Before delving into the details of how the characters of Tagore find themselves in harmony with nature and environment, it is necessary to understand how Tagore himself was influenced by the nature.

Rabindranath Tagore has inherited love and adoration for nature from his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. In his "Reminiscences" he says "Just as he allowed me to wander the mountains at will, so (father) left free to select my path in the quest for truth."\(^1\)

This quest for truth has made Rabindranath Tagore to develop into multifaceted personality. In his quest for truth he sojourned at the halt of nature. Though the destination was not nature but truth. Tagore viewed nature through the prism of truth. Naturally nature looks most beautiful and its impact is enthralling and universal. As John Keats says "A thing of beauty is joy forever" is personally experienced by Tagore in nature. And his quest for truth also once again reaffirmed the 'invention' of John Keats i.e. "truth is beauty, beauty is truth."\(^2\)

Tagore’s upbringing also tremendously contributed to the love for nature in him. The management of his father’s estate, which included agriculture and horticulture by establishment of Shantiniketan in a serene atmosphere. His busy childhood in journey to Himalayas has strengthened his bonds with nature. "Once more, Rabi was called into his father’s presence. How would he like to
accompany him to the Himalayas? How? 'I would have needed to rend the skies with a shout to give some idea of How!'.

The process of establishment of Shantiniketan was also preoccupied by some memorable events for Tagore.

The purchase of the land nearly seven acres – dated from 1863. Maharshi Debendranath bought it from a local zamindar named Sinha, a friend of his. The story goes that he stopped his palanquin there in order to meditate under a pair of chhatim trees, and fell in love with the spot. A gang of dacoits were said to have come up, seen the Maharshi and been so affected by his still poise that they left him alone and in due course even took up service under him ...

As referred to in the above lines, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore also had immense impact on Rabindranath Tagore not only as a father but also as a friend, philosopher and guide. The former’s way of meditation, passion for reformation, search for truth and unity of humanity are all such inspiring qualities that have been inherited by Rabindranath Tagore.

The Shantiniketan has evolved by Tagore in a living and loving manner. Every minute care was taken to groom the place into an ‘Abode of peace’:

The place was already called Shantiniketan (‘A bode of Peace’), possibly after a small hut known by that name. The hut and the chhatim trees apart, there was nothing else there: just denuded red
soil and the plain of Bengal stretching beyond a line of distant palm trees towards infinity. This utter bareness was what first appealed to Debendranath. Soon afterwards he brought good soil, trees and plants and established a mange grove.

His journey to Himalayas in every summer to escape from the heat of scorching sun of Bengal has also enriched Tagore’s love for nature.

Come mid-April, when the plains of Punjab begin to burn, they and their servants set off for the Himalayas. Their destination was Dalhousie, a sparsely populated hill-station on the borders of Kashmir at 7,500 feet, where they had taken a house on the highest hill-top, Bakrota. To get there from the plains in the 1870s meant a long trek carried in a litter known as a jhampan, staying each night at bungalows. Rabi drank in the new sights, so utterly alien to Calcutta, Shantiniketan or the Indian plains: the climbing road, the gorges beneath, the great forest trees clustering together at bends in the road, at their feet small waterfalls and streams babbling over black moss-covered rocks.

That is the great advantage of a first vision: the mind is not aware that there are many more to come. When this fact penetrates that calculating organ it promptly tries to make a saving in its expenditure of attention. Only when it believes something to be rare does the mind cease to be miserly. In the streets of Calcutta I
sometimes imagine myself to be a foreigner, and only then do I discover how much is to be seen.\textsuperscript{6}

And ultimately the freedom-loving father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore moulded the free will of his great son Rabindranath Tagore into the Viswakavi. Thus Maharshi Debendranath Tagore could not have completed the metamorphosis without the nature’s understanding of Tagore’s mind:

Remarkably, the Maharshi never tried to stop Rabi wandering in the mountains. No one accompanied him, a boy not even in his teens; all he had was a staff in his hand. Even allowing for a little later exaggeration by Rabindranath, his father’s attitude was questionable, verging on the foolhardy.\textsuperscript{7}

Nature has been a friend and playmate for Rabindranath Tagore throughout his life. His Short Stories spontaneously followed into nature’s lap. The short stories, “The River Stair,” “Subha,” “Home Coming” and “The Runaway” are the embodiments of nature’s personification as speaking character.

Tagore’s love for nature and skill of reflecting the living status of an unfortunate girl, destined to meet her adverse fate has been blended splendidly in his short story “The River Stairs.” On one hand, Tagore, in the beginning of Kusum’s childhood and on the other, at the end of her romantic imagination leaves nature as for only friend and companion.
It is the story of a village girl. The river is an emotional character – that becomes a playmate of the protagonist of the short story by name Kusum. The river has a sense of recognition for the tinkling sounds of her anklets. Kusum also feels that the river is her inner soul. An inextricable bond of living relationship is developed between the river, which is the representative of nature, and Kusum as the representative of human beings. Rabindranath Tagore gets nostalgic when he portrayed the bond of relationship.

The river in “The Post Master,” the river in “Subha,” the river in “The River Stair” and river in “The Homecoming” are the reflections of Rabindranath Tagore’s childhood river at ‘Jorasanka.’ River also is the symbol of life. Water, the content of the river is the basis for the existence of life.

In describing the river in many of his short stories, Tagore reminds of the lines by John Keats:

Like nature’s patient, sleepless Eremite,

The moving waters at their priest-like task

Of pure ablution round earth’s human shores.\(^8\)

In “The River Stairs,” nature in the form of a river acts as a source of solace to Kusum, when she comes back for the second time after a spell of one year. Tagore makes here a contrast between human beings and nature. As long as Kusum was with the nature, playing and sharing her feelings with it, she had been delightful. But, the human beings in the name of taking care and settling down her in life, she is married to a person who is a mismatch. This
disconnects the stream of her delight and joyfulness. She turns out to be a lonely girl at a tender age with a burden of widowhood on her head.

Tagore here is silent about the human feelings for the pathetic state of Kusum. May be, the alarming silence of human beings in real life in those days towards young widows made Tagore also silent. But Tagore is sensible enough to make nature responsive towards the pitiable state of Kusum. The moment Kusum comes back home, she rushes to the river ghat. The river also gives instant response of recognizing the familiar tinkling sounds of anklets. At the same time the river ghat, which is symbol of purity and friendship for Kusum promptly, notices the emotional differences in the anklet’s sound.

Here, we remember William Wordsworth’s poem where the girl grow nature and ultimately becomes a part of it:

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, ‘A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.9

Similarly, for children, Tagore prefers nature’s lap to confinement in school with dry and severed human sentiments and feelings. In the short story “The Home –Coming” Tagore presents the tale of a boy who is first nursed and groomed in the lap of nature. He is taken to some the metropolitan of Calcutta for studies. Tagore makes a pictorial presentation of the free life in the lap of
nature and caged life in the trap of so called civilized world. Phatik Chakrabarthi, his younger brother, Makhan and their widowed mother live in a small village. Phatik is a high-spirited boy of fourteen. He is the beloved leader of the boys of the village. He leads them in all kinds of mischief.

One day, Phatik gets a brainwave to roll along the bank a log lying in the mud-flat of the river. The boys agree and chuckle thinking how angry the owner of the log will be. But Makhan perversely sits on the log. Under Phatik’s order they roll the log and Makhan together. They laugh heartily at Makhan’s fall. Makhan attacks Phatik and runs back home crying.

Phatik is taken struggling and kicking to his mother. She has been told by Makhan that Phatik hit him. When Makhan repeats the charge Phatik rains blows on him. While the mother is trying to drag away the elder boy, a visitor arrives. When Phatik was at the river this gentleman had got down from a boat and asked him where Phatik Chakravarthi lived. Phatik had, with boyish impudence, asked him to find out for himself. But now his mother rushes to the visitor. He is Bishamber, her elder brother whom she has not seen for many a year. Bishamber had been doing business in Bombay. Now he had settled down in Calcutta. When he learns from his sister that Phatik is a pain on her neck, he offers to take the child to Calcutta and bring him up with his own three boys. Phatik agrees eagerly.

But, when he arrives at Calcutta, Phatik finds that his aunt does not want him. She always takes the side of the boys against him. His school life too is miserable. The teacher canes him for little or no reason. One day he ventures to
ask his uncle when he can return home. The uncle tells him to wait till the Pooja holidays in October.

The loss of his text-book precipitates a crisis for Phatik. The teacher canes him and his cousins mock him. When he reports the loss of the book to his aunt, she abuses him. That evening Phatik develops fever and headache. He does not want to be a nuisance to his aunt. He starts walking back to the village in the pouring rain.

Missing the boy, Bishamber gets anxious. He requisitions the help of the police. Two days later, a police van brings Phatik wet, muddy and in high fever. Presently, he becomes delirious. He asks his uncle whether the holidays have come. He also prattles asking his mother not to beat him. Bishamber guesses the boy’s hunger for his mother. He sends for her. When the mother arrives and rushes to the boy with outbursts of endearment, Phatik’s face grows calm. He mutters that the holidays have come.

Phatik is a mischievous boy. His mischief may be a cause of concern for his mother. He may dominate his younger brother ‘Makhan.’ Except this childhood mischief the life of Phatik is ‘wonderful.’ In the lap of nature, on the river side he plays and grows enthusiastically. He becomes a ring master of the village boys and enjoys his life in the village.

But here, in Calcutta he finds himself confined and imprisoned. He misses his playmates. There is no river to jump into and swim. Adding fuel to the fire, the inmates of the house behave in an unfriendly manner. Phatik becomes lonely in the presence of uncountable human beings of Calcutta, and
worse happens now. His loneliness makes him sick. His aloofness brings adverse effects on his education. He wants to run away from the artificial life of Calcutta to his mother’s lap. Finally, risking his life in the heavy rain he tries to get back to his native atmosphere and mother’s presence.

Tagore’s inner view here is that the nature is the best source for children to grow as William Wordsworth puts it:

Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! On my life
There’s more of wisdom in it.  

The short story “Subha” also is richly endowed with nature’s soothing association for human beings. Subha stays hale and halarious as long as she is in the comforting company of nature. But her happiness is disturbed, the moment she is distanced from nature. Subha is a dumb girl for her parents and people of the village. But she has forgotten that she is dumb and she has developed intimate relation with nature. She stays, plays and spends her time in nature:

But here nature fulfilled her want of speech, and spoke for her.

The murmur of brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatmen, the crying of the birds and the rustle of trees mingled, and were one with the trembling of her heart. They became one vast wave of sound, which beat upon her restless soul. This murmur and movement of Nature were the dumb girl’s
language; that speech of the dark eyes, which the long lashes shaded, was the language of the world about her. From the trees, where the cicadas chirped, to the quiet stars there was nothing but sings and gestures, weeping and sighing. And in the deep midnight, when the boatmen and fisher folk had gone to their dinner, when the villagers slept, and birds were still, when the ferry-boats were idle, when the great busy world paused in its toil, and became suddenly a lonely, awful giant, then beneath the vast impressive heavens there were only dumb nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent – one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow.” (T.O.M. - 105)

Here Tagore shows his ability of describing nature in its lovely and jubilant form. As long as Subha stays with nature, she is joyous and blissful. She scarcely feels that she cannot speak, she has no friends and she is not on par with other children. In the lap of nature she has her own world and she has her own friends.

Subha feels her dumbness when she is taken away from the lap of nature. She feels cut away from the liveliness of mother’s nature. And in the changed atmosphere she feels lonely. When her husband knows about Subha that she could not speak, her agony is doubled. In the midst of many civilized human beings she is lonely and deserted.

In less than ten days everyone knew that the bride was dumb! At least, if any one did not, it was not her fault, for she deceived no
one. Her eyes told them everything, though no one understood her. She looked on every hand: she found no speech: she missed the faces, familiar from birth, of those who had understood a dumb girl’s language. In her silent heart there sounded an endless, voiceless weeping, which only the searcher of Hearts could hear. Using both eyes and ears this time, her lord made another careful examination, using his ears this time as well as his eyes, and married a second wife who could speak.” (T.O.M. -109)

Tagore, through Subha, makes it clear that Mother Nature is always loving and caring irrespective of the ability or disability of human beings. Whereas the human beings find disability to discriminate against fellow human beings. Hence the message is that:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.
Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:
We wonder to dissect.11

With such comforting, consoling, teaching, soothing, lulling and friendly nature, the characters in Rabindranath Tagore’s short stories find
themselves in complete harmony with nature and the environment around the characters is inseparable and original.

As human civilizations are created and conditioned by the environment they grow in, the characters too in literary writings have perfectly suitable relations with their environment. Viswa Kavi Tagore’s short stories also have harmony with their nature and environment.

“Subha” is a fine example of maintaining harmony with the characters. Subha’s life suits the saying that “Life is what happens to us when we are planning other things.” The word Subha is the short form of Subhasini which means one who has the ability to speak well. But paradoxically, as subha grows, she turnout to be a dumb girl. Tagore create’s a perfect environment to all the characters in the story. The characters are her father Banikanta, her mother and her friend Pratap are the lead roles in the story. The place is Chandipur. It is a hamlet. Its environment:

It’s river small, for a river of Bengal, kept to its narrow bounds like a daughter of the middle class. This busy streak of water never overflowed its banks, but went about its duties as though it were a member of every family in the villages beside it. On either side were houses and banks shaded with trees. So stepping from her queenly throne, the river-goddess became a garden deity of each home; and forgetful of herself, performed her task of endless benediction with swift and cheerful foot. (T.O.M. - 82)
Subha also has two other friends, they are two cows, named Sarbhasha and Panguli and her favourite place in the hamlet is the river. Generally Tagore has a soft corner for the poor, the helpless and the neglected. Tagore has a deep concern for the neglected girl who suffers at everyone’s hand without any fault of her own.

Subhasini, subha in short, is the name of a dumb girl born in a middle class family. She is considered a God’s curse on the family. All the villagers treat her as an idiot. Her parents are always worried about her marriage. Subha seeks comfort from the sounds and silences of nature, which seem to echo her own innocent feelings. Her loneliness is only relieved by her association with a truant boy, Pratap. When she attain at the age of marriage, she is violently cutoff from her roots, married to a husband in Calcutta who, when he discovers her dumbness, abandons her for a wife who can speak.

Tagore creates a separate environment for Subha. She may be a mis-fit in the family and in the village as she is considered a curse, since she is not able to speak. But she is a perfect fit in the environment with a voiceless community. The two cows can communicate with Subha and Subha can understand the feelings of the cows. Without each for the other, the day is not complete to them.

The river also is a friendly abode for Subha to share her feelings. The river side environment gives her the ability of speech:

When her work was done, Subha stole away to the waterside, and sat there, but here Nature fulfilled her want of speech, and spike
for her. The murmur of the brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatmen, the crying of the birds and the rustle of trees mingled, and were one with the trembling of her heart. They became one vast wave of sound, which beat upon her restless soul. This murmur and movement of Nature were the dumb girl’s language; that speech of the dark eyes, which the long lashes shaded, was the language of the world about her. From the trees, where the cicadas chirped, to the quiet starts there was nothing but sings and gestures, weeping and sighing. And in the deep mid-noon, when the villagers slept, and birds were still, when the ferry-boats were idle, when the great busy world paused in its toil, and became suddenly a lonely, awful giant, then beneath the vast impressive heavens there were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent—one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow.” (T.O.M. - 82-83)

Tagore constructs the plot of the short story with pleasure and pain. On the river side hamlet as long as Subha is a child the environment of the story is pleasant. But as she grows up, her parents feel the burden of their daughter and they plan to perform their responsibility of getting her marry to somebody. For this purpose they migrate to a strange habitation. They find a groom for her and get her married to him. Subha becomes a misfit to the new environment. In her new habitation, Calcutta her friends are missed. River is not there and she has lost her speech also. Finally rough weather prevails and serenity is disturbed in
the environment of Subha. In the so called civilized society, Subha could not be understood by her husband and he abandons Subha for a speaking wife.

In the modern age people speak about the climate change and many measures have been taken for preserving the earth’s environment. But Tagore through his story “Subha” has already spoken about the need for preserving a natural environment of tender minds and requested the civilized society and elders not to pollute clean environment of tender minds whether they can speak or not.

“The Auspicious Vision” is the story of a dumb village girl confronted by a sophisticated young man, Kantichandra. This story, like “Subha” depicts character in relation to environment and the tension or absence of it, consequent upon reversal of situation.

Kantichandra goes to the swamp of Nydighi for hunting and notices a village maiden whose “beauty had a rare freshness as if she had just come from Vishawakarma’s workshop.” Having been captivated by the beauty of the girl, he goes to the house of her father Nabin Banerji and asks the old Brahmin to give “Sudha” in marriage to him. By an accident, Kantichandra mistakes the dumb girl for “Sudha” her sister and finds himself married to the sister instead. He realizes the deception only at the time of the “Auspicious Vision” in the course of the wedding ceremony. However, on knowing that he really has not married the dumb girl for whom he approached Nabin, he feels “a sigh of intense relief, as of escape from calamity.”
Thus, Kantichandra suddenly removes her from his mind. What was once a blissful vision of beauty vanishes from his mind. But the beauty of the dumb girl is a part of the eternal beauty of Nature. She is but “the companion of all the animals and birds of the locality.” Hence she has to remain a part of her environment.

Thus, a tragic climax as it has happened in the case of Subha is avoided. The virgin beauty is kept as virgin and Kantichandra’s desire of possessing a beauty as wife is fulfilled and calamity is avoided in his life.

Apart from employing birds and animals, Tagore commands supernatural powers also to find room in the environment of his short stories. “The Hungry Stones” the reader is taken into a trance and into the past time of about 450 years back into the history. The reader is subjected to an environment of suspense and thrilling. He is continuously kept in a state of imagination and guessing.

The short story opens with the narrator’s account of a train journey during which he comes across a stranger, who tells the story later in the waiting-room. Thus the major part of the story is narrated by the stranger, the extraordinary companion. The double narrator device gives dramatic objectivity and intensity to the story. The description of the lonely pleasure resort of the Emperor Shah II, the ‘solitary marble palace,’ is in tune with the state of the narrator ‘oppressed with solitude.’ The desert place weighs upon the narrator ‘like a nightmare’ and exerts a weird fascination upon him. In fact, he feels as if the whole house is “like a living organism slowly and
imperceptibly digesting me by the action of some stupefying gastric juice."15 The wind around is laden with an oppressive scent. The setting sun is "a long dark curtain" falling upon the stage of the day. The narrator's mental framework makes him see visions; "me thought I saw a bevy of joyous maidens coming down the steps to bathe in Susta in that summer evening."16

Having so far built up an atmosphere of suspense and fear, the author takes us into the realm of poetic fancy with the 'mystic forms' brushing past the narrator and giving him the feeling that "it was the Muse that had taken advantage of my solitude and possessed me."17 The narrator exclaims at the spirit's voice: "O lovely ethereal apparition! Where didn't thou flourish and when? By what cool spring, under the shade of what date groves, was thou born in the lap of what homeless wanderer in the desert." But he is constantly brought back to the world of reality by the refrain of the crazy Meher Ali's scream; "Stand back! All is false! All is false!"18

Thus, the initial atmospheric build-up taking the reader into the medieval world and stirring up the emotion of fear is at variance with the delightful poetic fancy that is subsequently developed. The story falls between the two fools of depressing fear and poetic fancy. The character is out of tune with the environment, leaving the reader somewhat confused as to the ultimate effect of the tale.

The abrupt ending of the story creates an environment of confusion in the minds of the readers. In addition, the reader undergoes a confusion whether the story has really happened or fiction created by the narrator. Added to this
confusion, the first narrator of the story and his theosophist relative get separated due to the differences arising on the validity of the flash back given by the co-teller. These fast developments in the ending of the story leave the reader on a note of disappointment as there is no logical conclusion.

The harmony between character and environment in the short story “Kabuliwallah” changes depending upon the times. The main characters are Abdur Rahiman, Mini – a little girl and her father. The cultural environment is depicted by Tagore through the character of Kabuliwallah. The harmony between Afghans and Indians is smoothly dealt with by the writer. The harmonious relation between the Kabuliwallah and Mini’s father establishes this point.

When the Kabuliwallah came up to the window and smilingly salaamed. I decided that although the plight of Pratap Singh and Kanchanmala was extremely critical, it would be churlish not to invite the fellow inside and by something from him. I bought something. Then I chatted to him for a bit. We talked about Abdur Rahman’s efforts to preserve the integrity of Afghanistan against the Russians and the British. (R.T.S. - 114)

The Kabuliwallah’s dress also provides for children with a healthy and playing environment. His attire is that

…. he is dressed in dirty baggy clothes, purre on his head, bag hanging from his shoulder, and with three or four boxes of grapes in his hands, a tall Kabuliwallah was ambling along the road. It
was hard to say exactly what thoughts the sight of him had put into my beloved daughter’s mind, but she began to shout and shriek at him. That swinging bag spells trouble, I thought: my seventeenth chapter won’t get finished today. But just as the Kabuliwallah, attracted by Mini’s yells, looked towards us with a smile and started to approach our house. Mini gasped and ran into the inner rooms, disappearing from view. She had a blind conviction that if one looked inside that winging bag one would find three or four live children like her. (R.T.S. – 113-114)

Harmonious relations are also established between a Kabuliwallah-an Afghan and the little child-Mini. This leads to a friendly and fireless environment in the society.

To dispel her groundless fear, I called Mini to come out. She clung to me and looked suspiciously at the Kabuliwallah and his bag. The Kabuliwallah took some raisins and apricots out and offered them to her, but she would not take them, and clung to my knees with doubled suspicion. Thus, passed her first meeting with the Kabuliwallah. (R.T.S. - 114)

Later, gradually Kabuliwallah and Mini become good friends. Their friendship grows stronger and thicker.

In all her five years of life, Mini had never found so patient a listener, apart from her father. (R.T.P. - 114)
But in the course of time the Kabuliwallah picks up a quarrel with one of his customers for not paying his dues. The Kabuliwallah becomes intolerable of the indecent attitude of his customer and he assaults the customer. For this he is convicted and put behind bars.

Several years after, the Kabuliwallah comes to the house of Mini and meets her father. Through him, the Kabuliwallah comes to know that Mini is getting married that day. On his request, Mini’s father summons Mini outside for Kabuliwallah. Kabuliwallah is faded out of Mini’s memory. She could not recognize him. But on seeing Mini the Kabuliwallah gets delighted. He suddenly remembers his own daughter at home in the faraway land. From there Kabuliwallah gets ready to go to his homeland for meeting his own daughter.

In the short story, the social environment is so friendly. The Kabuliwallah becomes oblivious of his own daughter, while he lives in a foreign place, because he feels at home in the adopted land. Mini’s father also is a representative of social harmony. He brushes aside the objections raised by his family members and brings out bridal Mini for the sake of the Kabuliwallah. Understanding the inner feelings of the Kabuliwallah, Mini’s father lends a helping hand to Kabuliwallah for getting back to his homeland to unite himself with his daughter and family.

Tagore inherited the worship of nature from his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. His stay with his father in the Himalayas and the green surroundings of residence shape his formative years. Hence, all of his short stories have rivers and hills inextricably connected with the people.
References


4. Ibid., p.53.

5. Ibid., p.53.

6. Ibid., p.55.

7. Ibid., p.56.


11. Ibid., p.18.


13. Ibid., p.54.


16. Ibid., p.16.

17. Ibid., p.17.

18. Ibid., p.19.