierarchical governance. Critics like John McClure interpret the stories as "a fable of imperial education and rule, with Mowgli behaving toward the beasts as the British do to the Indians" (99). Likewise, Jan Montefiore argues that Kipling's works are "fired by the pities of empire and by the imperialist fantasy of mastering otherness" (96), and Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar argues that the narrative presents a "human-centric view of the jungle world. It must and can only be tamed by human beings" (238). These critics emphasise what they maintain is Kipling's belief in Britain's 'civilising' mandate and the (beneficent or cruel) rule

of the colonisers. Kipling's "Jungle Law", then, introduces an explicit, anthropocentric hierarchy designed to separate order from chaos, reason from instinct, and civilisation from wilderness. This law is formally taught as a set curriculum to Mowgli, and the mastery of this Law constitutes his education. His destiny, as unequivocally outlined in the story "In the Rukh,"[89] is to apply this learned authority in service of the colonial state as an agent of the Imperial Forestry Service; a point which has been highlighted by Jessica Straley, who observes that in this story, "Kipling's hero transforms his ferality into a weapon in the service of the British Empire" (101).

According to such readings, the narrative arc of the *Jungle Books* insists that to become a complete "man," Mowgli must leave the jungle, a transition Bagheera highlights by noting Mowgli's uniquely human traits: his distinguishing gaze, his ability to instrumentalise fire and his capacity for tears. Thus, the overt framework of the *Jungle Books* promotes a model of linear progress where nature is a preparatory, childhood stage that must be outgrown and disowned for adult, civilised responsibility. The Law enables temporary immersion and control but demands ultimate transcendence, a point crystallised in the poignant departure of Mowgli from the jungle in "The Spring Running." However, as I have discussed, the mandated exile from the wild fellowship is not celebrated in the story (or the stories as a whole). It is imbued with a passionate protest and a sense of immense loss. This loss, I have suggested, is not only the loss of childhood as Mowgli transitions to adulthood, it also signifies the loss of (belonging to) nature itself which, in the (neo)Romantic imagination is associated with childhood. Further, it is a loss about which Kipling seems deeply conflicted rather than something he simply endorses, although endorse it he does, in the final analysis. In the proleptic earlier story, "In the Rukh," Mowgli, a servant of empire, lives in the jungle, with his partner and infant child and with his "people" – wolves. But this liminal existence is not suggested in the final story in the *The Second Jungle Book*, at the end of which Baloo says to Mowgli, "It is no longer the Man-cub that asks leave of his Pack, but the Master of the Jungle that changes his trail. … Go now." Kaa tells the young man, "It is hard to cast the skin," and the narrator states that "Mowgli sobbed and sobbed," concluding with the line, "And this is the last of the Mowgli stories."

[89] As I have discussed, this story is not properly part of the *Jungle Books* and was written before them, although concludes their chronology. However, many critics take the stance towards this story is epitomised in Straley's comment.

I have also argued, against the common critical trend of reading the stories as pro-colonial allegories, that while imperial values may triumph in the end, the stories are far more ambivalent than many critics suggest. It is my claim that they reveal colonial tensions and anxieties about nature and the imperial destruction and treatment of it. This ambivalence manifests not as a simple contradiction between pro- and anti-imperial positions, but as a more complex layering of perspectives that cannot be resolved into any single ideological stance. The narrative voice that assures the implied child reader of order and control coexists with moments that unsettle that very authority; the crocodile's ancient perspective in "The Undertakers," which reduces the Sepoy Uprising to mere fodder for his timeless hunger; the dholes in "Red Dog" who, despite being cast as villains, are granted a dignity in their final battle that complicates any simple reading of them as mere vermin; the repeated portrayal of animals whose behaviour follows biological imperatives rather than allegorical ones, reminding readers that the jungle exists independently of human meaning-making. Even Shere Khan acts according to tiger nature; hunting for food, defending territory, responding to the same ecological pressures that shape all life. What emerges is not a neat opposition between Kipling the imperialist and some other position, but rather a recognition that the *Jungle Books* register immense environmental disruption precisely because they cannot fully contain it within imperial frameworks. The stories repeatedly exceed their own ideological boundaries, allowing the nonhuman world to speak in ways that unsettle the very hierarchies the narratives ostensibly uphold. This is why postcolonial allegorical readings that confirm binaries, while valuable, remain incomplete: they tend to translate every animal back into the human, every ecological disruption back into political metaphor, thereby missing what is most distinctive: Kipling's creation of a jungle that resists being merely a stage for human drama, a jungle with its own temporality, its own laws, its own way of persisting against the incursions of "Man" whether brown or white. The originality of my reading lies in demonstrating how the *Jungle Books* register environmental anxiety precisely because they cannot fully resolve the tensions between imperial ambition and ecological consequence. Kipling's achievement, ambivalent and inconsistent as it may be, is to have let the jungle grow wild through his pages, speaking its own truths even when they cut against the stories' more overt allegiances.

Tagore's approach is very different to that of Kipling, which is unsurprising given their very different positions: religious indigene and product of Anglo-Indian upbringing. Tagore's valuation of nature springs from the indigenous, spiritual soil of the Upanishadic concept

of *Advaita*, or non-duality, which sees the Divine manifest in and interpenetrating all creation. This is not a borrowed Romanticism, as some Western critics have claimed, but a deep, philosophical worldview rooted in what V.A. Shahane identifies as the "Eastern characteristic of Tagore's sensibility" drawn from "Bengali and Sanskrit poetry" and his "Vaishnava faith" (53, 60). Tagore does not impose any hierarchy on nature but offers a vision of a sacred unity between all living things. He draws it as opposite to the colonial, and by extension western, impulse to dominate and subdue. In his philosophical work *Sādhanā*, he writes, "India's forest life … has come to men who are in living communion with nature," while the West "seems to take pride in thinking that it is subduing nature" (5). This spiritual foundation renders his nature active, sentient, and communicative, never a passive backdrop or a resource to be managed under a foreign law (6).

Tagore believed that this idea should be cultivated from childhood, as reflected in his own educational journey. Rejecting the "borrowed cages" of colonial pedagogy that treated students' minds as "captive birds," he founded his forest-school Santiniketan as a "living university" where learning occurred in "open communion with nature" (Mukherjee and Baghira 148). Here, as Kathleen M. O'Connell notes, Tagore's pedagogy promoted "joyous learning" and an "ethics of care" (44) for all living things, fundamentally challenging the rote learning and utilitarianism of colonial modernity. His literary works for children articulate this same philosophy. In *The Gardener*, he poetically erases the boundary between cultural expression and natural phenomena: "Your song caresses my heart / like the soft whisper of leaves." This vision finds its apotheosis in poems like "In Praise of Trees," where the tree is apostrophised as a "life-founder" and "friend / Of Man," an active agent that "raised from rhythmless rock the first / Hymn to the light." Here, nature is not under law but is itself the original lawgiver, creator, and pedagogue; a source of wisdom that predates and surpasses human invention. Likewise, in *The Crescent Moon,* the child's reality is one of seamless integration where stars "talk to him" and the sky "stoops down to his face." This is a reflection of what Tagore, in *Lokashahitya*, describes as the child's timeless, "guileless and sweet" connection with nature, a spiritual truth that adult society has forgotten (Roy 750). The conclusion of "The Last Bargain," where a child's offer of nothing makes the narrator "a free man," stands in direct contrast to Mowgli's sorrowful, mandated exile. For Tagore, as scholar Ayanita Banerjee observes, the child's consciousness reveals an "eco-poetic consciousness embracing the real experiences of living and uniting oneself with the organic wholeness of nature" (5).

These differences between Kipling and Tagore are fundamentally eco-political. While Kipling's stories unconsciously documents the ecological disruption wrought by the colonial project in quite a few of his stories, and reveals a deep love for and knowledge of the Indian natural environment in them, he ultimately turns away from this, not unlike Mowgli turns from the Jungle – and perhaps with similar feelings of sadness and loss. Tagore, in contrast, offers an explicitly decolonial "ecological vision for a better world" (Banerjee 5) rooted in symbiotic harmony and protest. His poem "Sabhyatar Prati" ("To Civilization") opens with a direct demand: "Give back that wilderness, take away the city," condemning the "gluttony of irreverent sight" that turns landscapes into resources. His stories, like "Bolai," validate a deep kinship with plants, while plays like *Raktakarabi* and *Muktodhara* dramatise the conflict between the life-giving force of nature and the mechanistic apparatus of power, capital and control. Tagore's "religion of the forest," as he termed it, teaches principles of "enough-ness" (Shiva 222), cooperation with and compassion for all forms of life, whether suffering villagers or a sapling striving to grow. Tagore's message of association is felt and realised as a spiritual awakening and relinquishment of singular identity. The Jungle law disintegrates the notion of human-nature symbiosis (it's hierarchical), while the "bond" integrates them (it's holistic). The pre-requisite of "the Jungle/British Law" is governance and exile while the "bond" invites participation and belonging, aligned with Tagore's universalist, anti-nationalist views.

Exile from the garden versus return to the source (maturation vs childhood)

The idea of maturation and the concept of child are crucial sites where Kipling's and Tagore's contrasting philosophies are dramatised. For Kipling, childhood in nature is a potent but temporary state, a glorious immersion that must be abandoned for the responsibilities of adult, imperial manhood. For Tagore, the child's consciousness represents a perfected state of spiritual and ecological connection, an "ancient" source of wisdom to which the fragmented adult must strive to return. Kipling portrays Mowgli as an archetypal child-in-nature but at the same time his navigation is one of destined exile. Mowgli's education in the jungle under the keen supervision of Father Wolf, Baloo and Bagheera is figured as a preparatory stage for a life to be lived outside it. The *Jungle Books* function as a Darwinian and colonial *Bildungsroman* that emphasises hierarchy, consequence, and the ultimate supremacy of human civilisation**,** as exemplified bv Mowgli's departure as civilisational imperative. As

John McBratney argues, Kipling's children experience a "primordial castelessness" and the "delights of early felicitous space" (281) but this is a suspended, liminal state that foreshadows capitulation to the ordering binaries of imperial authority. The inevitable transition, crystallised in the phrase "Man goes to Man" (repeated in the song that prefaces "The Spring Running"), signifies Kipling's belief in empire's necessary hierarchies, with childhood's fluidity serving as a training ground for future governance.

However, "The Spring Running" indicates that the emotional and narrative climax is not a triumphant assertion of dominance but the chronicle of a deeply sorrowful parting. Mowgli is overcome by an unexplained melancholy, as he bids painful, tearful farewells to his jungle family. His required exile signifies the logic that to become a "Man" (signifying both adult and human) Mowgli should outgrow the wild/childhood. This overt vision, however, betrays what I have argued is the text's own unconscious resistance to its plotted ideology, revealing Kipling's deep, affective affinity for the very world his framework requires Mowgli to abandon. The child's state is one of glorious but unsustainable immersion, ultimately sacrificed to a maturation defined by separation from nature and entry into a world of human reason, science, and colonial administration; the world of the Forest Department to which he finally goes.

Kipling's admiration for the animals as animals, and the Jungle itself, speak of an imaginative investment in the nonhuman that continually pulls against the imperial certainties the narratives elsewhere assert. When the jackal in "The Undertakers" wails that "[l]ife is hard for us all" since "the bridge has been built" and "good food is more scarce" (109), Kipling grants a scavenger the dignity of lamenting ecological loss; the critique of imperial infrastructure emerging not through polemic but through a creature the British would dismiss as vermin. The narrator's aside that "[e]at and be eaten was fair law along the river" ("The Undertakers" 133) posits an ethics of mutual predation that stands in stark contrast to the British engineer's righteous violence in blowing the Mugger 'literally into three pieces' (139) for the crime of eating fifteen coolies, as if the crocodile, ancient inhabitant of those waters, had any other way of being. This is the heart of Kipling's ambiguity: he cannot stop himself from letting the animals have their say, and what they say repeatedly unsettles the human exceptionalism on which imperial ideology rests. Even Shere Khan is granted a death where Mowgli himself feels "ashamed" ("Tiger! Tiger!" 59), recognising that the tiger's end was "a dog's death" (59) – unworthy of the dignity of predation. What Kipling gives us is a jungle

that exceeds its narrative containers, a world where animals are not merely symbols but beings with their own purposes, their own griefs, their own ways of knowing.

On the other hand, Tagore's perception of the child contrasts with that of Kipling. For Tagore, the child's consciousness is not a preliminary stage to be superseded, but a model of holistic perception that the adult must spiritually recuperate. Tagore's child figures embody an unfiltered, egalitarian, and empathetic way of being that challenges the alienating structures of colonial modernity. In *The Crescent Moon*, the child's reality is one of seamless integration and dialogue: Tagore suggests in *Lokashahitya* that "the child-figure has remained the same as it was thousands of years ago" (qtd. Roy "Of Broken Umbrellas" 232). The immersion of children in nature enacts what Banerjee calls Tagore's "eco-poetic consciousness embracing the organic wholeness of nature" (5). In "Clouds and Waves," the child refuses the call of the outside, transforming the domestic space in environmental imagination: "I shall be the cloud and you the moon." This is what Bandyopadhyay celebrates as Tagore's liberation of children's literature from "top-down diktats" into a "line[s] of whimsy" that cultivate "joyful learning" (258). Tagore's writing posits a timeless, spiritual truth of connection that adult society, particularly the (utilitarian) colonial system he condemns, has forgotten.

Tagore's Santiniketan school embodied his conviction that true learning could only flourish "in the bosom of nature," where children might "attain the maximum development of one's personality" through "experiences uniting humanity with nature's organic wholeness" (N. Kumar 138; Banerjee 5). As Ghosh observes, Tagore insisted that the child "must in a productive way stay connected with nature and his teacher" – a connection "that does not conform to a template of professional, mostly predestined, growth but allows for the development of both the body and the mind" ("Caught in the Cross Traffic" 402-3). Here, as Christine Kupfer notes, "nature represented both a universal and regionally specific realm, opposing the alienation created by colonial education in India, which distanced students from the physical world" (211). At Santiniketan, as Tagore wrote in "My School," education unfolded under "the shade of trees," where "the constant contact with the living growth of things" replaced the "dead routine of the class-room' (399). This was the philosophy he enacted when founding his ashram school, seeking to "revive the ancient ideal [of Upanishadic teaching] and people his country once again with sages and heroes" while replacing "the soulless and mechanical system of education that the British rulers had imported from the Victorian slums" (N. Kumar 137). The result, as Banerjee observes, was

an “eco-poetic consciousness” where nature itself became “an antidote to his melancholic mood” and “a tranquil world, promoting sustainability and harmony” (5). The conclusion of his poem “The Last Bargain” powerfully depicts this ideal. After rejecting the coercive offers of power (from a king), money (from an old man), and fleeting pleasure (from a maid), the narrator finds true liberation when a child playing with shells on the seashore offers him “Nothing.” With that non-transactional gift of pure, playful being, the narrator declares, “From thenceforward that bargain struck in child’s play made me a free man.” Tagore’s child does not need to depart from nature; the child *demonstrates* the ontology of living within a sacred, reciprocal network. True maturity, therefore, is not an exile from the garden of childhood innocence but a conscious reawakening of that foundational empathy, wonder, and sense of unity with creation.

Where Kipling’s narrative arc moves from nature to culture, Tagore’s posits that authentic adulthood is achieved by reclaiming the child’s ecological consciousness, thus healing the rupture imposed by colonial and anthropocentric modernity. Thus, for Mowgli the jungle is a lost Eden, a cherished memory of a state that cannot be sustained. For Tagore, the natural world is an ever-present, sacred source and for him it is not a lost paradise but a living breathing reality that one can consciously choose to return to and learn from at any time, as executed in the pedagogy of Santiniketan. The trajectory of Tagore’s writing, through his long career, exemplifies this. In the ten years before he died, much of Tagore’s work was written for children, or employed ‘childish’ narrative strategies and genres: nonsense verse, absurd mock-logic and fantasy were used to great satirical effect as he parodied pendency, bureaucracy, constraining conventions and global greed, often by “miniaturising” adults, adopting a child’s perspective and the use of anarchic language and grammar. He promoted a childlike vision that countered modernity’s mechanism and nationalistic divisions, which manifested in the second World War (which began two years before his death).

Authoritative distance versus intimate participation

Kipling’s omniscient narrative voice in the *Jungle Books* moulds the reader’s response and relationship to the natural world. The narrator is authoritative, often commenting directly on the actions or thoughts of the animals and Mowgli, interjecting to give information or provide explanations. It is the voice of a knowing adult who is addressing a child or children, as is evident in lines such those which conclude “Tiger! Tiger!”: “[Mowgli] was nor always alone,

because years afterward he became a man and married. But that is a story for grown-ups" (64).[90] The whole of the text in *The Jungle Books* is controlled by this voice, representing the self-aware adult and perhaps the 'voice' of paternalistic colonial governance. The narrator solemnly relates (and translates) the jungle's conflicts in a formal, rational (if sometimes lyrical) manner, presenting himself as the sole authority on the ancient "Law," replicating the imperial project of imposing a familiar order on a complex, 'foreign' system. He comes across, then, as a civilised explainer of the wilderness for the child reader. Critic Noel Annan suggests that Kipling viewed hostile Indian nature through a sociological lens, "tak[ing] the environment as given and noted its effect upon men," and in response promoted the forces of social control, with the Law being paramount (322). While there are elements of validity in such a reading, as I have argued, reading the *Jungle Books* simply as imperial allegories is too simplistic. The narrator appears to assure the (implied child) reader of a controllable structure beneath the apparent chaos, and so reflects what Parama Roy identifies as the imperial project's need to manage both men and "extra-human dramatis personae" (74). However, this authority is sometimes undermined and opens to various ambiguities. As Sue Walsh argues, and I have discussed, the text can be read as unsettling binary oppositions, and the narrator's role as a translator of animal speech – which may be coded as Indian languages, can introduce irony and destabilise fixed identities, even as it presents a front of order.

In contrast to Kipling's (apparently) authoritative, omniscient third-person narrator, Tagore's poetry is overwhelmingly characterised by first-person intimacy, lyrical address, and a tone of earnest supplication or contemplative meditation often approaching a chant or litany. His stories stress empathetic identification in and with the environment, even in its harsher forms For example, in "The First Jasmines" from *The Crescent Moon*, the speaker's recollection is sensuous and personal, "I seem to remember the first day when I filled my hands with these jasmines, these white jasmines." The repetition and simple diction create an incantatory, almost childlike tone, inviting the reader into a private memory of communion rather than

[90] Kipling is no doubt slyly gesturing towards "In the Rukh," in which Mowgli goes off with Abdul Gafur's "thirteen-year-old" daughter, against her father's wishes. Gisborne tells Mowgli he has "done a great shame to Abdul Gafur. Thou hast dishonoured his house and blackened his face." He is told to "Make the *shadi* [marriage arrangements] swiftly" because "the mischief is done." Of the daughter, the narrator writes, "This was not at all the girl that Gisborne had seen with a half-eye slinking about the compound veiled and silent, but another – a woman full blown in a night as the orchid puts out in an hour's moist heat" – an organic articulation of sexual awakening. Twelve months later she is revealed to be living with Mowgli and their child. Of interest, she is clearly marked as Muslim, not only by her father's name and the fact he wears "a turban" but also when Gisborne says due to the marriage "the girl will make him a Mussulman." There are many disparaging "grown up" asides about race, religion and caste in the story.

presenting a public lesson. In "In Praise of Trees," the speaker uses direct apostrophe – "O Tree, life-founder" – granting the tree agency and engaging with it as a sovereign "Thou." The tree is an active subject, not a passive object of description: "your height / Raised from rhythmless rock the first / Hymn to the light." The direct prayers and confessions in the poems in *Gitanjali* also adopt this intimate mode that dissolves the boundary between the speaker, the divine, and the natural world: "Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust." The text clearly indicates that the speaker is a vulnerable participant in a fragile, sacred ecology and invites the reader to do the same. This narrative perspective cultivates in the reader not a lesson in governance, but a sense of shared vulnerability, wonder, and co-dependence. It is an invitation to participate in the communion, not to observe it from a sanctioned distance. This approach parallels what Dhwani Sodha describes as the Vedic knowledge system, which emphasises "ecological balance through reverence for nature and sustainable practices" (Sodha 32) and sees natural elements as sacred.

Th range of voices in Tagore's prose writing is quite different. In the story "The Parrot's Training," the tone is satirical rather than earnest; it mocks, rather than endorses adult (and class) authority and knowledge. In "Bolai," the adult perspective is satirised and shown to be deficient, aligning reader sympathy with the child (and the grieving aunt). The narrator does not *explain* the boy's affinity with trees from a position of superior understanding; instead, he confesses his own initial bafflement at Bolai's deep, wordless connection. In non-fictional works like "The Message of the Forest,' Tagore's voice is clear and persuasive as he argues that India's "view of life and love has come to us from the great peace of our ancient forests' (387), and expresses his belief that true knowledge of nature comes not from scientific dissection ("mere knowledge") but from joyful, spiritual kinship. He contrasts the West's "pride in subduing nature" with India's forest-born civilisation that maintained "closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects" (6-7). This critique intensifies to an almost strident pitch in *Nationalism*, where he warns that western nations "are following that path of suicide" by "smothering their humanity under the immense weight of organizations" (77).

It is the lyrical, resonant, first-person voice of the poetry and songs that most distinguishes Tagore from Kipling, although English readers' appreciation of this is hampered at times by translation, as I have discussed. The difference between Kipling's panoramic, ordering gaze and Tagore's immersive, participating "I" reflects their core disagreement about humanity's

proper stance toward nature. Kipling's voice, for all its love of the jungle's detail and rhythm, ultimately aligns with what he saw as the British role to interpret, classify, and govern. Tagore's voice *perform*s his philosophical and spiritual ideal, where, as scholar Mohammad A. Quayum notes, "nature is a manifestation of divinity" (187). His narrative perspective is thus an act of decolonial resistance, rejecting the detached, utilitarian "gluttony of irreverent sight" that is associated with colonial modernity and "this mocking age of unbelief" ("Boro-Budur"), and instead offers a model of attentive, humble, and reciprocal listening to the more-than-human world, seeking not mastery but *sadhana* (the realization of union.)

Unconscious documentation versus conscious condemnation

The *Jungle Books* frequently advance themes of environmental transformation and exploitation which are not always positively portrayed as some critics suggest. Kipling's representation of the environmental damage wrought by the colonial and industrial processes may have been unconscious expression of colonial "environmental anxiety," as I have suggested with reference to James Beattie. This documentation of destruction reveals, as Christie Harner argues, how imperialism was concurrently sociopolitical and ecological, with its effects on the natural world "as immense as those on indigenous peoples" (135). "The Undertakers" serves as an important example to which I have given considerable atrtention. The railway bridge, a proud symbol of imperial engineering and progress, irrevocably alters the riverine ecosystem, fragmenting the river which now looks "more like a chain of little lakes than a stream" (The Undertakers 106,) and creating artificial sandbars. This prompts the Jackal's lament for a lost world: "'Ahai! The world is iron in these days… since the bridge has been built good food is scarcer'" (110). The narrative is saturated with images of industrial pollution and decay, reducing the environment to what the jackal refers to as a "rubbish-heap" (114). The killing of the ancient Mugger crocodile by the bridge-builder's rifle, details of which conclude the story, is described as a swift, mechanised act that feels less like a heroic conquest and more like the violent, unceremonious displacement of an older, primordial order, a "regime shift" in the ecosystem. This act, while often read as allegorical imperial triumph, is undercut by the phlegmatic indifference of the surviving animal interlocutors and the text's deeper suggestion, as Harner notes, of "ongoing instability – the ceaseless ebb and flow of flood and drought" beyond human control (142).

Likewise, the devastating description of drought in "How Fear Came" is stark and resonant, detailing a systemic collapse of the jungle ecology: "The green growths in the sides of the ravines burned up to broken wires and curled films of dead stuff; the hidden pools sank down and caked over… the bamboos withered, clanking when the hot winds blew" (150). The drought's impact is presented as a great, shared fear that temporarily suspends the jungle's predatory laws. Such passages embed a keen awareness of environmental fragility and scarcity directly into the fabric of the narrative, challenging the fantasy of benign, limitless control. Kipling here writes the chronology of a world that is changing/evolving and this recording carries an elegiac tone that complicates the surface ideology. This is perhaps most clearly captured in "Mowgli's Song Against People," a furious anthem of nature's vengeance where the bitter Karela vine symbolises the jungle's reclaiming force: "I have untied against you the club-footed vines, / I have sent in the Jungle to swamp out your lines. / The trees – the trees are on you!" This visceral prophecy of ecological retribution stands in stark tension with any straightforward narrative of colonial mastery.

Tagore portrays similar environmental issues explicitly in his works with conscious critique and a proactive vision of reclamation grounded in indigenous philosophy and religion. His spiritual beliefs in the justice of ecological harmony are deeply linked to a sharp, decolonial protest against the extractive, utilitarian logic of colonialism and industrial capitalism. His play *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleander*) dramatizes this conflict through the kingdom of Yakshapuri, where an unseen king's obsession with gold drives the exploitation of both workers and the earth itself. Zafor argues that the anonymous ruler, "hidden behind metal walls, symbolizes the destructive forces of unchecked capitalism,' disrupting "the harmony between humanity and the earth" while Nandhini, the protagonist, emerges as "a beacon of resistance and the embodiment of benevolent nature" (9). Here Tagore's critique of extractive greed finds dramatic form, the play's underground mine standing as metaphor for colonial resource plunder that reduces living landscapes to dead commodities. For Tagore, this was not an abstract concern but a cultural and spiritual crisis. His vision drew deeply from the Upanishadic philosophy that, as N. Kumar observes, informed his aim to "revive the ancient ideal [of ashram retreats] and people his country once again with sages and heroes" (137), replacing colonial materialism with what Banerjee calls "symbiotic co-existence' that "promotes an ecological vision for a better world" (5).

Tagore's approach towards nature is very practical and pedagogical. His experiment at Santiniketan was the living manifestation of this decolonial ecology. He rejected the

enclosed, rigid colonial education system that treated students' minds as "captive birds" to be stuffed with foreign knowledge, a process he savagely satirised in the story "The Parrot's Training," where the bird ultimately dies, choked on the book leaves it is forced to eat. In direct opposition, he founded his Brahmacharya ashram and later Visva-Bharati as a "tapovan" (forest school) or "living university" where learning occurred under the open sky, in constant dialogue with the rhythms of the seasons and local flora and fauna. This was designed to foster "joyous learning" and an "ethics of care" for all living things, directly challenging the alienation inherent in both colonial and industrial modernity. His aim was to cultivate a sense of cosmic unity. As Patrick D. Murphy notes, Tagore's *jiban-debata* philosophy balanced "deep engagement with the world with serene detachment from it," combining "ancient Indian philosophy with modern scientific thought" (315), a vision where nature serves as both teacher and sanctuary, solidifying his legacy as a poet who "wove ecological consciousness into the fabric of human thought" (315). Thus, while Kipling's jungle tales unconsciously archive the wounds of ecological imperialism, Tagore's work and life consciously sought to heal them by reviving and modernising an indigenous, ecological worldview.

Hierarchical ambivalence versus egalitarian care

Kipling's overt ethic is inherently hierarchical and utilitarian, privileging order and control as Jan Montefiore affirms in noting that "Mowgli's position in the Jungle does in some measure correspond to the European imperialists' daydream of lording it among the natives" (96). Her proviso, "in some measure," is echoed later in her essay when she suggests readers should avoid "oversimplifying" (102) Kipling's stories. As I have traced in this thesis, there are many ambiguities in the *Jungle Books* that undermine "simple" allegorical readings. In the story "How Fear Came," for example, the vision of the "Water Truce," where a pragmatic suspension of the food chain occurs during a severe drought, acknowledges a shared vulnerability to a greater natural force, creating a temporary, cross-species community. This is not realistic, of course, but points to an alternative understanding of species co-dependence in a shared ecosystem. Likewise, Kipling's detailed and evocative descriptions of the jungle flora, and his naturalistic portrayals of animal behaviour – from the mongoose's inherited "peculiar rocking, swaying motion" in battle ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi"), to the python Kaa's cyclical renewal through shedding his skin, and the carnivorous, not cannibalistic, feeding behaviour of the mugger crocodile – grant the non-human world a vibrant,

autonomous life that often resists allegorical subordination. As Parama Roy observes, Kipling's work encompasses both "the deployment of sovereign violence against animality" and a "sardonic awareness of the imbecility at the heart of human claims to exceptionalism" ("Kipling's Bestiary" 833-834). This very ambivalence grants his work its enduring complexity and even, at times, a strange prescience. Some of his narratives, as Christie Harner notes, reflect "regime shifts" where human actions fundamentally alter animal ecosystems, embedding within tales of imperial progress an unconscious "dirge for the wilderness empire displaces" (Harner 135). Thus, his legacy is one of productive contradiction, he crafts a Law to order the jungle but populates it with such teeming, agentic life that its disruption or loss feels deeply tragic, containing the seeds of an ecological awareness that recognises a huge change.

Tagore's ethic, on the other hand, is unequivocally egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, and rooted in a metaphysics of care that extends "beyond the animal to the vegetative world" (Zafor 11) that is directly opposed to colonial and industrial modernity. "Bolai" typifies this sensibility in an ostensible simple story. For the titular boy "the fundamental notes of plants and trees sounded the loudest" His uncle's decision to cut down his beloved silk-cotton sapling is portrayed not as sensible land management but as a violent act of emotional and ecological insensitivity directed against the child, his aunt and the tree itself – a microcosm of the utilitarian greed. The story validates the child's deep connection as a superior form of understanding, aligning with indigenous knowledge systems that emphasise, as Dhwani Sodha writes, "reverence for nature and sustainable practices" and see natural elements as sacred ("Timeless Guidance" 32)

Tagore did not confine this egalitarian care to mere verbal expression but rather he applied it practically through his pedagogical actions. At Santiniketan, Tagore created a "living university" to promote an "ethics of care for all living things," (Chakrabarty 58) directly countering the alienating, captive-bird model of colonial education he satirises in "The Parrot's Training." In other literary works Tagore dramatise this conflict on a grand scale. Plays like *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleander*) and *Muktodhara* (*The Waterfall*) pit the life-giving, feminine, and fluid force of nature (embodied in characters like Nandini or the waterfall itself) against the sterile, greedy, mechanistic apparatus of the state and capital. This represents the clearest ethical divergence from Kipling; where Kipling's "Law" enforces a social and species order that often reflects imperial hierarchy, Tagore's vision is of a decolonial ecology that seeks not to govern nature, but to participate in its sacred unity,

offering a radical alternative to both the ambivalent documentation of ecological loss and the hierarchical ethos of the colonial project.

Contradiction and unity as lasting legacies

Kipling and Tagore offer two ways of viewing the place of humans in nature, and their contending visions continue to inform global discourses about humanity and the environment. Kipling's works stand as a monumental, ambivalent testament to the colonial era's conflicted anxiety where a love for nature is bound to an ideology that demanded its subjugation. As Jan Montefiore aptly summarises, his writing for children "was undoubtedly fired by the pieties of empire and by the imperialist fantasy of mastering otherness, but its lasting achievement was the creation of the Jungle which readers could enter in imagination to discover the meanings both of wildness and of humanity" (108). The *Jungle Books*, often read as a "fable of imperial education and rule" (John McClure 58) also articulates an elegiac sense of the loss of both childhood and unmediated nature and captures the poignant tragedy of a world perceived as both magnificently autonomous and necessarily conquerable. This is the world where Mowgli's "Song Against People" prophecies the jungle's vengeful reclamation, where the bridge in "The Undertakers" symbolises an "iron" world that displaces ancient ecosystems, and where the detailed ethological observations of animals grant them an agency that often exceeds their allegorical function. Kipling leaves us, ultimately, with the haunting image of an amphibious hero – "of the jungle and not of the jungle" – whose departure causes the forest itself to weep, a powerful symbol of the irreconcilable schism at the heart of the colonial project.

Tagore, in contrast, imagine the cosmos not as a hierarchy but as a "great meeting" on the "seashore of endless worlds," where humans, animals, plants, and rivers, soil, clouds and sunshine exist in a fluid, interdependent, and sacred concert. His work is not merely descriptive but deeply prescriptive, offering a timeless "ecological vision for a better world" (Banerjee 5) rooted in a decolonial vision. This vision, drawing from Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy, posits "nature as a manifestation of divinity" (Mohammad A. Quayum) and champions an ethics of reverence and reciprocity.

The work of these two writers map a critical spectrum of response to modernity's relationship with nature. Kipling, the complex chronicler, immerses us in the visceral beauty and brutal realities of a changing world, his work a palimpsest where imperial ideology is constantly

shadowed by loss. Tagore, the visionary unifier, promotes a way out of that duality, extending an open invitation to step into the circle and cycle of life. As Guha observes, Tagore's poems "display a lifelong engagement with nature" and its "acute observations of birds, plants and trees" (13), reminding us that the sacred is not locked in temples is found in "the divinity of humanity and the humanity of God" (Aubrey): "and the ideal he proposes is to be attained not through philosophical reasoning but through direct experience of the union of the individual self and the eternal spirit" (Aubrey). Nonetheless, for these very reasons, he risked being dismissed as a romanticised "oriental' which – as I have discussed – he became for many readers from the West, not long after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for being precisely this: an a mystic, Eastern sage compelled to impart a vision of natural harmony deeply embedded in (alien) Indian mythology, cosmology, philosophy and religion.

It is ironic that both writers suffered critical reversals in their reputations for deeply political reasons. Kipling, the "Bard of Empire," fell from favour as decolonisation rendered his imperial certainties suspect; as Benita Parry observes, "the history of Kipling criticism is emblematic of changes in Western attitudes to the modern imperial experience" (186). Tagore's reputation in the West slipped dramatically too, but for opposite reasons. His anti-nationalism and increasingly direct expressions of anti-colonialism, evident in works like *Nationalism*, alienated western readers as the world lurched toward war. Compounding this, as Rita Kothari notes, the very spirituality that had won him the Nobel Prize, his personification of "India's spiritual East" to the West's "rational" one, became a liability in an era of modernism, with poor translations further diminishing his lyrical complexity (23). It is heartening that recent decades have seen both writers re-evaluated with greater openness to contradiction and ambiguity. This thesis contributes to that ongoing work of reading them not as symbols but as writers: flawed, complex, and urgently worthy of our attention. Perhaps it is not true that they "lived lives that ran coldly parallel, like sets of railway tracks, designed not to touch even by accident" (Nair 44). In all their complexity, the visions of "the twain,' Kipling and Tagore, do "meet" in the awe both express in the face of the Indian forest/jungle.

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