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**Manuscript Title:** Countering Plant Blindness through Vegetal Life in Selected Works of Bengali Authors

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**Abstract**

Plants persist on the periphery of human attention, present everywhere yet rarely observed, often tended but seldom theorised: a phenomenon that Wandersee and Schussler (1999) termed "plant blindness." In response to such a critical absence, this paper argues that Bengali poetry, from the colonial period to modernism, represents plants not as passive backdrops but as active agents in constructing memory, identity, and ethical thinking. Focusing strictly on the poetic genre to ensure rigorous textual engagement, the study investigates how poetic form articulates an alternative vegetal ontology across shifting socio-political environments. Toru Dutt's nineteenth-century English verse presents an arboreal archive of colonial grief, displacement, and trans-spatial memory, where the introduced Casuarina Tree outlasts human mortality and

challenges logocentric communication. In the twentieth century, the rural modernism of Jibanananda Das expands this botanical imagination across the deltaic wetlands of Bengal. Through granular close readings of three key poems from *Rupasi Bangla* – "Abar Asibo Phire" ("I Shall Return to This Bengal"), "Ghas" ("Grass"), and "Ekhane Akash Nil" ("Here the Sky Is Blue"), the paper explores the dissolution of the lyrical ego into decentralised photosynthesising vegetal networks. By grounding its close readings within Michael Marder's concept of "plant-thinking" and recent developments in Critical Plant Studies, the paper demonstrates how Bengali poets anticipated contemporary ecocritical concerns, offering non-Western insights into multispecies relationality and countering botanical erasure in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** *Bengali Poetry, Critical Plant Studies, Vegetal agency, Plant blindness, Asian Environmental Humanities, Toru Dutt, Jibanananda Das.*

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## Introduction

The systematic marginalisation of vegetal life within human cognitive, philosophical, and cultural frameworks represents one of the most durable ontological biases in global intellectual history. Historically codified in Western thought through Aristotle's teleological stratification and the medieval schema of the Scala Naturae (the great chain of being), plants have conventionally been relegated to the baseline of animate existence. Stripped of intentionality, sensory capacity, and locomotive autonomy, flora became conceptualised as passive, nutritive matter, existential scenery designed to furnish the background against which human and nonhuman animal dramas unfold. In 1999, botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler formally categorised this pervasive perceptual deficiency as "plant blindness," defined as the human tendency to overlook plants in the immediate environment, leading to the chronic under-appreciation of flora and the erroneous assumption that plants are merely static

visual props rather than active, living beings. Within humanistic inquiry, this cognitive blind spot has routinely manifested as an interpretive habit wherein the vegetal world is acknowledged only when it can be allegorised, aestheticized, or subsumed into anthropocentric concerns.

This critical absence is particularly striking when evaluated against the ecological and literary legacies of South Asia, specifically the riverine landscapes of Bengal. Bengal's historical ecology, dominated by the monsoonal cycles of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta, has fostered an intricate relationship with vegetal life. For centuries, the delta's human populations have cohabited with shifting silt beds, dense mangrove networks, seasonal paddy cycles, and invasive water flora. However, the consolidation of British colonial rule in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries subjected this riparian geography to aggressive epistemic and material violence. Through the institutionalisation of the Imperial Forest Department, standardised silviculture, the introduction of exotic timber species, and capitalist regimes of commercial agriculture, the colonial apparatus systematically sought to reduce Bengal's biodiverse vegetal world to Gestell—a standing reserve of extractable commodities. Yet, parallel to this imperial drive toward ecological rationalisation, Bengali literature, and particularly Bengali verse, cultivated an alternative botanical consciousness that actively resisted the commodification and aesthetic silencing of flora.

This research paper investigates how selected works of Bengali poetry actively counter plant blindness by establishing vegetal life as an agentive, mnemonic, and ontological presence. Rather than functioning as decorative pastoral ornament or passive stage sets for human emotional states, plants in this poetic tradition operate as active participants in the construction of personal memory, regional belonging, and ecological ethics. The compressed formal architecture of the lyric, its reliance on dense metaphoric transfer, and its sensory soundscapes provide an ideal medium for registering the non-linguistic, biochemical, and rhythmic lives of plants. By excluding cross-genre surveys, this paper establishes a focused comparative dialogue between two critical figures spanning two defining moments of Bengali literary history: Toru Dutt, writing in English during the late-nineteenth-century colonial period, and Jibanananda Das, writing in Bengali during the turbulent modernist interwar era of the mid-twentieth century.

Through a rigorous, text-first methodology, this paper tracks how the representation of vegetal life undergoes a profound formal and thematic evolution across this century-long span. In Toru Dutt's colonial elegy "Our Casuarina Tree", vegetal agency is localised within the

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monumental form of a single, historical tree that functions as an affective archive of grief, displacement, and trans-continental connection. In the modernist verse of Jibanananda Das, this botanical engagement expands outwards into a decentralised, multispecies matrix. Analysing three representative poems from his seminal 1957 collection *Rupasi Bangla*, the paper demonstrates how Das completely dissolves the sovereign lyrical ego into the moist, photosynthesising tissues of deltaic grasses, aquatic weeds, and seasonal blossoms. By examining these poets alongside each other, this study establishes that Bengali verse does not merely reflect modern environmental anxieties; it actively generates early non-Western frameworks for dismantling human exceptionalism and recognising the lively agency of the vegetal world.

**Literature Review**

The critical study of literature and the environment have undergone substantial theoretical refinement over the past three decades. The field of ecocriticism, initially dominated in its first wave by Anglo-American celebrations of wilderness writing and deep ecological preservation, has systematically broadened its analytical parameters. Second-wave ecocriticism incorporated urgent questions of environmental justice, toxic exposure, urban political ecology, and postcolonial land sovereignty. Recent ecocritical scholarship has increasingly engaged posthumanism, materialism, environmental justice, and Anthropocene studies. However, despite this conceptual expansion, a persistent zoocentric bias historically characterised much of green literary studies. While animals, charismatic megafauna, and broad ecosystemic crises received widespread critical scrutiny, the specific ontology of the botanical realm remained largely overlooked, inadvertently reinforcing the very plant blindness diagnosed by scientific disciplines.

To redress this intellectual omission, the interdisciplinary field of Critical Plant Studies (CPS) has emerged as an important development within the environmental humanities. Drawing upon revolutionary developments in contemporary plant neurobiology, plant signalling, and chemical ecology, including the empirical research conducted by Stefano Mancuso, Monica Gagliano, and Suzanne Simard, the humanities have begun to theorise plants as sentient, communicative, and socially organised beings. Scholars within CPS challenge the long-held Western philosophical assumption that agency, intelligence, and memory require a centralised, animal nervous system. Landmark philosophical texts have provided the foundational grammar for this field: Matthew Hall's Plants as Persons (2011) systematically critiques Western philosophical traditions for denying moral standing to vegetal life; Michael

Marder's Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life (2013) articulates a non-hierarchical, modular vegetal ontology; and Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass (2013) combines indigenous botanical knowledge with scientific methodology to argue for an ethics of animacy and reciprocal ecological obligation.

Between 2020 and 2026, the scope of Critical Plant Studies has rapidly diversified, moving beyond its initial Eurocentric philosophical foundations to interrogate postcolonial, decolonial, and Global South literary geographies. Recent scholarship has increasingly linked botanical representation to imperial histories, forced labour, and colonial plantations. Similarly, Jill Casid's re-evaluation of colonial landscapes demonstrates that empire was maintained not merely through military force, but through an imperial botany that mapped, categorised, and commodified non-Western vegetation. Even recent interventions in Bengali ecocritical scholarship, such as Akaitab Mukherjee's 2022 study 'Ecopoetry and Landscape, Dwelling and Environment: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Rupasi Bangla,' primarily evaluate Das's landscape through phenomenological frameworks of dwelling, regional topography, and human environmental attachment. While Mukherjee convincingly establishes Das's verse as foundational ecopoetry that navigates the affective bonds of regional habitation, the physical and biological specificities of the plants themselves—their autonomous botanical habits, non-human temporalities, photosynthetic mechanics, and agentive materiality demand a more focused engagement through this lens.

Despite these vital recent contributions, a significant research gap persists at the intersection of Critical Plant Studies and Bengali literary scholarship. While South Asian environmental writing has garnered substantial scholarly interest, existing criticism has historically focused on select canonical figures and prose genres. Substantial attention has been paid to Rabindranath Tagore's eco-philosophical essays, educational experiments at Santiniketan, and pastoral drama, or to the sweeping regional realism of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's epic forest novel Aranyak. When Bengali poetry has been subjected to ecological analysis, critics have frequently subsumed vegetal descriptions under broader nationalist frameworks, reading flora as nostalgic allegories for the lost rural homeland or as romanticised pastoral backdrops to political independence movements. The physical, biological specificities of the plants themselves - their botanical habits, growth patterns, ecological niches, and material agencies remain routinely undertheorized. This study directly intervenes in this scholarship by demonstrating that the verse of Toru Dutt and Jibanananda Das does not treat vegetation as an abstract cultural metaphor. Instead, through the deliberate

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manipulations of poetic form, meter, and sensory imagery, these poets engage in a direct encounter with vegetal materiality and can be productively reread through contemporary CPS frameworks, providing a distinct, non-Western aesthetic model for overcoming plant blindness.

**Theoretical Framework: Vegetal Agency and Material Ecocriticism**

To analyse how poetic structures convey the autonomous presence of flora without falling into sentimental anthropomorphism, this paper synthesises Michael Marder's concept of "plant-thinking" with the analytical tools of material ecocriticism. In Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life, Marder argues that human cognitive models have long prioritised a centralised, totalising consciousness that observes the world as a detached observer. Plants, by contrast, possess a decentralised, modular, and non-totalising morphology. A plant does not possess an essential centre or a command organ; rather, it lives through continuous, open-ended extension into its immediate environment, with information processing distributed across root tips, cambium layers, leaves, and reproductive blossoms. Plant-thinking (phytomorphism) demands that we abandon the search for an individualised interiority and instead recognise an intelligence that is dispersed, relational, and fundamentally bound to the material substrate of the earth.

When brought into contact with literary analysis, Marder's ontology allows scholars to trace how poetic language can move beyond conventional human psychology. In poetry, phytomorphism manifests through aesthetic forms that decentre the lyrical "I," adopting instead syntax and rhythms that imitate the non-linear, seasonal, and repetitive temporalities of botanical growth. This philosophical model is significantly enriched by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's conception of "storied matter" within material ecocriticism. Iovino and Oppermann contend that matter is not inert physical substance awaiting the imprint of human language; rather, matter is inherently vibrant, articulate, and generative of meaning. A tree, an aquatic marsh, or an alluvial riverbank is a storied site where natural evolutionary processes, climatic pressures, and human historical events converge and leave physical traces.

Furthermore, this paper uses Stacy Alaimo's framework of "trans-corporeality," which asserts that the human body is constantly porous, permeable, and materially intermeshed with the nonhuman world. Trans-corporeality refuses to treat the human subject as a sealed, autonomous container, emphasising the uninterrupted circulation of elements, nutrients, air, and toxins across species boundaries. Operating alongside these material frameworks is Robin Wall Kimmerer's "grammar of animacy", an Indigenous philosophical stance that treats plants

not as passive grammatical objects ("it"), but as sovereign subjects and relational kin. By unifying these theoretical perspectives into a single, cohesive framework, this study constructs an analytical lens capable of examining how Bengali poetry deploys formal aesthetic choices such as metric cadence, sonic repetition, cataloguing, and sensory defamiliarization to register the material agency of vegetal life. Rather than treating plants as static symbols of human thought, this framework allows us to examine the poem as an ecological contact zone where human consciousness is profoundly challenged, decentralised, and re-constituted through its material encounter with the botanical world.

**Toru Dutt and Arboreal Memory**

Written in the late nineteenth century amid personal loss, illness, and cultural displacement, Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree", published posthumously in her 1882 collection Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, remains a significant work of early Indian English poetry. Conventionally analysed by postcolonial and feminist scholars as a nostalgic elegy deeply indebted to British Romanticism, specifically John Keats's odes and William Wordsworth's "Yew-Trees" the poem has frequently been read as an attempt by a colonised subject to claim poetic authority within the master's tongue. However, when re-evaluated through the lens of Critical Plant Studies and material ecocriticism, the poem reveals a far more radical ecological project. Rather than using the tree as an ornamental prop for human melodrama or an abstract symbol of an idealised Indian past, Dutt establishes the Casuarina equisetifolia as an autonomous, material archive: an active, arboreal witness whose durable flesh physically preserves and articulates the memory of human grief, trans-continental alienation, and deep non-human time.

From its opening stanza, the poem vigorously counters plant blindness by confronting the reader with the overwhelming, dynamic physical presence of the tree, granting it a muscular, sculptured agency that commands the physical environment:

> Like a huge Python, winding round and round
> The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars
> Up to its very summit near the stars,
> A creeper climbs, in whose embraces bound
> No other tree could live. But gallantly
> The giant wears the scarf, and flowers are hung
> In crimson clusters all the boughs among,

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Whereon all day are gathered bird and bee...

Dutt's linguistic register deliberately avoids delicate pastoral conventions. The tree is characterised through visceral, tactile adjectives: its trunk is "rugged" and "indented deep with scars." These scars are not decorative poetic tropes; in Iovino and Oppermann's terminology, they constitute "storied matter", the visible, material indices of a protracted, biological existence marked by mechanical stress, seasonal typhoons, and parasitic tension. The dynamic between the Casuarina and the winding creeper is characterised not by passive victimisation, but by a tense, symbiotic coexistence. Dutt's simile comparing the creeper to a "huge Python" introduces an aggressive, zoomorphic vitality into the botanical scene, yet the Casuarina bears this parasitic weight "gallantly," wearing it as an ornate "scarf" hung with "crimson clusters." This framing emphasises the independent agency and physical resilience of the vegetal subject. It is an arboreal body that has actively negotiated its ecological relationships long before the human observer enters the frame.

Crucially, Dutt avoids the solipsism of traditional lyric poetry by depicting the Casuarina as the central actant within a bustling, multispecies collective. It is not an isolated specimen standing in sterile isolation, but a thriving community node:

A gray baboon sits statue-like alone
Watching the sunrise; while on lower boughs
His puny offspring leap about and play;
And far and near kokilas hail the day;
And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows;
And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast
By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
The water-lilies spring, like snow enmassed.

Here, the poem directly subverts human-centred spatial organisation. The human speaker does not occupy the physical or conceptual centre of the scene; instead, she observes the dawn from her bedroom casement, gazing out upon an ecosystem whose rhythms are orchestrated entirely around the tree. The Casuarina provides the shelter that sustains the resting baboon, the branches that accommodate its playing offspring, the acoustic environment for the songs of the kokilas, and the protective shadow that shields the blooming water-lilies on the surface of the adjacent pond. In this configuration, the tree is an ecological anchor that sustains,

coordinates, and mediates the life cycles of mammals, birds, aquatic flora, and domesticated cattle.

However, the poem's most profound theoretical contribution occurs when the speaker is separated from this childhood landscape. Displaced to the shores of Europe, residing in southern France and Italy, Dutt discovers that the tree is not bound to local geographic confines. Instead, it possesses a trans-spatial, biochemical resonance that actively breaches the boundaries of human consciousness:

> But not because of its magnificence
> Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:
> Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,
> O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
> For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear!
> Blent with your images, it shall arise
> In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!

In this stanza, the material tree and human memory become fundamentally entangled. The phrase "blent with your images" indicates an ontological collapse between the lost human siblings - Abju and Aru, who both died prematurely of tuberculosis, and the living wood of the Casuarina. The tree does not merely remind the speaker of her dead brother and sister; it has physically absorbed their voices, their childhood laughter, and their historical reality into its internal tissues. This is not an abstract psychological projection; it is an arboreal materialisation of memory. The tree operates as a botanical hard drive, an embodied storehouse of familial and cultural trauma that carries the material traces of the dead forward into time.

This mnemonic agency becomes explicitly communicative in the fourth stanza, where Dutt attributes a unique, non-human sonic capacity to the distant tree:

> What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear
> Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach?
> It is the tree's lament, an eerie speech,
> That haply to the unknown land may reach.
>
> …
>
> And the waves gently kissed the classic shore
> Of France or Italy, beneath the moon,
> When earth lay tranced in a dreamless swoon:

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And every time the music rose, — before
Mine inner vision rose a form sublime,
Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime
I saw thee, in my own loved native clime.

By characterising the sound of the wind through the needles of the Casuarina as "the tree's lament" and an "eerie speech," Dutt breaks through anthropocentric definitions of language. Although Dutt uses personification in calling the tree's sound a "lament" and "eerie speech," the poem does not reduce the tree entirely to a human symbol; instead, its non-human presence remains central to the speaker's experience. This moment illustrates Michael Marder's contention that plants communicate outside the structures of human logocentrism. The tree's lament is a material vibration, an acoustic wave that travels across thousands of miles of ocean from the deltaic soil of Bengal to the shores of Europe. It is an eco-linguistic transmission that bypasses the limitations of the English language in which the poem is composed, asserting the enduring hold of the homeland's vegetal life over the displaced body of the poet.

In the final stanza, Dutt addresses the temporal disparity between fleeting human existence and the deep, slow temporality of the arboreal world:

Therefore I fain would consecrate a lay
Unto thy honour, Tree, beloved of those
Who now in blessed sleep, for aye, repose,
Dearer than life to me, alas! were they!
Mayst thou be numbered when my days are done
With deathless trees—like those in Borrowdale,
Under whose awful branches lingered pale
"Fear, trembling Hope, and Death, the skeleton,
And Time the shadow;" and though weak the verse
That would thy beauty fain, oh fain rehearse,
May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse.

Invoking Wordsworth's celebrated yew-trees of Borrowdale, Dutt places her Bengali tree within a global lineage of sacred, long-lived flora. Yet, while Wordsworth's yew-trees are framed as gloomy, ominous emblems of human mortality and metaphysical dread, Dutt's Casuarina is sustained by "Love", a relational, affective commitment that bridges the human

and more-than-human worlds. While the speaker seeks to protect the tree through her verse, the structural logic of the poem reveals an inversion of agency: it is the tree that outlives, protects, and carries the memory of the human subjects who once sheltered beneath it. Long after the human voices have been silenced by disease and colonial displacement, the Casuarina stands firm, its roots plunged into the alluvial earth and its branches extending toward the stars. In "Our Casuarina Tree", vegetal life outlasts and outwits the temporal fragility of human empire, establishing the plant as an enduring historical agent that preserves what human memory alone cannot sustain.

**Jibanananda Das and the Multispecies Landscape**

While Toru Dutt's nineteenth-century verse anchors memory within the concentrated monument of an individual tree, the modernist poetry of Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) enacts a radical, decentralised expansion of the botanical imagination. Composing the vast majority of the poems that would form his posthumously published masterpiece *Rupasi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal) composed largely during the 1930s, with the manuscript generally dated to 1934, Jibanananda Das turned his poetic gaze away from the urban modernism of Calcutta toward the rural landscapes and wetlands of Bengal. Although the collection was published only in 1957, its poems belong primarily to the pre-Famine and pre-Partition period, even as their later publication invited new readings against the backdrop of the devastating Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Partition of Bengal in 1947. For decades, literary critics categorised *Rupasi Bangla* through the comfortable tropes of romantic pastoralism, nationalist nostalgia, or escapist melancholy. However, when examined through Critical Plant Studies and material ecocriticism, Das's poetry reveals an extraordinary ontological revolution: a systematic, formally rigorous effort to dismantle human exceptionalism and dissolve the sovereign lyrical ego into the moist, photosynthesising flesh of the Bengal delta.

In Das's poetic world, plant blindness is countered not merely by describing plants, but by entering directly into their unique modes of existence. Rather than utilising flora as symbols for human psychological states, Das approaches the delta as an intricate, multispecies terrain where human subjectivity does not observe the landscape from an ontological distance but is materially constituted through and sustained by it. To understand the depth and formal range of this phytomorphic modernism, this section provides close readings of three key poems: *Abar Asibo Phire* ("I Shall Return to This Bengal"), *Ghas* ("Grass"), and *Ekhane Akash Nil* ("Here the Sky Is Blue").

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### *Abar Asibo Phire* (*"I Shall Return to This Bengal*"): Vegetal Metempsychosis and Relational Trans-corporeality

In the celebrated opening poem of the collection, *Abar Asibo Phire* ("I Shall Return to This Bengal"), Das immediately introduces a radical vision of trans-species continuity, challenging Western and traditional metaphysical conceptions of the unified, transcendent human soul:

> I shall return to this Bengal, to the riverbanks, the fields,
> Maybe not as a man, but as a white-breasted kite or a dawn crow;
> Or perhaps as a duck, with a young girl's anklets on my red feet,
> Floating all day with the scent of kalmi greens, in the water...
>
> (translation mine)

The speaker's desire for post-mortem survival is fundamentally anchored in the material earth of Bengal, yet this survival explicitly rejects the preservation of the human form. Metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul, is here stripped of its classical theological hierarchy, wherein reincarnation as a human represents the spiritual zenith. Instead, Das imagines an intentional evolutionary descent into nonhuman and explicitly vegetal affinities.

The sensory mechanics of this stanza are thoroughly trans-corporeal. The speaker imagines returning as a young duck, but this animal embodiment is inextricably bound to botanical materials: the duck is imagined with "a young girl's anklets on my red feet," while its movement is described as "floating all day with the scent of kalmi greens" (kalmi-shaker ghran). The kalmi (water spinach) is a semi-aquatic creeping plant that blankets the stagnant canals and seasonal ponds of rural Bengal. Das does not merely name this plant; he identifies its olfactory signature, its "scent", as the buoyant physical medium upon which life drifts. The boundaries between the animal body (the duck) and the wild aquatic weed (kalmi) are dissolved. Human consciousness is transformed into a decentralised sensory apparatus that navigates the world not through intellectual mastery, but through the immediate chemical signatures of deltaic flora.

As the poem progresses, Das catalogues a dense, regionally specific botanical community:

> Again I will come, loving Bengal's rivers, fields, and marshlands,
> To this green, compassionate shore, wet with the waves of the Jalangi river;
> Perhaps you will see a dusk-blown wind breathing through the leaves of the
> hijal,

Or a child strewing puffed rice upon the grass of a courtyard…

(translation mine)

Here, the riverbank of the Jalangi is explicitly designated as jal-bhora bhabnar shyamal kinare, "a green, compassionate shore" swollen with moisture. The adjective shyamal (dark green, verdant) emphasises the living plant cover that stabilises the unstable silt banks of the river. Das's mention of the hijal tree (the freshwater mangrove native to wetland ecosystems) is critical. The hijal is a tree capable of surviving extended periods of complete submersion during seasonal monsoonal floods. By describing the evening wind moving through its foliage, Das frames the tree not as an inert physical object, but as a respiratory organ that registers the breath of the regional atmosphere. In this ecological terrain, memory and existence are not sustained by stone monuments or colonial institutions; they are inscribed within the dynamic, seasonal cycles of flood-tolerant trees, courtyard grasses, and alluvial silt.

### *Ghas ("Grass")*: Somatic Entanglement and Phytomorphic Rebirth

If *Abar Asibo Phire* envisions a multispecies metempsychosis across cyclical time, *Ghas* ("Grass") executes an immediate, visceral surrender of human subjectivity to the sensory and modular ontology of the plant world. It stands as one of the most radical examples of Michael Marder's "plant-thinking" in twentieth-century world literature:

The earth is filled with the soft green light like young lemon leaves this morning;
The grass is green like a fresh breeze — such a sweet scent —
the deer are tearing it with their teeth.
I also want
to drink this scent of this grass like green wine in a glass — glass,
I rub the body of this grass with my eyes,
my feathers on the wings of the grass, I
am born as grass within the grass —
the sweet taste of the body of the mother comes down from the darkness.

(translation mine)

In this passage, the boundary between the human subject, fauna, and flora collapses through intense synaesthesia. The experience begins through visual and olfactory immersion, the morning illuminated with light "like young lemon leaves" and the grass scented so keenly that deer tear it with their teeth. Rather than remaining an external onlooker to this pastoral

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ecology, the speaker desires the same primal consumption: wanting to "drink this scent of this grass like green wine in a glass."

Crucially, the intake of vegetal scent transforms into a multisensory touch. The speaker rubs the "body of this grass" with his eyes and merges his own physical form with the vegetal mass: "my feathers on the wings of the grass, I / am born as grass within the grass." This is not mere decorative metaphor; it is an ontological remaking. Human identity abandons its rigid, sovereign isolation to achieve horizontal entanglement with the lawn.

By becoming "grass within the grass," Das situates consciousness directly within vegetative modularity, culminating in an intimate return to the maternal earth: "the sweet taste of the body of the mother comes down from the darkness." Rooted in subterranean dampness and dark nourishment, the human ego is stripped of modern restlessness and dissolved into the communal, replenishing metabolism of the soil. Common turf ordinarily overlooked and trampled underfoot becomes the locus of elemental communion and biological rebirth.

### *Ekhane Akash Nil ("Here the Sky Is Blue")*: Ecological Memory and Palimpsestic Temporality

In *Ekhane Akash Nil* ("Here the Sky Is Blue"), Das examines the relationship between historical myth and the quiet, enduring vitality of rural Bengal's botanical landscape. Moving away from grand imperial chronicles, the poem posits an alternative sensory continuum grounded in native flora and regional folk memory:

> Here the sky is blue—across the bluish sky the sajne flowers
> Bloom frost-white—their colour like the light of Ashwin;
> The black hornet of the akondo flower hums here
> Filled with midday sun;—again and again the sunlight dips its sharp hair
> Into the heart of jackfruit and jamun;—in lakes and wetlands, wandering fingers
> Caress gently—here the grove of jam, litchi, and jackfruit,
> Has touched the feet of Dhanapati, Srimanta, Behula, and Lahana;
>
> (translation mine)

The opening lines construct a tactile, richly textured seasonal realm governed by indigenous vegetation. The frost-white *sajne* (moringa) blossoms set against the blue sky evoke the specific autumnal light of Ashwin, while the black hornet drones amidst the wild *akondo* (calotropis) under the glare of midday sun. Light itself becomes somatic sunlight plunging like

"sharp hair" into the foliage of *kathal* (jackfruit) and *jam* (java plum). Crucially, this vegetative belt of jackfruit, jamun, and litchi groves acts as a living archive that has directly "touched the feet" of medieval Mangalkavya figures like Dhanapati, Srimanta, Behula, and Lahana. The plant world is not an inert backdrop; it is an enduring witness whose physical surface holds the impressions of regional history and mythical time.

This entanglement of ecological matter and poetic lore deepens in the concluding lines, where human cultural composition is shaped and interrupted by non-human presences:

> Into the dirt paths mingle the dust of the bodies of crows and cuckoos,
> The cuckoo of what distant era, do you know? When Mukundaram, alas,
> Was sitting at midday writing his beloved Chandimangal,
> Hearing the cuckoo's call, his writing faltered—pausing again and again;—
> Or when Behula was drifting alone on the waters of the Gangur
> In the evening gloom, by the paddy field, the mango grove, on indistinct branches
> Hearing the cuckoo's call, only mist welled within her eyes.
>
> (translation mine)

Here, the biological remains of crows and cuckoos dissolve into the dust of unpaved paths (*metho path*), emphasising an ongoing material recycling between living fauna and the soil. Das then collapses historical distance by tracing the birdsong back across centuries. When the medieval poet Mukundaram composed his *Chandimangal*, it was the persistent, seasonal cry of the cuckoo that ruptured his creative process and paused his pen. Similarly, as the legendary Behula rafted down the river Gangur alongside the shadowed paddy fields and mango groves, that same avian voice provoked her grief into tears of mist. Through this double reflection, Das demonstrates that human literary legacy and existential sorrow are fundamentally situated within, and mediated by, an ancient, continuous botanical and zoological ecosystem.

**Discussion**

When evaluated synthetically, the poetic works of Toru Dutt and Jibanananda Das reveal a profound, evolving lineage of ecological consciousness that spans more than half a century of Bengali literary history. Rather than operating as isolated aesthetic events, their poetry constitutes a continuous, formally rigorous effort to counter plant blindness by re-centring vegetal life as an agentive, communicative presence. By restricting this investigation strictly to

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the genre of verse, this paper demonstrates how the formal architectures of poetry—metre, imagery, sonic resonance, and sensory defamiliarization—serve as specialised linguistic technologies capable of translating the slow, non-human realities of the botanical world into registers of deep human significance.

To understand the trajectory of this botanical imagination across changing historical conditions, it is essential to examine how each poet engages with the specific socio-political pressures, linguistic frameworks, and ecological landscapes of their respective eras. As established throughout the textual analysis, this progression reflects an expanding scale of ecological perception.

Toru Dutt's deployment of the elegiac form in "Our Casuarina Tree" is deeply rooted in the mid-nineteenth-century colonial context of the Bengal Renaissance. Writing from a position of profound geographical and cultural alienation in Europe, Dutt operated within a complex, hybrid linguistic position. Using the rigid constraints of English Romantic meter, she articulated an intensely localised, ancestral memory. Her tone is personal, melancholic, and burdened by the trauma of familial displacement.

The tree functions precisely as Iovino and Oppermann's *storied matter*, its physical *scars* and *rugged trunk* bearing material witness to biological and human history. By attributing an *eerie speech* to the tree, Dutt introduces a non-human, deltaic voice that challenges the polished surfaces of Victorian English verse. Vegetal agency in Dutt's work is concentrated, intensive, and monumentally centred on a singular plant that outlasts human mortality, preserving familial love and cultural continuity across the geographical ruptures of empire.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Jibanananda Das operated within a drastically transformed historical and ideological landscape. In response to this existential and territorial fragmentation, Das executed a decisive linguistic and formal break. Abandoning the English language entirely, he composed in a deeply tactile, highly regional, and sensory Bengali idiom. His tone is hauntingly intimate, defined not by an elegiac distance from nature, but by an immediate, somatic immersion within it.

This stylistic revolution represents a formal manifestation of Michael Marder's "plant-thinking." In Das's poetry, vegetal agency is no longer localised within a single monumental tree; instead, it is radically decentralised across the entire riparian topography of the Bengal delta.

Human subjectivity undergoes a profound trans-corporeal dissolution: the speaker's body drinks starlight through "green pores" and floats upon the chemical scents of water vegetation. Politically and culturally, this botanical immersion functions as a radical rejection of both British colonial resource exploitation and the sterile, mechanical rationalism of urban modernity. By embedding human identity within the soil and seasonal flora of Bengal, Das provides a model of belonging that cannot be dismantled by political cartography or imperial border-drawing. While human nations tear themselves apart through political partition, the wild grasses and seasonal blossoms continue their seasonal cycles of regeneration, offering a quiet, botanical sanctuary of cultural continuity.

Crucially, this comparative analysis demonstrates that Bengali poetry does not merely provide passive illustrations for contemporary Western ecotheory. Instead, these poets anticipated and complicated the core insights currently driving the global environmental humanities. Writing before the emergence of contemporary concepts such as "plant-thinking," "trans-corporeality," and "storied matter," Toru Dutt and Jibanananda Das used poetic form to explore decentralised forms of agency, cross-species entanglement, and the material presence of the vegetal world.

Dutt's attribution of an *eerie speech* to the Casuarina directly challenged the human monopoly on language and memory, anticipating Marder's critique of logocentrism. Das's poetic persona literally transforming into photosynthesising grass offered an extraordinary creative realisation of Alaimo's trans-corporeality and Hall's vision of plants as persons. By centring the biological realities of the Bengal delta its flood-adapted flora, its seasonal blooms, and its wetland ecosystems these poets constructed a distinct, non-Western ecopoetics that counters plant blindness at its root. They demonstrate that addressing the environmental crisis requires far more than technological intervention or abstract scientific data; it requires a profound transformation of human sensory and literary habits, training the human mind to perceive, honour, and listen to the slow, vital events of the vegetal world.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that selected works of Bengali poetry, spanning from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, provide a sustained and sophisticated challenge to the cognitive baseline of plant blindness. By conducting rigorous, text-first close readings of Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" alongside Jibanananda Das's "Abar Asibo Phire", "Ghas", and "Ekhane Akash Nil", this study has shown how the poetic medium

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systematically dismantles the anthropocentric paradigm that treats plants as inert scenery or passive commodities. Across these texts, the botanical world is consistently re-centred as an agentive, mnemonic, and ontological presence: whether through Dutt's arboreal archive that outlasts colonial displacement and preserves human grief within its scarred bark, or through Das's radical modernist dissolution of the lyrical ego into the photosynthesising tissues of deltaic grasses and wetland flora.

The significance of these findings extends directly into the contemporary field of Critical Plant Studies. By exploring how non-Western poetic traditions have historically articulated complex models of phytomorphic kinship, this study challenges the Eurocentric biases that have long dominated environmental literary criticism. The Bengali botanical imagination offers an alternative model of relational ecology, one that is deeply attuned to local seasonal rhythms, the historical traumas of colonial forestry, and the lived realities of human-plant cohabitation in a riverine landscape. Through their deliberate formal innovations, Dutt and Das prove that the lyric poem functions as an indispensable ecological instrument, capable of capturing the slow, non-human temporalities and silent, chemical languages of the botanical realm that conventional scientific prose often overlooks.

In the contemporary epoch of the Anthropocene, characterised by runaway global heating, accelerating habitat destruction, and catastrophic biodiversity collapse, the recovery of this poetic botanical awareness carries urgent ethical significance. As global industrial systems continue to reduce biodiverse, living ecosystems into sterile, monocultural resources, humanity's chronic plant blindness threatens the foundational life-support systems of the planet. By learning to read these vegetal archives and attuning our senses to the eerie speech of the more-than-human world, human culture can begin the urgent, necessary work of overcoming its botanical erasure, finding its rightful, humble place within the vibrant, living mesh of the earth.

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