



**“Let them see your face, my child,  
and thus know the meaning of all  
things”: Unity, the Child, and the  
Natural World in Rabindranath  
Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon***

Alicia Alves

*Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada*

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**Abstract**

This essay explores how Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore mediates his ideas about universalism and natural harmony through the figure of the unnamed child in his collection of poems, *The Crescent Moon* (1913). I argue that when the child crosses the borders of home/nature and earth/cosmos, he also extends these borders to reach out for unity with broader communities outside of his own. The child embodies this unity with others and openness to the world because his body is a part of nature and the cosmos. Thus, the child also blurs the boundary between body and nature and reflects a unity with the world as a whole. This relationship with the natural world is one that adults in *The Crescent Moon* do not possess to the same extent and is specific to the child. In this way, the child must lead the adults to see and to live this connection.

**Keywords:** childhood, Rabindranath Tagore, nature, universalism, nationalism; India

**B**engali poet Rabindranath Tagore writes in his poem “The Child-Angel,” “Let them see your face, my child, and thus know the meaning of all things” (79). In Tagore’s poems in *The Crescent Moon* (translated into English by the author in 1913), the unnamed child becomes a conduit for knowledge of nature and unity between people and between humans and nature. Tagore’s collection of poems centres around an unnamed child and shifts between the perspectives of the child and his family, thus drawing a comparison between these characters’ approaches to the world. However, these poems privilege the child’s play and imagination when compared to adult perspectives on the world. This article focuses on the poems in this collection that most closely reflect the child’s relationship with the natural world, though the collection also examines the child’s relationships with family, education, and work. Indeed, Tagore writes that children “remain as fresh, sweet, and innocent as on the first day. The reason that children remain so universally pure and clean is that they are Nature’s creations; adults, in contrast, are to a great extent the product of their own doings” (qtd. in McQuail 491).<sup>1</sup> So, this connection to nature as an avenue for knowledge of unity is distinctly child-based. However, adults can learn this connection through the child.<sup>2</sup> In his essay “My School,” Tagore argues, “it is India’s mission to realize the truth of the human soul in the Supreme Soul through its union with the soul of the world. This mission had taken its natural form in the forest schools in the ancient time” (399). Tagore represents the ideal Indian citizen, the one who embodies this ideal of unity, as a child. This child challenges the idea that knowledge must be passed on from an adult to a child and so flips this hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> The child becomes an ideal and unchanging figure for Indian unity in these poems.

Scholars such as Indra Nath Choudhuri and Mohammad A. Quayum have already discussed Tagore’s distaste for nationalism and his push for universalism.<sup>4</sup> Choudhuri notes, though, that Tagore’s wish was not for a “homogenised universalism,” which he saw as “a product of the uprootedness and deculturation brought about by British colonialism in India” (122). Instead, as Quayum argues, “Tagore’s emphasis is on creating unity between people, but to do so without imposing uniformity” (“Education for Tomorrow” 3).<sup>5</sup> Patrick

Colm Hogan elucidates that “genuine universalism is the only way in which we can recognize the common humanity and thus the shareable value of distinct instantiations. Respect for different cultures is not the antithesis of universalism, but a *consequence* of universalism” (xviii). Arnab Dutta Roy refers to Rabindranath Tagore as “one of the first modern proponents of the theory [of universalism] in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India” (178). Tagore argues that education should bolster unity as the “purpose of the age,” not “creat[e] divisions” and that “the mission of our education should be to realize our unity in spite of [differences between people]” (“To Teachers” 612). Thus, universalism for Tagore can be freeing, not limiting, as long as differences are maintained.

Critics have also argued that Tagore demonstrates his push for universalism through nature and pedagogy. However, as Christine Kupfer notes, “Tagore thought that it is impossible to realize universal humanity in the forms of education that existed in his time” (210). Thus, for Tagore, education could lead to unity only if the prevailing pedagogical outlook could be altered. Debarati Bandyopadhyay notes that Tagore demonstrates what Swati Lal calls “the need for international brotherhood” (31) primarily through his school, Santiniketan,<sup>6</sup> the basis of which was his hope “to bring together the human and the natural spheres, in his concept of a true civilisation” (314). Thus, for Tagore, universalism was not only a resistance to nationalism or Western colonialist influences in India; universalism could also be tied to unity with nature and the world, which was impacted and altered by British colonial presence. As these scholars have noted, Tagore’s hope for universalism, especially in relation to nature and to children’s educational spaces and pedagogy, is that it would lead to a greater interconnectedness between people.

Although scholars have discussed Tagore’s relation between unity, nature, and education, Tagore’s views in the context of childhood in his poems in *The Crescent Moon* (1913) have been understudied.<sup>7</sup> In these poems, the child embodies the potential for unity between humans and nature, and how this potential flows into relations between people as well. Supriya Goswami notes that, in children’s literature, children were used as both “active colonial and anti-colonial agents” (3). She further argues, “British, Anglo-Indian, and Bengali children’s literature of empire celebrate children and their ability to become transformative agents of change” (4, emphasis in original). In Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon*, the child becomes the agent for change through unity with others and with nature, and a way to lead adults to this change. The knowledge the child offers in these poems is of unity and nature, not practical or cultural knowledge. However, the child’s knowledge, in being linked to unity, is also related to the political realm, if adults choose to follow the child’s lessons. In “On the Seashore,” the children “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” (Tagore 3-4). While the adults, named for their occupations, navigate the natural world for its wealth or in order to work, children take from and give back to the natural

world in their reciprocal play; they do not seek to analyse or investigate nature in looking “for hidden treasures.” Instead, the children are simply in harmony with the natural world.

This paper explores how Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s attention to unity and the lessons of nature are fulfilled through the figure of the child in his poems in *The Crescent Moon* (1913). I argue that when the child crosses the borders of home/nature and earth/cosmos, he also reflects his affinity with broader communities outside of his own, which challenges the hierarchy of adult/child as well as culture/nature. Ultimately, it is the child who truly fulfills Tagore’s vision of universalism and unity with nature. The child embodies this unity and openness to the world because his body is a part of nature and the cosmos, blurring the boundary between body and nature and between communities. The child reflects a challenge to Western notions of knowledge and the privileging of “culture” over nature through his affinity with his environment and his natural knowledge; instead, the child (and Tagore) privileges nature and natural knowledge over the cultural. This relationship with the natural world is one that adults in these poems do not possess to the same extent. In this way, the child must lead the adults to see and to live this connection.

### **The Child’s Unity with Nature**

For Tagore, nature constituted a universal nature, but it also constituted a regionally-specific space in opposition to colonial education in India. Tagore viewed this education as limited because it separated students from the physical space of nature. Tagore’s concern about nature was specific to his experience in India, but his universalism also reflected a broader potential union between cultures and thus a broader vision of nature. Tagore aimed to teach children about this unity with nature, which he argues children lost through the Western model of education, with his own educational model at his school. Tagore’s pedagogical vision for children was linked with an understanding of one’s unity with nature, and thus he argued through his school the need for this unity. In “To Teachers,” Tagore argues “that children should be surrounded with the things of Nature which have their own educational value” and schools could not provide this (611). Kupfer notes, “Tagore was a member of the New Education Fellowship, which promoted arts, nature, and physical exercise and replaced rote learning with active and direct learning” (207). Tagore’s pedagogy, then, links learning, bodily awareness, and being outdoors in nature with active learning. His pedagogy also asks students to look to non-Western sources of knowledge and learning, such as nature, as opposed to strictly written knowledge in textbooks or memorization. In “My School,” Tagore argues, “The young mind should be saturated with the idea that it has been born in a human world which is in harmony with the world around it. And this is what our regular type of school ignores” (390). Therefore, it is through combining education and nature that students can achieve both unity and knowledge of the self.

The child in *The Crescent Moon* is made of nature, reflecting their harmony with the world. Choudhuri argues, “‘Nature’ becomes (and always was in Indian tradition), not just the ensemble of natural reality, but a profound source in us where man and nature are in mysterious harmony” (112). Again, for Tagore, nature as a physical space demonstrates the ways in which humans are actually in unity with nature. In Tagore’s poem “The Source,” the speaker questions where the baby’s physical features originated. In each instance, the answer is a space outside of human “culture” and in or associated with the natural world, including “two shy buds” (5) and “a young pale beam of a crescent moon” (5). However, the child is also made from the mother, as one of the answers to the question of the baby’s origins is from a time “when the mother was a young girl [and] it lay pervading her heart in tender and silent mystery of love” (6). Similarly, later the baby himself asks his mother about his own origins in “The Beginning.” This time, the mother responds and answers that his origins all came from her own girlhood: “You were in the dolls of my childhood’s games; and when with clay I made the image of my god every morning, I made and unmade you then” (15). The mother also notes, “In all my hopes and my loves, in my life, in the life of my mother you have lived” (15). Here, the child’s body is associated with the mother’s own body and also her own mother’s, but he is also linked to her girlhood and thus childhood. In linking the baby’s origins in both nature and in a line of mothers, the mother figure becomes liminal in that she is closer to the unity that the boy represents than the other adults in the poems.

As the baby grows older, the mother ascribes his origins to her own self; however, the child continues to be made from nature and the cosmos. In “The Champa Flower,” the child equates his own body with nature. He tells his mother, “Supposing I became a *champa* flower ... and grew on a branch high up that tree, ... would you know me, mother?” (29). In the child’s question is the idea of becoming a flower, and thus the ability to change form and to transcend boundaries between worlds, thus also blurring the binary between human/nature and unsettling a Western anthropocentric hierarchy. Not only is the child made from the natural world, but also he can become it. In answer to his own question of “would you know me, mother?” (29), the child notes that his mother would indeed not know him (29-30). In the natural world, the child is able to disappear, should he wish it. He has crossed the boundary into a unity that the adults around him do not recognize, and thus they cannot distinguish his body from among the natural things. Furthermore, the child can choose when he will cross back into the human realm, only re-appearing as a boy-child when he wants to (30). With the ability to blend and cross boundaries at will, the child embodies his unity with all spaces of the world around him, whether cultural or natural.

Not only is the child made from nature and able to transcend boundaries, he also identifies kinship with other natural beings as playmates or as fellow children. For instance, in the poem “The Flower-School,” the child personifies the flowers and pictures them attending school, just as he does, and playing as he does as well (45-46). He refers to them as “the flower children” (46) and describes their home in the sky among the

stars (46). The child identifies the plant life in the natural world as like him, just as he is like them.<sup>8</sup> He also identifies an alternative school in nature that the child-flowers attend. In Tagore's school in nature, there was more emphasis on experience and unity rather than textbooks and rote learning, which Kupfer argues was linked to "the experience of British colonialism in India" (208). Roy's point about universalism reflects the child's kinship with plant life: "universalism implies that all humans share certain fundamental emotive states, ethical aspirations, cognitive capacities, and experiential impulses [...] [though] universalism does not recommend that all humans are the same, or think in the same way" (177). In this way, the child establishes kinship with natural beings who are like himself as a child, but he does not erase difference; he does, however, muddy the binary that separates humans and nature. In "To Teachers," Tagore argues about the child's affinity with nature,

[A]t this critical period ... the child's life is brought into the education factory ... We are born with that God-given gift of taking delight in the world, but such delightful activity is fettered and imprisoned, stilled by a force called discipline which kills the sensitiveness of the child mind, the mind which is always on the alert, restless and eager to receive firsthand knowledge from mother Nature. (610-611)

Tagore describes children's education as like a "factory," and thus the child loses their connection to the natural world. Instead of "receiv[ing] firsthand knowledge from mother Nature" and from their kinship structures with natural beings, the child becomes "fettered and imprisoned" in the current education system. As Quayum points out, "The three basic tenets of Tagore's educational vision are: freedom for the learner, creation of an environment that enables the student to develop a healthy kinship with nature, and cultivation of the pupil's creativity or imagination" ("Education for Tomorrow" 4). In *The Crescent Moon*, we see the child not only learn from nature, but we also see him develop close kinship bonds with flowers and with the world itself.

This close kinship with nature reflects Tagore's educational vision in resisting lasting colonial effects. Kupfer notes that Tagore's vision was not only focused on nature, but was also tied to anti-colonial efforts:

Tagore's work is profoundly shaped by the experience of British colonialism in India, and his reflections on education are informed by a quest to rediscover older Indian values and traditions. Tagore reintroduced vernacular Bengali instead of English in school lessons, scrapped typically European classroom furniture such as tables and chairs, and emphasized learning from everyday life in India instead

of learning from British textbooks that were entirely alienated from students' backgrounds. (208)

Not only does Tagore advocate for learning in the natural world and from everyday life therein, he also pushes against textbook learning that was associated with British colonial efforts in India. He focuses on Bengali instead of English as a way of reconnecting with that natural space in India that students had become alienated from through colonial, Western education models. In this way, Tagore anticipates Paulo Freire's conception of "the banking concept of education" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which "turns them [students] into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher" (58) and "problem-posing education" in which "[t]he students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (68). Goswami argues, "By casting the Bengali child as the designated protagonist who was able to unsettle colonial structures of power and authority, Bengali children's authors were able to free their young readers, at least temporarily, from the shackles of colonial rule" (12). The child protagonist in Tagore's poems unsettles these structures of colonial education models in his emphasis on the education of the natural world as opposed to the space of the school. Similarly, Quayum argues, "Tagore recommends achieving unity with nature, humanity and the universe, as an ultimate objective of education" ("Education for Tomorrow" 13). In *The Crescent Moon*, we see the child focused on learning from his own experiences while navigating and identifying with the world, particularly the natural world. As the child grows older, he identifies not only *as* but also *with* the world around him, discovering playmates and other children within the surrounding plant and cosmic life.

### **The Child's Unity with Others**

The Child's unity with and ability to become the natural world also bleeds into his ability to cross spatial borders. For instance, as a baby, the child is constructed as willfully crossing the border into the human realm. In "Baby's Way," the infant actively chooses to "g[i]ve up his freedom" to remain on earth (Tagore 8).<sup>9</sup> Although this is a sacrifice on the infant's part, he actively chooses to be and remain on earth as opposed to passively receiving life. The baby gives up what status and understanding he would have prior to entering this world in order to be closer to the mother (7-8). However, the infant does retain his ability to interact with the natural world, but the suggestion is that he will lose this as he grows up since this connection tends to be lost as the child grows up in the educational system and once they reach adulthood.

Part of the reason the child could lose this unity and ability to cross borders is the association of home with exclusion, and thus the possibility of excluding nature from the home. This exclusion is not necessarily

something the child connects with home in his infancy and childhood, aside from the child/adult divide. Rosemary Marangoly George argues that home is not usually associated with mobility: “‘home’ moves along several axes, and yet it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel” (2). Therefore, in cultural imagination, “home” is a fixed idea and a fixed space, but for the child in *The Crescent Moon* poems, home is constantly shifting between the “real” world and the fairy world, the cultural space and the natural space, and even his own body as residing within a home is constantly shifting as well. Yet, these are all spaces that the child has access to and kinship within, and thus “home” shifts for him. As George notes, there is no formula for “home,” and it is instead organized around exclusion: “‘home’ is built [...] [on] a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive” (2). Indeed, George further notes, “[homes] are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control” (9). Although there certainly can be a power relationship between humans and the natural world, in these poems the child’s kinship with nature is to view elements of the natural world as beings in their own right and to view them as playmates or as equal children.<sup>10</sup> The child includes natural beings and children into his “home,” but adults are excluded from this liminal home space where nature and home/culture collide. The child instead describes how the natural world claims him as the natural beings call to him as a potential playmate and welcome him into their space, resisting the colonial idea of claiming space and land.

Thus, the child’s mobility to cross borders means he can inject some of this unity into his relations with other humans, particularly adults. In “Clouds and Waves” (Tagore 27-28), the child is called to the sky and to the sea through his kinship with his playmates within these realms, but instead he brings the game and nature to his home and to his mother. When telling his mother about his playmates in the sky and sea, he says, “But I know a nicer game than that, mother. / I shall be the cloud and you the moon” (27), and “But I know a better game than that. / I will be the waves and you will be a strange shore” (28). The child considers his kinship structure with the natural world and replaces it with his adult, human mother. However, the child does this in order to bring that unity to his mother and to share what he has learned from his own border crossings with an adult figure. As the child’s mother, she gains the closest access to this intimate connection with nature because of her liminality. In the poems, the child shares his unity with her most frequently, and although he is made from nature, he is also made from her.

Because the child blurs boundaries in his border crossings, he also blurs categories of exclusion and inclusion, and the binary of nature/human and nature/culture. The child reflects Abdul R. JanMohamed’s description of the “syncretic intellectual” who is “more ‘at home’ in both cultures than his or her specular counterpart, [and] is able to combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms



and experiences” (97). Although the child can be seen to also reflect the “specular border intellectual” who finds none of their communities “sufficiently enabling or productive” (97), in that the child in Tagore’s poems needs to maintain his identification with nature and with nonhuman beings, he also needs to return to the traditional home and family to maintain those kinship structures, ultimately bridging the gap between the two. He attempts to use his position in the space between the two worlds to manifest unity between them and how we might allow entry into this space for a broader group of people, not only children. As JanMohamed notes, borders are not really spaces in and of themselves; instead, they signify a “difference between [spaces]” (103). In this liminal space, it is children who meet; this is not a space for adults. In “On the Seashore,” Tagore writes, “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” (3). The kinship the child forges between himself and playmates in plant life and the natural world acts to illuminate potential harmonious possibilities in this kinship structure. The child is positioned in a liminal space through his border crossings as well since the seashore is a space between land and sea, where the sea laps onto the space of land on the shore.

The child’s border crossings also extend to communities and people outside of his familial unit and village. In both “Paper Boats” and “The Sailor,” the child uses his affinity with the natural world to reach out to other communities beyond his own. In “Paper Boats,” the child sends his identity out into the world through a self-made boat: “Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down the running stream. / In big black letters I write my name on them and the name of the village where I live. / I hope that someone in some strange land will find them and know who I am” (38). The boy regularly puts his name out into the world with the explicit hope that his name and “the name of the village where I live” are found by someone in another village, thus connecting the two through the child’s identity. Also, this vessel that carries the child’s identity and his own village through the water is not one made by an adult; this boat is forged by a child through play and pretend. Although the child here attempts to reach out to other communities outside of his Indian village, he also maintains his affinity with the natural world in this poem as well: “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!” (38). While his boat carries his identity and the name of his home out into the world to connect with another land, his “playmate ... in the sky” mimics the movement, also echoing this outreach and attempt to unify across borders.

Similarly, in “The Sailor,” the child becomes more specific in his journey than the previous reference to “some strange land,” and he now names the locations he traverses, or hopes to traverse, with his identity. When referencing the (named) boatman, the child also names the location of his boat: “The boat of the boatman Madhu is moored at the wharf of Rajgunj” (40). He also combines his own border crossing with a naming of

spaces: “If he would only lend me his boat .../ I should never steer her to stupid markets. / I should sail the seven seas and the thirteen rivers of fairyland” (40). Although he will avoid adult spaces of commerce, he notes, “We shall pass the ford of Tirpurni, and leave behind us the desert of Tepāntar” (41). In this way, the boy utilizes his mobility in border crossings to move through India, adult spaces, and across the natural world in order to join together communities in knowledge of one another and, potentially, kinship. The boy’s insistence that the regular boatman, Madhu, only travels to “stupid markets” suggests a different kind of kinship that is, in the child’s perspective, limiting. According to the child, one must travel past the known, named lands in order to unify and put into communication the unknown with the known spaces. The boy’s travels are not only about unifying communities and (natural and cultural) spaces within India, but also with other, unnamed communities, and it is the child who seeks to accomplish this.

### **The Child Teaching the Adult**

This unity and connection to the natural world is special to children; the adults in Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon* do not have this connection or knowledge, and thus Tagore suggests that it is in the child that we can reconceive kinship structures that are not narrowly conceived of as community between humans. Tagore argues in “My School” that as children age into adults, they lose their connection with nature and instead, as adults, strive for “social uniformity” (391). Tagore’s vision of education, and the space of education, then, reflects a connection to nature, but also emphasizes how this link is special to childhood. As Tagore argues, this connection fades with age and with pedagogical methods that focus on the Western classroom, in which children sit at desks and learn from books, as opposed to Tagore’s school in which the child’s connection with the world around them is part of essential learning (Kupfer 208). The child’s “direct communication” with the natural world is essential to any pedagogical approach to children’s education in order to maintain this natural connection.

Tagore’s poetry in *The Crescent Moon* suggests that adults need to re-learn this connection and unity with nature, either by looking back to their own childhood or learning this through a child, and that this conception of the future of the nation cannot necessarily be found in other adults. As the mother notes in “Baby’s World,” “I wish I could take a quiet corner in the heart of my baby’s very own world. / I know it has stars that talk to him, and a sky that stoops down to his face to amuse him with its silly clouds and rainbows” (Tagore 17). The mother recognizes the child’s connection with the world and longs to observe it herself, if she cannot take part in it. The mother knows, though cannot experience, the stars and sky who act as beings on a level with the child and connect with him. Similarly, the boy’s father contrasts his own work with his child’s play in “Playthings”: “Child, I have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud-pies. / I seek out costly playthings, and gather lumps of gold and silver” (23). The father equates his work to the child’s

play, though the father's play leads to a reward of wealth as opposed to a connection with the natural world in "sticks and mud-pies," which the father suggests is worth more. He notes, "In my frail canoe I struggle to cross the sea of desire, and forget that I too am playing a game" ("Playthings" 24). In the world of work in which the adult has long outgrown the child's connection with nature, the father realizes he is still playing a game, but it is a game of struggle and one in which the adult cannot gain unity with nature, others, or themselves. This lack of unity means his vessel for navigating the world is "frail" and he "struggle[s]" through the world, forgetting that his work is also a game until he compares himself with the child. It is only through the adult comparing their world to that of the child that they recognize what they are missing.

The child in *The Crescent Moon* actively attempts to impart his lessons of unity and connection to adults, which would lead to freedom and understanding. As Bandana Purkayastha notes, "Rejecting the notion of the rational, self-interested individual ... Tagore argued that human beings are connected in fundamental ways with the universe. ... In Tagore's view, real freedom meant being conscious of and acting to acknowledge such ties" (49). Therefore, one cannot recognize or attain true freedom until they achieve or re-attain their connection with "the universe" or with the natural world. In "Baby's Way," the infant chooses to remain on earth and is described as knowing more than he lets on or that adults can understand (Tagore 7). Similarly, in "When and Why," the mother understands the colours, music, and sweetness of the natural world only through the child (18-19). The mother begins to understand the unity within the world as well as the connection between the child and the world through watching him: "When I sing to make you dance, I truly know why there is music in leaves, and why waves send their chorus of voices to the heart of the listening earth—when I sing to make you dance" (18). As Roy notes, Tagore argued that to "only ... pursue political independence from British imperialism and thereby overlook the real social problems of Indian society ... [means] India will never be liberated from its condition of oppression (colonialist or indigenous)" unless there is "reconnect[ion] with the underprivileged sections of Indian society, [and] understanding (through empathy) their local and regional cultures" (183). As Roy argues, then, for Tagore, this universalism (here represented through the child's connection with the natural world and thus his mobility to connect with other villages and communities outside of his own) is what will "liberate" India from Western influence.<sup>11</sup>

The child embodies this possibility of unity leading to "freedom" in that the child is represented as a stopper of violence in *The Crescent Moon* in contrast to adults' experience with the trauma of colonization. Goswami notes that in children's texts, "children seem to demonstrate a greater resilience in surviving culturally fraught occasions than adults, who are often rendered impotent and powerless in the face of historical trauma" (4). However, the speaker must tell the child what the implications of his manifestation of unity are. In "The Child-Angel," the child's presence is enough to end violence. When people are fighting, the speaker instructs the child: "Let your life come amongst them like a flame of light, my child, unflickering and pure,

and delight them into silence” (Tagore 79). Furthermore, the speaker instructs the child to “stand amidst their scowling hearts” when “[t]hey are cruel in their greed and their envy” (79). If the child can insert himself into this violence, his purity and connection to the natural world (and thus his connection with other communities) will allow him to impart these lessons onto adults: “Let them see your face, my child, and thus know the meaning of all things; let them love you and thus love each other” (79). Through the child as mediator, adults can re-learn the power of unity and connection with nature; adults can again learn to “love each other” through the child as a bridge for this connection. Through the child, adults can turn to universalism and unity in the face of the divisiveness of British colonialism and Western influence and oppression.

## Conclusion

The power of the child’s unity with the natural world and his ability and mobility to connect with communities outside of his own means the child represents the possibilities of Tagore’s universalism in the face of British colonialism in India and the ability to reconnect with the core values and philosophies of Indian traditions and Indian communities. However, the child in *The Crescent Moon* also longs to grow up, which, as I have discussed, can lead to a movement away from these ideals. In “The Little Big Man” especially, the boy imagines that growing up is linked to greater respect from adults and more agency: “I am small because I am a little child. I shall be big when I am as old as my father is” (54, 54-56). The problem here is that the child’s power of unity is not always recognized by adults as a power or as valuable. Part of Tagore’s point in these poems is for adults to recognize what the child can and does represent and what nature can and does signify in terms of universalism and uniting Indian people under the ravages of colonialism. The child’s longing to grow up, though, does not necessarily mean he will lose his connection with the natural world. Since the child has maintained this connection throughout his youth, well beyond his infancy and years in school, the hope remains that he will maintain this unity into adulthood as well, which lends futurity to Tagore’s ideal of unity. Tagore’s representation of childhood in *The Crescent Moon* puts forward an educational model that maintains the child’s unity with nature and with other communities well into adulthood, as opposed to models that separate the child from their natural connection with the world around them.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1 While “[m]any of ... [Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon* poems] were taken from the Bengali collection *Sisu*, written for his children during 1903-1904” (Mehta 233), J. M. Barrie first introduced the iconic forever-child Peter Pan in *The Little White Bird* in 1902. This reflects a broader (and Western) reflection of similar concerns during the same period about the status of the child. In these iterations, the child is a figure who is defined in opposition to the adult whose imagination

and connection to Neverland or to the natural world fades as they age. Thus, these authors privilege the child's innocence and connection to a world outside of the adult.

2 Tagore makes a similar point about the child/adult divide in his essays "My School" (391) and "To Teachers" (611).

3 Discussing Indian versus Western conceptions of childhood, Sudhir Kakar points to how the adult must "learn the child's mode of experiencing the world" (31) in Bhakti texts.

4 See also Ashis Nandy, Arnab Dutta Roy, Satish C. Aikant, as well as Manju Radhakrishnan and Debasmita Roychowdhury.

5 See also Quayum's article "'Imagining One World': Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism."

6 For a further discussion about Tagore's school, see Swati Lal. See also Mohammad A. Quayum's "Education for Tomorrow" for a discussion of Tagore's views on education as well as further discussion of his pedagogical essays, including the two I discuss in this article ("My School" and "To Teachers").

7 For a discussion of loss, mourning, and the child's relationship with the mother in *The Crescent Moon*, see Purnima Mehta. For a discussion of language and the child in *The Crescent Moon*, see Josephine A. McQuail.

8 Tagore also compares the child to a flower in "My School" (391)

9 Tagore makes a similar point in his essay "My School" (393).

10 Quayum notes, "Tagore would often take them [students] on tours through nearby forests and even conduct his classes in a natural setting. ... This was Tagore's way of resisting the prevailing materialism of his time, which saw nature as nothing more than a resource for gathering and holding and for profit and plunder" ("Education for Tomorrow" 5).

11 For another discussion on Tagore's ideas about colonial resistance, see Manju Radhakrishnan and Debasmita Roychowdhury (31).

12 Indeed, Kupfer argues, "Rabindranath Tagore's ideas and experiments in education could become a source of inspiration and renewal for Western pedagogies" (207).

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