

When Trees Speak: Revisiting Select Writings of Tagore and Mahasweta Devi from the Perspective of Plant Humanities

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Abstract: “Since the emergence of Cartesian philosophy, thinkers of various disciplines have sought to challenge the concept of human rationality with a view to establishing the symbiotic relationship between humans and the nonhuman”¹. Therefore, it becomes essential to examine how plants are represented and how they function within literary texts. Plant Humanities, as an interdisciplinary field, moves beyond viewing vegetation as a passive background to human action. Instead, it foregrounds plant life as dynamic presences that shape cultural meaning, ethical imagination, and narrative structure. By treating plants not merely as scenery but as active participants in human and ecological worlds, this approach reorients literary studies toward a more inclusive understanding of life and agency. Moving beyond the notion of anthropocentrism, the study reframes plant as participants in narrative, identity formation, and ecological imagination. Drawing on Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “Bolai”, Mahasweta Devi’s novella *Aranyer Adhikar* (*The Rights of Forests*), the paper argues that plants in these texts operate as productive forces that deconstruct the division of human and the non-human. It invites ethical attention to multispecies entanglements, and expose socio-ecological injustice.

Key Words: Plant Humanities, Intrinsic Value, Vegetal Agency, Species Relations.

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Introduction

In recent years, environmental humanities have encouraged us to change the way we read literature, history, and culture. Instead of seeing them as purely human-centered activities, this approach asks us to recognize that they are shaped by the interconnected lives of humans, animals, plants, and other forms of life. It reminds us that our stories and histories are not created by humans alone, but are part of a larger web of multispecies coexistence. Within this expanding intellectual landscape, plant humanities has emerged as a vibrant field that challenges the long-standing assumption that plants are passive backdrops to human action. Instead, plants are increasingly understood as active participants in cultural memory, ethical formation, and ecological imagination. Bengali literary traditions, ranging from the devotional and pastoral to the nationalist and modernist, have long been rooted in intimate relationships with rivers, forests, fields, trees, and flowering seasons. Yet, much of conventional literary criticism has approached these natural elements symbolically by treating them as metaphors for human emotions or national identity. Hence, this paper proposes a different approach by drawing upon plant studies and ecocritical theory. It reads trees, crops, forests, and flowers as living presences that carry memory, community life, and intervene in ethical discourse. Hence, it repositions plants as agents that subvert anthropocentric hierarchies embedded within colonial, capitalist, and even nationalist narratives.

The phrase “when trees speak” in the title of this paper does not imply a simple anthropomorphic projection; rather, it gestures toward a mode of listening, a critical attentiveness to vegetal life as expressive in its own right. Bengali literature, with its deep ecological consciousness and seasonal sensibility, offers fertile ground for such listening. From the rural landscapes of nineteenth-century prose to the politically charged forests represented in the fictional world of twentieth-century, plants often serve as silent witnesses to dispossession, resistance, and cultural transformation. This article seeks to revisit Bengali literary ecology as a multispecies archive by foregrounding these vegetal presences.

Plant Humanities and Its Critical Intersections

Plant humanities emerges from the broader turn toward posthumanism, new materialism, and multispecies studies. It seeks to dismantle the long-standing hierarchy that privileges human consciousness over vegetal life. In the long history of Western thought, plants have often been placed at the margins of philosophical concern. Influenced by Aristotle’s concept of the *scala naturae*, or “great chain of being,” life was arranged in a strict hierarchy, from inert matter to plants, animals, and finally human beings at the top. Within this framework, plants were understood as possessing only a basic “nutritive” soul, defined by growth and reproduction but lacking sensation, movement, or reason. This hierarchical ordering was later reinforced by Cartesian dualism, which sharply separated mind from matter and elevated rational consciousness as the defining feature of existence. Since plants do not display cognition, intention, or movement in forms that align with human expectations of agency, they have historically been interpreted as inert or purely mechanical organisms. As a result, Western metaphysics largely confined plants to the lowest rung of being; alive, yet deprived of

interiority, subjectivity, or ethical consideration. However, contemporary theorists challenge this hierarchy by arguing that plants are neither passive matter nor decorative backdrops but dynamic agents participating in ecological and cultural worlds.

One foundational thinker in this discourse is Michael Marder, whose *Plant-Thinking* radically reinterprets vegetal ontology. Marder argues that plants embody “non-conscious intentionality,” and they orient themselves toward light, soil, and others without centralized subjectivity². He writes, “Plants think without a brain, without a head, without a center”³. This decentered mode of being destabilizes the humanist assumption that cognition requires consciousness. This insight allows us to reinterpret vegetal presences not as mute scenery but as forms of distributed intelligence. The banyan trees in *Aranyer Adhikar* (*The Right of the Forest*) whose “roots like veins across the earth”⁴ can be interpreted as embodiments of what Marder calls “rhizomatic existence”.

Similarly, Emanuele Coccia, in *The Life of Plants*, proposes that plants are not peripheral to the world but constitute its atmospheric foundation. In this context, he writes, “Plants are the mediators that transform the sun into world”⁵. By producing oxygen and sustaining ecosystems, they generate the breathable environment for all life. Coccia’s argument that plants create “a mixture of beings in the same breath”⁶ aligns powerfully with Jibanananda Das’s imagery of grass and wind conversing in “ancient murmurs”⁷. The poetic suggestion that wind and grass share communicative intimacy resonates with Coccia’s philosophy of life as interpenetration rather than separation.

The political dimension of plant humanities is sharpened by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, whose *The Mushroom at the End of the World* emphasizes multispecies entanglement under capitalism. Tsing argues that survival in damaged landscapes depends on “collaborative survival” among species⁸. Though she focuses on fungi, her model extends to vegetal networks. In Mahasweta Devi’s narrative of forest resistance, trees are not static resources but collaborators in indigenous survival. The forest in *Aranyer Adhikar* becomes a multispecies where human and plant lives are co-constitutive. Tsing’s insistence that landscapes are “assemblages of ways of being”⁹ helps us see Devi’s forest as an assemblage that resists colonial extraction.

Another crucial figure is Jane Bennett, whose theory of “vibrant matter” challenges the subject-object divide. Bennett contends that material entities possess a “vitality intrinsic to matter”¹⁰. This vitality is not metaphorical but ontological. When Tagore shows silk cotton tree in “Bolai,” the tree becomes a vibrant participant in emotional life. It is not merely symbolic but materially co-present, shaping human temporality. Bennett’s claim that agency is “distributed across a network of actants”¹¹ invites us to interpret the tree as one such actant in the affective ecology of the story.

The ethical implications of recognizing vegetal agency are foregrounded by Matthew Hall in *Plants as Persons*. Hall critiques the anthropocentric bias that denies moral consideration of plants by arguing that many indigenous cultures regard plants as relational beings that deserve respect¹² (Hall 4). He writes, “Plants are active, responsive beings engaged in ongoing relationships”¹³. This perspective resonates deeply with Bengali literary traditions. Mahasweta Devi represents trees not as mere natural resources, but as members of an extended

self. In her narratives, the forest is not an external landscape to be exploited; it is a living, relational world in which trees are treated as ancestors, companions, and protectors. This portrayal challenges modern, extractive notions of property and instead foregrounds an ethics of intimacy, reciprocity, and shared existence between humans and the vegetal world. In many tribal cosmologies, sacred groves reflect what Hall describes as a relational understanding of existence.

Posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti further strengthens plant humanities by challenging human exceptionalism. In *The Posthuman*, she argues for a “zoe-centered egalitarianism,” where life (zoe) exceeds human categories¹⁴. Plants, in this framework, are not inferior but participants in a shared vitality. Braidotti’s call to “decenter Anthropos”¹⁵ echoes through Jibanananda Das’s poetic landscapes, where human solitude dissolves into vegetal expanses. The grasses that “conversed in ancient murmurs”¹⁶ diminish human centrality by situating the speaker within a broader field of living presence.

Philosopher Elaine Miller, in *The Vegetative Soul*, critiques Western metaphysics for reducing plants to passive growth mechanisms. She notes that vegetal life has been associated with femininity and passivity by reinforcing cultural hierarchies¹⁷. Plant humanities resist this reduction by restoring complexity to vegetal being. In Bengali literature, however, we find anticipatory gestures that resist plant blindness. Tagore’s lyricism often attributes sentience to trees and rivers by aligning more closely with indigenous cosmologies than with Western mechanistic thought. Moreover, recent scientific research in plant neurobiology, though controversial, has influenced the discourse of humanities. Thinkers like Stefano Mancuso argue that plants exhibit forms of distributed perception. While plant humanities do not equate vegetal response with human consciousness, it recognizes what Marder calls “a non-subjective mode of relation”¹⁸. In the Bengali context, vegetal imagery frequently intersects with colonial history. Forests were sites of imperial extraction under British rule. Thus, when Mahasweta Devi writes that “When trees fall, their fall echoes; it is the echo of generations betrayed”¹⁹, the vegetal lament encodes historical violence. Hence, Plant humanities, informed by postcolonial ecocriticism, enables us to see this as more than metaphor.

Plant Humanities and Rabindranath Tagore’s “Bolai”

Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “Bolai” anticipates many of these theoretical interventions. Though written decades before the emergence of plant humanities as a formal field, the story foregrounds a child whose emotional, ethical, and imaginative life is inseparable from a tree. The silk-cotton sapling at the center of the narrative is not a mere symbol of innocence; it becomes the locus of an alternative ontology that destabilizes anthropocentric modernity and redefines ethical community. Through close textual analysis and theoretical application, this essay argues that *Bolai* functions as a proto-plant-humanities text.

The story reconfigures vegetal existence as agential presence and dramatizes the ethical implications of the destruction of plant, and critiques the utilitarian logic of modernity through the figure of a child aligned with vegetal temporality. Michael Marder, in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, argues that philosophy has systematically excluded plants because

they do not conform to models of consciousness based on mobility and rational speech²⁰. For Marder, plants embody a distributed, non-subjective mode of thought, a form of openness and exposure to the world. In *Bolai*, the silk-cotton sapling occupies precisely such a position of openness. Bolai's intense awareness of the growth of the tree reveals his alignment with vegetal temporality. He observes it not as commodity but as living presence. Tagore describes how the attention of the boy lingers on every new leaf, every tiny change in its growing body". The emphasis on incremental transformation foregrounds slow vegetal time rather than dramatic human action. Marder suggests that plant life challenges metaphysics because it resists subjectivity²¹. The silk-cotton tree similarly resists the narrative of marginalization. Although silent, it structures the emotional arc of the story. Bolai's attachment is not projected fantasy; it is relational attentiveness. Tagore writes:

"I often saw him walking in my garden with his head bowed, searching for something. He was impatient to watch the new seedlings lift their curly heads towards the light. Every day he would bend low to them, as if asking: "And now what? And now what? And now what?" They were stories always unfinished, tender young leaves, just arisen; he felt a companionship towards them that he didn't know how to express. They too, seemed to fidget in their eagerness to ask him something. Maybe they said, "What's your name," maybe "here did your mother go?" Maybe Bolai replied, in his head, "But I don't have a mother"²²

The passage suggests a quiet, imagined conversation between Bolai and the young seedlings. Bolai bends down to them as if he is asking questions, and the plants seem restless, almost eager to ask him something in return. This conversation blurs the traditional boundary between humans and plants and hints at a subtle connection between the two. It shows that Bolai does not see the seedlings as lifeless objects but as living companions with whom he shares a silent bond. Instead of treating them merely as background elements of nature, we can try to listen to them and respond to their presence with care and empathy. It suggests that communication with plants may not happen through spoken language but through attention, imagination, and emotional sensitivity. Rather than presenting the tree as metaphor, Tagore situates it as a co-constitutive presence. Its rootedness contrasts with the restlessness of the world of adult. Hence, Bolai's identification with the plant marks his resistance to anthropocentric dominance.

Plants as Persons: Ethical Expansion through Matthew Hall

Matthew Hall's *Plants as Persons* challenges the assumption that moral considerability depends on rational self-awareness²³. Drawing from Indigenous traditions, Hall argues that plants should be recognized as "other-than-human persons" within ethical communities. Bolai's relationship with the tree enacts precisely such an expansion of moral community. He does not instrumentalize the plant. When adults consider removing it for practical reasons, he experiences profound grief. Hence, the possibility of its destruction struck him like a blow. It equates harm to the tree with physical injury to the child by blurring species boundaries. The author writes:

"I saw that it was a tiny silk-cotton plant that had taken root in the middle of the gravel path... He'd noticed it when only a small shoot had come up, like an infant's first incoherent word. After

that he watered it every day, checked it anxiously morning and evening to see how much it had grown. The silk-cotton grows rapidly, but it couldn't keep up with Bolai's eagerness. When it had risen a hand's breadth or two, he saw its rich leafage and thought it was a prodigious tree, the way a mother sees the first hint of an infant's intelligence and thinks, a prodigious child"²⁴

The tree occupies space; it disrupts order; it serves no immediate human purpose. Their perspective mirrors what Hall critiques as anthropocentric moral limitation²⁵. Bolai's sorrow reveals an ethical consciousness that includes vegetal life within the circle of care. Significantly, Tagore does not portray the attachment of the boy as irrational. Instead, the narrative tone remains sympathetic. The narrative allows the reader to experience the loss with Bolai by sharing his pain and emotional suffering. Hence, the story affirms the importance of plant life by recognizing it as meaningful rather than marginal. The silk-cotton tree becomes a being whose removal constitutes ethical violation. Through this bond, Tagore anticipates the ethical expansion beyond the human as it is rightly pointed by Hall.

Coccia and the Metaphysics of Mixture

Emanuele Coccia's *The Life of Plants* redefines plants as the foundation of earthly life by arguing that they dissolve boundaries between organism and environment²⁶. Plants create the atmosphere; they make life possible. For Coccia, existence is mixture rather than separation. In *Bolai*, the tree transforms space into place. It is not simply located within the yard; it generates meaning. Tagore notes how Bolai's imagination intertwines with the tree's growth, as if its upward stretch were a secret conversation with the sky. The metaphor of conversation does not anthropomorphize the tree but signals relational mixture between earth and air. Coccia's philosophy suggests that plants embody openness to the world²⁷. The silk-cotton sapling exemplifies such openness: rooted in soil, reaching toward sky, exposed to cattle and human intervention. Bolai's empathy reflects his attunement to this openness. He senses the vulnerability of the tree within a world structured by human control. When the tree is removed, the landscape feels emptied. The absence is not decorative loss but ontological rupture.

Multispecies Assemblage: Anna Tsing and Colonial Modernity

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* explores multispecies assemblages in capitalist ruins²⁸. She argues that human survival depends on entanglements with nonhuman life. *Bolai* can be read as a micro-assemblage narrative. The child, the tree, cattle, and adults form a relational network. The conflict arises when adults refuse to recognize this assemblage. They isolate human interest from vegetal presence. The colonial context intensifies this reading. Modern urban planning and land management in colonial Bengal often reduced vegetation to resource. The removal of the silk-cotton sapling echoes such extractive logic. The decision of the adult reflects what Tsing describes as capitalist simplification by erasing complex interdependencies in favor of efficiency²⁹. Bolai's grief becomes resistance to this simplification. His sorrow exposes the cost of dismantling multispecies worlds. Tagore thus critiques modernity not through overt political rhetoric but through intimate ecological loss.

Toward a Proto-Plant Humanities: Nonhuman Agency in Tagore

Through the silk-cotton tree, *Bolai* redefines the tree not as a mere metaphor but as a living

presence with its own value. Hence, a revisiting of the story in light of plant humanities reveals how vegetal life can be philosophically and ethically meaningful. It resonates with Michael Marder's idea of plant being as significant in itself, Matthew Hall's call to extend ethics beyond the human, Emanuele Coccia's vision of shared ontological existence, and Anna Tsing's emphasis on multispecies entanglement. By placing the tree at the emotional center of the narrative and portraying its destruction as a deep moral rupture, Tagore anticipates contemporary ecological thought and critiques anthropocentric modernity. In *Bolai*, the tree "speaks" not through human language but through its growth, vulnerability, and loss. It urges readers to question hierarchical assumptions, expand their ethical imagination, and rethink what coexistence truly means.

Forest Sovereignty and Vegetal Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*

Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (*The Rights of Forests*) is often read as a landmark text of subaltern resistance. It chronicles the life and rebellion of Birsa Munda against British colonial authority. While the novel has been extensively studied through Marxist, postcolonial, and tribal rights frameworks, a plant humanities perspective reveals another crucial dimension. The forest itself, its trees, roots, and vegetal networks, functions not merely as setting but as sovereign presence and co-actor in the struggle for justice. Through dense ecological imagery and indigenous cosmology, Devi foregrounds the forest as an animate collective whose life intertwines with human history.

At its most immediate level, the title *Aranyer Adhikar*, translated as *The Rights of the Forest*, signals a clear departure from an anthropocentric framework. By attributing "rights" to the forest rather than to human communities alone, the title shifts attention away from a human-centered understanding of ownership and authority. It foregrounds the forest as a subject with intrinsic value. Hence, it challenges conventional hierarchies that place human interests above ecological existence. The phrase does not refer simply to human rights within forests, but to the rights of the forest itself. This semantic shift resonates strongly with plant humanities scholars like Michael Marder, who argue that plants possess their own mode of being irreducible to human utility. In Devi's narrative, the forest is not a passive landscape awaiting cultivation or extraction. It is a living entity whose existence precedes and exceeds colonial governance.

Throughout the novel, trees are described in corporeal and relational terms. Devi writes that the banyan's aerial roots spread "like veins across the earth"³⁰. This metaphor moves beyond simple anthropomorphism; it evokes an interconnected, almost organic system that links soil, trees, and human communities in a shared cycle of sustenance and dependence. The vegetal body becomes homologous with the social body. This imagery reflects what Jane Bennett calls "distributed agency," where vitality is dispersed across networks rather than centralized in human will³¹. For the Munda community, the forest is sacred space. Sacred groves are not symbolic tokens but living presences inhabited by spirits and ancestral memory. Matthew Hall's argument that many indigenous traditions recognize plants as relational beings finds direct narrative embodiment here. When tribal characters resist colonial forest laws, they

are not defending property; they are defending kinship. The forest functions simultaneously as dwelling place, ancestral presence, and source of sustenance. It is not conceived merely as a physical environment but as an integral part of collective identity and continuity. Hence, the act of cutting a tree signifies more than environmental damage; it represents a profound injury to the community itself, as if harming an extension of its own living body.

Colonial intervention, in contrast, reduces the forest to taxable land. In this context, it is pertinent to note that British forest policies transform trees into measurable resources by stripping them of sacred relationality. In this context, Devi writes, “When trees fall, their fall echoes; it is the echo of generations betrayed”³². The falling tree becomes a historical witness. Plant humanities invites us to interpret this not as a sentimental metaphor, but as a serious acknowledgment of the vulnerability of plant within systems of extractive capitalism. Moreover, Birsa Munda’s awakening is inseparable from his immersion in the forest. The vegetal world shapes his consciousness. In passages describing Birsa’s movement through the *sal* and *mahua* groves, Devi foregrounds a deep sensory engagement with the environment of the forest; the sound of leaves stirring, the fragrance of blossoms in the air, and the shifting light that filters through the canopy above. These details create an atmosphere of intimate connection by underscoring the embodied relationship of the protagonist with the forest landscape. This experiential immersion recalls Emanuele Coccia’s claim that plants create the atmospheric condition of life. The forest is not backdrop; it generates the breathable, habitable world within which political consciousness emerges. Hence, Birsa’s resistance is ecologically rooted, literally grounded in vegetal presence.

The mahua tree, in particular, holds socio-economic and ritual importance. Its flowers produce liquor, its seeds yield oil, and its shade shelters gatherings. Through her powerful articulations, Devi demonstrates how plant life structures cultural practice. The tree mediates sustenance, celebration, and survival. From the perspective of plant humanities, the mahua exemplifies what Anna Tsing says “collaborative survival”. The destruction of mahua groves under colonial management thus disrupts multispecies networks of survival. Importantly, Devi does not romanticize the forest as pristine wilderness. It is inhabited, cultivated, and known intimately by tribal communities. This challenges the colonial myth of “empty land.” The vegetal density of the forest testifies to long-standing human-plant cohabitation. The knowledge of Munda community regarding medicinal herbs and forest produce shows a deep respect for nature. Instead of trying to control or exploit plants, they learn from them. They understand that plants have their own life, value, and wisdom. This approach reflects humility by accepting that humans are not superior to nature but are part of it.

In the climactic suppression of Birsa’s rebellion, the colonial state attempts to assert total control. Yet the narrative repeatedly returns to the endurance of the forest. Even after human defeat, the trees remain. This endurance evokes what Marder calls plant persistence without self-assertion. Hence, the silent survival of the forest contrasts with the violent temporality of empire. By bringing detailed focus to the materiality of the forest, Devi encourages readers to recognize it not as a setting, but as a central and active presence in the narrative. The struggle for tribal rights becomes inseparable from the struggle for the rights of the forest.

Devi anticipates such theoretical and legal developments by attributing subjectivity to the forest long before environmental law began to consider this issue. Trees, roots, and blossoms shape political consciousness, sustain cultural identity, and resist colonial extraction. The novel insists that the rights of forests are inseparable from the rights of those who dwell among them. In foregrounding vegetal agency, Devi invites readers to rethink justice beyond the human toward an ethics rooted in soil, shade, and shared breath.

Conclusion

Tagore's *Bolai* and Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* challenge anthropocentric modes of thought by foregrounding the forest and plant life as central. In *Bolai*, Tagore foregrounds emotional and narrative significance to the silk-cotton tree by presenting its destruction as a moral rupture that exposes the violence of utilitarian modernity. Similarly, in *Aranyer Adhikar*, Devi situates the forest as home, ancestor, and sustainer by embedding it within the political struggle of Birsa Munda and the realities of Adivasi resistance. While Tagore explores an intimate, almost spiritual identification between child and tree, Devi articulates a collective, material bond between community and forest under colonial exploitation. Together, these texts anticipate contemporary plant humanities and environmental ethics by recognizing vegetal vulnerability and agency. They invite readers to reconsider the human place within ecological networks by suggesting that harm to the forest is simultaneously cultural, ethical, and existential loss.

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